RHETORICS OF THE FANTASTIC:
RE-EXAMINING FANTASY AS ACTION, OBJECT, AND EXPERIENCE

by

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Dedication

To all my fellow wanderers in the Perilous Realm, without whom I would indeed be lost—especially those, best loved, who have been my companions on Earth and Otherworlds.
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Rhetorics of the Fantastic: Re-Examining Fantasy as Action, Object, and Experience

Establishing the literary genre of fantasy, as it is currently known, is largely credited to J. R. R. Tolkien in the mid-twentieth century, though in a broader sense fantastical storytelling has existed for as long as humans have been telling stories. Since its rise to popularity as a contemporary genre, many scholars have studied fantasy in various dimensions, but such study has tended to emphasize genre taxonomy, remaining otherwise generally limited in scope and narrow in focus.

This dissertation seeks to complicate an understanding of the term “fantasy,” particularly as it differs from commodified, market-driven genre conventions. It argues that the fantastic represents departure, transformation, and alternative modes of thinking. The project examines major writings on fantasy and the fantastic, including works by writers such as Tzvetan Todorov, Farah Mendlesohn, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Tolkien. It also examines how the fantastic manifests in works not usually thought of as fantasy, as in the writings of Gloria Anzaldúa, and draws upon rhetorical thinkers, such as Wayne Booth and William Covino, while borrowing Kenneth Burke’s dramatistic pentad as a central device to establish a “fantastical pentad.”

Part One of this dissertation examines three major capacities of this fantastical pentad: action, object, and experience. As action, the fantastic has the power to complicate, to reimagine—what Tolkien called “sub-creation” and what Paulo Freire called “re-creation.” This produces a fantastical object, or fantasy, that embodies the transformative power of the fantastical act, allowing others to experience it. In turn, experiencing a transformative fantasy
offers the opportunity for questioning, evaluating what that fantasy is, how it may or may not be plausible within one’s worldview, and to understand why it is fantastical—that is, what it seeks to transform. Part Two applies these ideas to three sites of inquiry: the composition classroom, games and play, and popular fiction.

The project concludes that the fantastic offers, as its primary function, not escapism or mere “flight of fancy,” as has often been claimed in the past, but transformation. This transformation may work in many ways: it may be transformative for the fantasist, who enacts the fantastic; it can be transformative for the audience, who experience the fantasy that the fantasist creates; or, it can be transformative within the object, itself, by reimagining some convention within the writing. This compositional transformation may be a narrative element of fiction such as in the works of Le Guin, where the fantasy is transformative within its genre, or in the writing of Anzaldúa, which blend the fantastic with non-fiction for very material, real-world purposes. This illustrates a cultural significance that reaches far beyond the realm of idle entertainment, providing inspiration and impetus to enact change in the material world.
Rhetorics of the Fantastic: Re-Examining Fantasy as Action, Object, and Experience

Introduction

The impetus for this dissertation began with my desire, upon arriving in the University of Arizona’s Rhetoric, Composition, and the Teaching of English program, to define a single, unified Rhetoric of Fantasy. As of this writing, I no longer believe such a task to be possible or even appropriate, so instead (to adapt a few words from Wayne C. Booth’s “Afterward to the Second Edition” of *The Rhetoric of Fiction*) I have chosen to set out to attempt to explore *Some Notes toward an Introduction to a Possible Way of Viewing Some Aspects of the Many Rhetorical Dimensions of Fantasy*, with Special Emphasis on *Some Limited Kinds of Fantastical Texts*. This may be taken as a bit of humorous hyperbole, but it also conveys a realization I’ve come to in the past several years: There is no single, unifying Rhetoric of Fantasy. There cannot be, for fantasy is—and, indeed, rhetoric is—far too vast, too diverse a concept to be constrained by a single set of conventions. While many have studied fantasy in various dimensions, such scholarship has been generally limited in scope and focus, tending to focus heavily on genre taxonomy.

I began my research, apart from which I had already encountered in previous projects, with Tzvetan Todorov, who was primarily invested in the distinction between the “uncanny” and the “marvelous,” or the merely unusual versus the supernatural, defining the Fantastic as existing strictly within the uncertainty between the two. Many others, such as Farah Mendlesohn, focus on genre-based taxonomies of fantasy. Then are were those, such as Ursula K. Le Guin, who are interested in the social origins and significance of fantasy fiction. What is less widely examined is the “doing” aspect of fantasy—that is, what does it mean to participate in creating, experiencing, and even consuming fantasy? What are the major considerations in examining
such questions? What frameworks might we utilize to facilitate these discussions? At the same
time, fantasy as a genre and fantasy as an experience are of definite interest. As stated above, I
believe there are too many possible rhetorics of fantasy to entirely capture them all. Therefore,
instead, I have targeted certain specific dimensions of what we often call, simplistically,
“fantasy.” Wayne Booth’s work is one guide to understanding the concept, though Kenneth
Burke’s work is perhaps more important still. J. R. R. Tolkien and Ursula K. Le Guin have
informed my thinking quite heavily, as have writers of non-fiction, from Gloria Anzaldúa and
bell hooks to William Covino and Peter Elbow. From them, I have bridged many gaps in my
thinking between fantasy and composition pedagogy, but I have also come to realize more about
the subject itself.

In considering rhetorics of the fantastic, I have selected three major capacities to
consider: the fantastic as action, as object (or, as what is produced by the action: fantasy), and as
experience. In discussing fantasy as action, I harken back to the origins of the word “phantasy”
(in reference to the Old French “phantasie” and the Greek “phantasia”) as derived from terms
that reference the power of imagination.1 It is the power of fantasy to complicate, to reimagine—
what Tolkien called “sub-creation” and what Freire called “re-creation.” It is not confined to
genre-based expectations, nor must it be supernatural or overtly unrealistic in nature. Fantasy is
the capacity to conceive (critically, one hopes) of worlds or realities that differ from our own,
and it does not necessarily (as is frequently the conceit in popular discussions of fantasy) “look

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1 From Douglas Harper's "Online Etymology Dictionary," the origins of the term may be traced as follows: “fantasy
(n.) early 14c., 'illusory appearance,' from Old French fantaisie, phantasie 'vision, imagination' (14c.), from Latin
phantasia, from Greek phantasia 'power of imagination; appearance, image, perception,' from phantazesthai 'picture
to oneself,' from phantos 'visible,' from phainesthai 'appear,' in late Greek 'to imagine, have visions,' related to
phaos, phos 'light,' phainein 'to show, to bring to light' (see phantasm). Sense of 'whimsical notion, illusion' is pre-
1400, followed by that of 'fantastic imagination,' which is first attested 1530s. Sense of 'day-dream based on desires'
is from 1926. In early use in English also fantasie, phantasy, etc. As the name of a fiction genre, from 1949."
back,” a claim which is usually contrasted by the argument that science fiction serves as a counterpart that “looks forward”; I will heavily explore the question of what fantasy *does* do in my first three chapters. The specific choices made in fantastical reconceptualization are the key rhetorical moves, and in those first three chapters I will seek to establish a schema for examining and discussing those moves. In this capacity, the fantastic exists as action, as practice. Enacting the fantastic produces that object that is termed “fantasy,” but this term is often limited by the constraints of an understanding based on market genre. In broad terms, fantasy is most often presented as escapism, well-known for conventions such as mythical creatures and magic. I expand upon and complicate this view of fantasy. Establishing this tripartite view of the fantastic as action, product, and experience allows a consideration of this concept across several different dimensions and in a number of contexts, including demonstrating the ways that “fantasy” may extend well beyond the assumptions of conventional understanding.

An inevitable question is, why fantasy? There have been many claims as to the importance of fantasy by many great writers and thinkers, ranging from J.R.R. Tolkien’s essentially spiritual imperative to emulate the act of creation, building on the bones of mythology that had come before, to Ursula K. Le Guin’s notion of challenging dominant narratives and resisting conventional market forces. In my own project, I find myself sympathetic to Tolkien, but my purposes align more closely to Le Guin’s. Fantasy has seen a pop culture boom in recent years, from the success of adaptations of Tolkien’s own work and the (as yet unfinished) media force that arose from the Harry Potter series to the ubiquity of young adult fantasy fiction and the massive popularity of television projects, such as HBO’s *Game of Thrones*. (This does not even

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2 I refer to “market genre” or “market-based genre” throughout this project to differentiate the term “fantasy” in the sense that I use it, pertaining to its rhetorical applications and capacities, from its more popular conception, which is largely based on the marketing of genre fiction, similar to horror, romance, etc.
touch upon the rise of “superhero” films and television, nor many other permutations on the
genre that currently serve as powerful examples of fantasy’s impact on contemporary popular
culture.) Fantasy is doing things, affecting audiences, and producing countless new cultural
artifacts. This underscores the importance of asking what it even means to do or experience
fantasy, and what is the thing itself—what is fantasy? In this project, I demonstrate the
significance of fantasy beyond its current cultural pervasiveness, addressing the questions of
what it is, how it works, and what it can do. In short, fantasy can and does function as a largely
unexplored rhetorical mode: it offers the power to transform thinking by examining and
reimagining the way the world works and can be imagined to work, up to and including even
questioning central assumptions about the known world. One may see this power even in the
most realistic of fiction, the wildest flights of the imagination, and in the courage or audacity of
those who rise up to challenge the failings or misworkings of the world.

My first chapter includes a literature review on the subject, as well introducing the
concept of the fantastic as action, that process that can be called “magic.” This means examining
the act of fantasy itself, the process that Tolkien referred to as mythopoeia, or myth-making. To
better identify fantasy as a process, examining how it is done and what elements comprise it, I
construct a framework for rhetorics of this fantastical magic using Burke’s dramatastic pentad as
a starting point and constructing a “fantastic pentad” of my own. The significance of this chapter
lies in examining what fantasy can do as a rhetorical method. It seeks to answer fundamental
questions: what does it mean to do fantasy, how is it done, and what can it accomplish?

In my second chapter, I consider fantasy as an instantiation of the fantastic and as a
genre. Having begun by identifying what it is fantasy can do and how it can be done, I then
consider the result of that action. What is produced when one “does” fantasy, and how does this
product represent a rhetorical text or situation? I continue this thread in my third chapter, where I review the concept of the fantastic as an experience, which may be termed “enchantment.” Here I refer to the liminal fantasy, the fantasy as it exists in the perceptions and minds of its audiences as they experience it as a phenomenon. As I argue that the fantastic as action is a significant rhetorical mode and fantasy is what can be produced by those rhetorics, this chapter explores the experience itself, essentially examining the question of how fantasy works upon its audience.

My latter three chapters serve as sites of inquiry, applying the theory explored in the first three chapters to specific contexts. In my fourth chapter, I draw connections between fantasy, such as Tolkien’s writings, and those of writers like bell hooks, Peter Elbow, Paulo Freire, Kenneth Burke, T. R. Johnson, and William Covino. I explore the way enacting, exploring, and experiencing fantasy in various capacities may be of use in the composition classroom, particularly as it engages with the ideas of these writers. In my fifth chapter, I explore a topic that has always been of great interest to me: games and how they work. Using the model of fantasy put forth earlier in my dissertation, I explore the intersections between play and fantasy. In particular, I examine role-playing games as instantiations of magic, fantasy, and enchantment based on the models set up in my earlier chapters. Here I follow the central thread of this rhetoric of fantasy: how is game play (and design) an act of fantasy? Perhaps most importantly, what transformative experience does it offer, and what is significant or valuable about that experience?

My final chapter seeks to apply the concepts from each of my first three chapters to the specific context of fiction. Initially, I intended for the chapter to examine how fiction offers and can facilitate the fantastic as action, the fantastic as experience, and fantasy. However, in this chapter I found myself taking a much narrower focus. The project up until this chapter argues that the act and agency of fantasy are characterized by a transformative process, which can be
called “magic.” As I wrote the chapter, I began to trace the development of the fantasy genre, particularly throughout the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, focusing on how different fantasies transformed their relationships to their audience, as compared to the relationships between previous fantasies and their audiences. Following this thread, I was able to observe an interesting trend in how these fantasies transformed not only their own relationships to their audiences, but also how they transformed the process of transforming those relationships.

In many ways the central impetus for this project was to complicate an understanding of the term “fantasy,” particularly as it differs from commodified, market-driven genre conventions. Enacting the fantastic represents departure, transformation, and alternative modes of thinking. It may simplify or it may complicate, but it always has the power to question and reimagine. As I have alluded to already, there is a word for this power: magic. Many have written of magic, from writers of fantasy fiction to philosophers to composition theorists, and I will draw heavily on the concept of magic as put forth by William A. Covino in his 1994 work, *Magic, Rhetoric, and Literacy: An Eccentric History of the Composing Imagination.* Covino discusses both “generative” and “arresting” magic, and each offers its own sort of power. The primary power of enacting the fantastic is generative magic, while the primary power of fantasy as a set of genre conventions is arresting magic, but they do not exist separately. Each modifies the other as a fantastical experience, contained and distinct within the concept of “fantasy.” I envision this much like the dual ouroboros of the magical pendant AURYN from *The Neverending Story* (an image that I will revisit in chapter six). To envision the act and the genre each as a serpent, the whole constitutes the fantasy experience—the transformative and the conventional—or, at least, it offers one way of visualizing the relationship between these two aspects of fantasy.
Chapter One: Magic, The Fantastic as Action

A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall. Of the old stone some had already been used in building the house in which he actually lived, not far from the old house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower. But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labour, in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions, or to discover whence the man’s distant forefathers had obtained their building material.… And even the man’s own descendants, who might have been expected to consider what he had been about, were heard to murmur: ‘He is such an odd fellow! Imagine his using these old stones just to build a nonsensical tower! Why did he not restore the old house? He had no sense of proportion.’ But from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea.

– J. R. R. Tolkien (Monsters and the Critics 7-8)

For Tolkien, the practice of taking old stones—old pieces of myth and legend—and using them to construct new and engaging structures, such as his stories of Middle-earth, was essential to his method of creating fantasy. He called this process “mythopoeia,” and he placed great value on it, wherein a person created Secondary Worlds in the image of the Primary World, which in Tolkien’s view was a tribute to all of creation, part of his personal religious outlook. For myself, I believe that this process presents the essential element of fantasy: transformation. This power,
which I follow in a long tradition of calling “the fantastic,” is evidenced in the work of fantasy writers from J. R. R. Tolkien and Ursula Le Guin to Jim Butcher and George R. R. Martin, as well as from writers who utilize fantasy in their own way for non-fictional purposes, such as Gloria Anzaldúa. One who experiences fantasy is witness to a process where the known, the familiar, is transformed to the unknown, the strange, and sometimes the reverse—where what was alien and Other becomes familiar, relatable. In this chapter, I will outline the key components of how I believe the fantastic is enacted, and I will set up how, in future chapters, I will discuss the way the fantastic becomes fantasy, and in turn how the experience of fantasy in varying sorts can impact its audiences.

The core structure for my discussion of the fantastic comes from Kenneth Burke’s concept of dramatism, which sets forth five key terms: act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. These terms allow Burke to discuss human motives and activities in terms of, respectively, what took place, the context in which it took place, who performed the action, how it was accomplished, and why it was done. In these first three chapters, I will demonstrate how these concepts can be applied to the power of the fantastic, the fantasies it can produce, and the way those fantasies are experienced. In later sections of the book, Burke extensively discusses Creation, which creates interesting parallels to Tolkien’s sub-creation. Drawing upon Burke’s framework grants a method of discussing what is done, who does it, and so forth. This approach provides a useful method to identify the way the fantastic operates as action, identifying the significance and function of each of these five key terms within that context. Before I proceed with this discussion, however, there are other key texts that have informed my thinking, which I present here in the form of a literature review.
**Literature Review**

One place to begin in framing a rhetoric of the fantastic is in examining the work of those who have done so previously. In *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Farah Mendlesohn sets up the project of “understanding of the construction of the genre; specifically, I wish to consider its language and rhetoric, in order to provide critical tools for further analysis” (loc. 100-102). She further sets forth a focus on “the way in which a text becomes fantasy or, alternatively, the way the fantastic enters the text and the reader’s relationship to this” (loc. 116-117) and identifies “four categories within the fantastic: the portal-quest, the immersive, the intrusive, and the liminal” (loc. 132-133). She puts this forth as a taxonomic understanding of the genre, though she does not attempt to claim universal applicability or to preclude other such taxonomies, preferring to “open up new questions” rather than to “offer a classification” (loc. 143-145). She emphasizes, “Generally speaking this is a book about structure, not about meaning” (loc. 169). Given that Mendlesohn’s approach is more structural and taxonomic, I will reference it more heavily in my chapters on the fantastic as an experience and as an object, but her work offers, as she puts it, questions that may be asked. Further, her framing concept of the four categories of fantasy suggests that different approaches to the fantastic may serve different ends. Thus, in considering what it means to enact the fantastic and how this is done, her text offers at the least a useful grounding in the subject matter and the forms that the fantastic can take. Mendlesohn’s concerns are not dissimilar from those of Tzevetan Todorov, whose work she references.

Todorov wrote one of the classic treatises on fantasy in his 1970 work, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, which was translated by Richard Howard as *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Todorov is heavily concerned with genre, and his primary task in

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3 Some texts used in the writing of this project included “Kindle location” notation in lieu of page numbers.
the text is to explore three specific genres of narrative: the uncanny, the fantastic, and the marvelous. The uncanny constitutes that which is possible within the known physical world, even if the circumstances are extraordinary—most “realistic” fiction occupies this space. The marvelous is what might be termed, today, “fantasy,” where the narrative overtly departs from the workings of the known world, allowing for the “impossible” to truly happen (such as stories about wizards, superheroes, or monsters). Todorov’s great fascination is with “the fantastic,” however. For Todorov, the fantastic was a very liminal experience, limited specifically to those moments when one could not determine whether a narrative did or did not stray from the uncanny into the marvelous. It was explicitly a state of ambiguity and uncertainty, and the duality and liminality of his fantastic inform my thinking. In constructing fantasy, one does occupy a highly liminal space, balancing the dualities of what is known to be possible and what is thought to be impossible, and it is in that psychic space that enacting the fantastic takes place.

My understanding of the fantastic is also heavily informed by certain theorists on fiction in the broader sense. Perhaps most significantly, a cornerstone of my thinking on the subject comes from the writings of Wayne C. Booth and Kenneth Burke. Booth’s *The Rhetoric of Fiction* is in many ways a similar project to my own, though his is a considerably larger undertaking. Of specific interest to me is Booth’s concept of “interests.” He identifies the types of literary interest served by fiction as intellectual interest, qualitative interest, and practical interest. He characterizes intellectual (or “cognitive”) interest as that of following a story, finding out “whodunit?” and so forth. This extends also to non-fiction in the capacity of learning about the world (125-126). The qualitative interest, or “completion of qualities,” relies upon the completion of patterns, such as: “cause-effect,” or seeing the consequences of elements of a text; “conventional expectations,” or following popular literary forms; “abstract forms,” or utilizing
literary devices, such as meter and rhyme, that stand the test of time; and “promised qualities,” or furthering whatever the text itself suggests, early on, that it will deliver (126-128). The final type is “practical interests,” or what one might term a reaction to the “human qualities” of a work. If following the narrative of fiction is “intellectual,” then for Booth it is following characters and their emotional arcs that concern practical interests. This will aid me in considering the fantastic in terms of how it functions with respect to such interests.

Meanwhile, Burke’s Counter-Statement provides another useful way to discuss the functions of the fantastic, discussing symbols and how they appeal to audiences. Within this section of the work, which Burke terms his “Lexicon Rhetoricae,” he breaks down “patterns of experience” into: universal experience, or those emotions and states of being that are common to human beings (149); modes of experience, or the circumstances that give rise to universal experiences (150); and patterns of experience, when modes of experience are repeated and give rise to symbols (152). Here Burke enters into a thorough discussion of the appeals of symbols, fitting very neatly into the “interests” presented in The Rhetoric of Fiction presented by Wayne Booth. As the chapter continues, Burke presents six key appeals of the symbol. He notes that the list is “not exhaustive, but illustrative” (156). I also find this useful, methodologically speaking, as it reinforces Booth’s notion that these are only some approaches to the subject matter. Burke’s six appeals of the symbol are: as the interpretation of a situation, by favoring the acceptance of a situation, as the corrective of a situation, as the exerciser of “submerged” experience, as an “emancipator,” and as a vehicle for “artistic” effects: This appeal is perhaps best termed “craft,” tied to notions of eloquence and artistry (154-156).
Burke’s 1945 book, *A Grammar of Motives*, also provides a useful framework for discussion of the fantastic as action. Ken McAllister’s 2004 book, *Game Work: Language, Power, and Computer Game Culture*, offers an example of how Burke’s concept may be adapted, as with the fantastical pentad (see Fig. 2). Apart from a robust discussion of computer games—including definitions, rhetorical events surrounding them, and how those games make meaning—McAllister also offers a useful example of how to adapt Burke’s dramatistic pentad for his subject. As such, this text plays a large role in shaping my thinking about how I might do the same for the fantastic, as I will approach in the next section of this chapter. I also draw upon Raph Koster’s *A Theory of Fun for Game Design* and Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, each of which suggests approaches to how play works and facilitates learning. Koster in particular argues that games are by necessity teaching mechanics, and that a key form of “fun” is actually the experience of learning, which satisfies the human brain’s need to form patterns. This too will play a greater role in later chapters, but Koster’s ideas about game design also reflect a method of enacting fantasy—the fantastic is conceptualized and rhetorically utilized to achieve specific ends by teaching the player. The subject of games and play also pertains directly to the fantastic, particularly game design and imaginative play. I will examine games more specifically in Chapter 5, but reading and playing games has distinctly informed my ideas about the fantastic. Indeed, play and games may be one

\[\text{Fig. 1. Burke’s Dramatistic Pentad}\]

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4 During my course of study, directly working with Ken McAllister led me to consider games as another method of enacting fantasy. While I reference his book, here, I must also note that he personally informed my thinking.
of the most ready examples of how one may enact the fantastic. With that in mind, role-playing games make up some of the most fantastical and imaginative forms of gaming.

By “role-playing,” I refer more particularly to collaborative recreational fantasy than to communication or therapeutic techniques of the same name. Sarah Lynne Bowman explores the workings of role-playing games (or RPGs) in her 2010 book, *The Functions of Role-playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity*. Bowman gives a brief history of role-playing games as they’re currently understood, as well as exploring the social benefits of such games. Some of her examples illustrate glimpses into the “how” of enacting fantasy in a nuts-and-bolts sense: Constructing characters and scenario-building allow players to apply problem-solving skills, engaging in both active and passive learning (82). This accompanies discussion of various other functions of RPGs, such as interpersonal skill development, but a central point about role-playing games is that they place the player “into a unique, liminal space, in which he or she inhabits a split consciousness or dual identity” (86).

This description of a liminal space that embraces duality is also part of enacting the fantastic—the agent is aware of the separation between “reality” and “fantasy,” but occupies a temporary threshold between the two. (This is similar to the way fantasy is experienced, save that the role of the participant changes, as I will discuss in Chapter 3.) In considering the fantastic in a role-playing context, I will also draw examples from classic role-playing games, such as White Wolf’s *Mage: The Ascension, Changeling: The Dreaming*, and their *Changeling Storyteller’s Guide*. White Wolf was a pioneer in publishing role-playing games that focused more on constructing worlds and characters than on “hack-and-slash” mechanics, which makes them a useful example for my discussion.
As Koster indicates, the fantastic can be contextualized in very “real life” applications, such as in liberatory pedagogy. Howard E. Gardner’s *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* is deeply invested in the project of re-examining intelligence. Written in 1983, much of it strays too deeply into the neurological and sociological for my own use, but as a now-classic text on the nature of multiple intelligences, it offers a point of consideration: What intelligence(s) are drawn upon by enacting the fantastic? Is there an identifiable “fantastical intelligence”? These are useful questions as I consider other texts pertaining to the fantastic as a mode of learning, much as Koster, McAllister, and Huizinga identify play in a similar context.

Robert Crossley’s 1975 essay from *College English*, “Education and Fantasy,” offers a further bridge into the subject. Crossley criticizes the presumed childishness of fantasy, drawing on ideas from Tolkien’s “On Fairy-Stories” to argue that fantasy is, in fact, useful and notes similarities between works such as *Lord of the Rings* and Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. Each is a work of fantasy that offers commentary on and perspective into human experiences (284-286). Fantasy, he argues, calls for not a mere “suspension of belief” but an “expansion of belief,” which allows the “shape and scope of one’s world” to change (288). In the end, he likens teaching to the act of writing fantasy itself, wherein “the teacher needs to provide a distinct enough order to the process of responding to the experience of reading that students can perceive its value. This is a difficult posture for the teacher to strike; it entails patient discrimination in deciding when students are engaged in cheap thrills and when they are in the midst of promising voyages which should not be interrupted” (293). Crossley does not provide much in the way of method for using fantasy in education, but certainly others have given some indications about doing so. One such example, offering perhaps surprising links to the work of Tolkien, is the work of Paolo Freire.
In addition to its status as a classic text on the subject, Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* also represents an example of one function of fantasy that is of particular relevance to my project: re-creation. Much of Freire’s work is focused on empowering students to be re-creators of their own worlds. A central theme of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* deals with breaking from oppressive systems used to maintain extant power structures, instead encouraging students to seize agency in spite of a system that would rather they remain passive cogs within the wheels of the social machine. The first real spark of this project came when I mentally connected Freire’s re-creation to Tolkien’s sub-creation, which I will discuss shortly. I realized that to have a vision for re-creating the world another world must first be sub-created. Describing the process of “decoding,” Freire writes that “the participants externalize their thematics and thereby make explicit their ‘real consciousness’ of the world” (115). That is, by using certain codifications to test the limits of students’ awareness, they can move beyond previous limitations in order to achieve greater consciousness. While Freire’s codifications were usually sketches or pictures, the fantastic also represents another method of codifying experience. Via codified sub-creation, the fantastic can also test the limits of one’s imagination and awareness. An example of this can be found in relation to Freire’s own work, courtesy of bell hooks. Much of hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* relates more to my ideas about classroom practice than about fantasy, but she does offer another way to consider fantastic thinking—what Le Guin would call “translation.” For hooks, utilizing Freire meant orienting to his work as a feminist. As an admirer of Paulo Freire’s ideas but not his less enlightened attitudes toward gender, she had to engage in an act of translation and imagination, re-creating Freire’s ideas in order to use them. Another possible way to pursue such liberatory pedagogy is through the
“renegade rhetoric” of T. R. Johnson, who suggests that a kind of “magic” is possible in the classroom when one casts off the strictures of an oppressively “masochistic” system.

In *A Rhetoric of Pleasure: Prose Style & Today’s Composition Classroom*, T. R. Johnson advocates for what William Covino calls “generative magic.” As Johnson writes, “To cultivate generative magic, writers must learn techniques and principles that, rather than arrest the play of critical thought, stimulate it, structures that liberate rather than merely limit the composing imagination” (40). This idea is taken from Covino’s *Magic, Rhetoric, and Literacy: An Eccentric History of the Composing Imagination*, which offers up a sketch of rhetorical history with an eye toward demonstrating the presence of “magic” as, alternately, either an element of rhetoric or its equivalent. In defining his concept of magic, Covino writes that “magic is and always has been symbolic action (that is to say, magic never occurs apart from language), in the service of individual or social transformation” (12). Covino makes the case that even science borrows from ritual and magic: “In a nonmagical society, our classification systems are presumed to be scientific and logical, so that their origins in social rituals within a magical epistemology are forgotten” (13). So, if magic is a symbolic performance—even, perhaps, that of the scientific method that invokes trust and credibility—it follows fairly reasonably when Covino raises the idea of “magic rhetoric,” which prefers “a fertile, dynamic, and fluctuant imagination to its opposite” (16). Many of Covino’s claims about symbolism resonate with Burke’s ideas. In this discussion of magic, Covino eventually comes to what I consider the key concept of the work: a distinction between “generative magic” and “arresting magic” (21) Arresting magic/rhetoric is authoritarian and reduces or removes ambiguity. Generative magic complicates, inviting new ideas. From this, Covino observes that “What is at issue then is not whether rhetoric is magic, but what sorts of magi/rhetors, under what sorts of conditions, produce what kind of effects” (22).
So, arresting magic sets limits and reduces ambiguity, while generative magic offers additional possibilities and increases ambiguity. These concepts of magic and its functions inform the way I approach the fantastic. In the course of this discussion of magic and the fantastic, turning to the concept of fantasy—as in the literary genre and mental practice—also becomes inevitable.

A key text in this tradition is W. R. Irwin’s *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy*. Irwin defines the fantastic thusly: “A matter is within the range of the fantastic if it judged, whether on the basis of knowledge or convention, to be not only outside ‘reality’ but also in knowing contravention of ‘reality.’ Thus within the concept of the fantastic is a competition for credence in which an assertive ‘antireal’ plays against an established ‘real’” (8). He goes on to argue that the fantastic “is not of itself a literary form, and its presence, even preponderance, in a narrative does not necessarily make a fantasy” (8). Here Irwin’s distinction is consistent with my own, as he separates the genre of fiction, fantasy, from the broader concept of the fantastic. Irwin’s book is exceptionally useful, in that it offers an excellent discussion of various discourses on fantasy fiction, which is itself one of the most significant manifestations of the fantastic as an object—as a thing to behold. This includes something of his own fantasy literature review, but one important early move Irwin makes is to emphasize the distinction between fantasy, the literary genre, and the “psychic phenomenon” of fantasizing, even within literature, noting that fantasy stories contrast with those designed to emulate flights of fancy (such as stream-of-consciousness narratives) in their form and purpose. The fantasies “show sharper forming, clearer external objectification, and more evident rhetorical tactics than these explorations of the psyche in its apparently inchoate wanderings” (35). Irwin cites Jung’s engagement with fantasy

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5 Covino’s magic is framed as divided between “generative” and “arresting” forces, and while this reduces his magic to a binary, these forces work together in complex ways to create meaning. To create a fantastical effect, it is just as necessary to limit possibility as it is to create it, as unchecked ambiguity may fail to be coherent.
(or phantasy) as part of this distinction. Jung referred to the act of engaging in fantasizing as “phantasy” and the resulting fantasies “phantasms.” He further distinguished active from passive phantasy, in which passive phantasy refers to forms such as dreams, while active phantasy refers to what Jung termed “the principle attribute of the artistic mentality” (Irwin 6). For Irwin, distancing fantasy in the artistic sense from “fantasy” in the sense of a psychological delusion is of great importance. He writes, “There is little evidence in literary fantasy itself, or in the wit play which incites and sustains it, that release from the author’s idiosyncratic repressions is a significant motive” (Irwin 7). Irwin goes on to acknowledge that certainly the psychological phenomenon of phantasy could inform the creation of literary fantasy, but there is no evidence that one necessitates the other. In terms of the fantastic as I discuss it, I agree—this process is a deliberate and conscious act, not one based in confusion, delusion, or other challenges of perception and understanding.

Fantasy as a mental exercise or playful practice is different, in Irwin’s argument, from fantasy of delusion, but not quite the same as the fantasy of creative fiction. Irwin orient his discussion of play in contrast to those of Huizinga, who heavily associates play with games and competition, and to Freud’s notion of play as an attempt to return to a carefree, child-like state. Instead, examining the kind of “play” that leads to producing fantastical work, he asserts, “In its pure state of nonsense, play is separate from the ordinary; in manifestations of wit, play temporarily rejects the ordinary and labors to displace it. It follows that the new proposition must be demonstrated by argument, exemplary narrative, or other means. To this end, all the devices of rhetoric are mobilized. When the developed play is ended, one of two things occurs: either the reader returns to his acceptance of the challenged norm with a sense of simply having been entertained by the departure, or (what I believe happens more frequently) he returns with his
understanding modified” (Irwin 27). This does not mean, however, that such play does not have power to resist the pull of the mundane. As Irwin indicates much earlier, in framing the overarching discussion of his *Rhetoric of Fantasy*: “But even within the habit of conformity a restiveness is lurking; many of us are ever hoping to break out and be as gods” (Irwin 3). This is not a delusion, nor is it mere fancy, but the beginning of a creative impulse. Here, fantasy becomes a genre of literature.

In the literary mode, Irwin argues, fantasy holds particular rhetorical capacity and invites specific questions. One must ask of the fantasy: How does the Secondary World differ from a conventional understanding of the Primary World? What devices of rhetoric are employed to convey those differences? What are the characteristics of the Secondary World? How do these departures and rhetorical devices impact the work’s style? These questions are central for Irwin’s understanding of fantasy rhetorics, and I find that they offer a useful method of examining any fantastical text (57). Irwin argues that fantasy may be more rhetorical than artistic, and he borrows from Booth’s *The Rhetoric of Fiction* to frame his own definition of the same. For Irwin, the rhetoric of fiction is “those internal means of showing and telling by which the writer enables the reader to envision his fictional world” (58). The purpose of this rhetoric, he asserts, is “to persuade the reader through narrative that an invention contrary to known or presumed fact is existentially valid” (60). Indeed, he later claims, “Fantasy relies upon a discrimination between possible and impossible that is clearly conceived” (89). This is consistent with my own claims about the fantastic, which serves to reimagine the known. If a primary rhetorical function of fantasy is to persuade the reader of the viability of its departure from the Primary World, and if fantasy is a major example of the fantastic as an object, then this still leaves my main question: What is the rhetorical power of those fantastical elements, themselves? That is to say, while *The
“Hobbit” may have as a major rhetorical goal to convince the reader that the Secondary World is viable, what of the specifically fantastical choices, themselves? What is transformative about its depiction and use of elves, dwarves, dragons or, indeed, hobbits?

Irwin acknowledges both J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis as important theorists of the fantasy genre. In discussing Tolkien’s “On Fairy-Stories,” Irwin observes both many of the essay’s strengths and weaknesses. A key observation is that Tolkien distinguishes between magic and enchantment: “Magic is a technique designed to achieve power in the primary world; enchantment is a condition that fosters both art and faith” (Irwin 44). While, as Irwin points out, Tolkien remains fairly grounded in Christian orthodoxy, he does provide many helpful ideas about the function of fantasy, many of which I explore elsewhere in this project. Certainly Irwin is not the only critic of Tolkien’s worldview and its intrusion into his use of fantasy, but even Tolkien complicates many of his own ideas, such as by drawing on pagan mythology to construct his own fantasy world (Irwin 45). While many have cited aspects of Tolkien’s worldview—prominently pertaining to his treatment of race—as problematic, and I do not disagree, I believe that Tolkien’s theories about fantasy remain useful. Irwin refers to Lewis as “the most generous contributor to the theory of fantasy” (45). Lewis distinguished between the psychic phenomenon of fantasy and the literary genre, while acknowledging that the former could fuel the latter. For Lewis, the psychic phenomenon was heavily associated with daydreams and the self; it was primarily egoistic in nature. They might serve as a point of inception for art, but they are not themselves artistic expression. Literary fantasy, in Lewis’ view, is “disinterested” in that it is not rooted in personal wish fulfillment (46-47). As much as Irwin sets out a discussion of fantasy and one vision of what it is and can do, Brian Attebery constructs one that similarly offers a
robust history of fantasy, focusing mainly on fantasy in America and its evolution up through most of the twentieth century.

In his 1980 book, *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature: From Irving to Le Guin*, Brian Attebery seeks to define fantasy in a specifically American context and trace its roots through the genres that gave rise to it. Early in the work, he defines fantasy as “a tradition that runs counter to the main force of American belief as evidenced by the bulk of our folklore and literature up to the turn of the [20th] century” (vii) and adds that “One might think of it as a resistance movement, working to undermine the natural faith in things-as-they-are (vii). In a broad sense, he defines fantasy most simply as “Any narrative that includes as a significant part of its make-up some violation of what the author clearly believes to be natural law—that is fantasy” (2). He observes some of the fantastic’s transformative power when he writes, “Fantasy invokes wonder by making the impossible seem familiar and the familiar seem new and strange. When you put a unicorn in the garden, the unicorn gains solidity and the garden takes on enchantment” (3). More specifically, he argues “That is the way fantasy operates, by externalizing ideas and emotions and clothing them in appropriate imagery” (137). Like many others, Attebery defines fantasy largely in terms of literary market genre. For instance, in comparing fantasy with the often-related genre of horror, he asserts, “The horror story depends on things remaining one sided, but fantasy demands both black magic and white. [...] All that needed to be done was to turn the fallible protagonist of horror fiction into a true fairy tale hero, someone the readers can root for and someone capable of striking back against dark gods, of stealing away a few of their prerogatives like the working of wonders” (140). Attebery further explores a definition of fantasy in his 1992 work, *Strategies of Fantasy*. 
Fantasy is a sophisticated mode of storytelling characterized by stylistic playfulness, self-reflexiveness, and a subversive treatment of established orders of society and thought. Arguably the major fictional mode of the late twentieth century, it draws upon contemporary ideas about sign systems and the indeterminacy of meaning and at the same time recaptures the vitality and freedom of nonmimetic traditional forms such as epic, folktale, romance, and myth. (1)

Attebery refers to what might be termed “realistic” or “non-fantastical” fiction as “mimesis,” and he argues that all fiction balances mimetic and fantastical elements, as pure mimesis would be nothing but reportage of real events and pure fantasy would be incoherent artifice (Strategies of Fantasy 3). This comprises a connection between the Primary and Secondary Worlds; the fantastical must exist in relation to the real.

The original point of inspiration for this project came from J. R. R. Tolkien’s “On Fairy Stories,” which was originally delivered as an Andrew Lang Lecture at the University of St. Andrews on March 8, 1939. As discussed by Verlyn Flieger in Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien’s World, “On Fairy-Stories” was later published as an essay along with “Leaf by Niggle” in Tree and Leaf in 1964, which was later included in The Tolkien Reader (Flieger 495-497). In this essay, Tolkien sets out his rather spiritualistic defense of the value of the fantastic, in particular what he calls “fairy stories” and his practice of mythopoeia. Much of the work is dedicated to characterizing “sub-creation,” or the act of creating fictional worlds and stories that exist within the greater world (which, for Tolkien the devout Catholic, meant “Creation,” itself). Whether, like Tolkien, one borrows from ancient myth—as he puts it in the quote at the start of this chapter, taking the stones from an old ruin and building a tower, from
which one might view the distant sea—or from a more modern context, enacting the fantastic means producing something. To distinguish this process from other forms of art and fiction, which engage in much the same act, I look to another Tolkien fan, Ursula K. Le Guin.

Le Guin saw both the strengths and shortcomings of Tolkien’s work, and she begins her essay, “Assumptions about Fantasy” (collected in the anthology *Cheek by Jowl: Talk & Essays on How & Why Fantasy Matters*), with a refutation of what she identifies as three myths—in her phrasing, “assumptions”—about the fantasy genre: that the characters are always white, that the setting is always medieval (or medieval-inspired), and that the central conflict is always a simplistic battle between good and evil (4). This might seem a direct reference to Tolkien’s work and the work of those who came after him, yet she also asserts that Tolkien’s “On Fairy Stories” is required reading for anyone interested in serious discussion of fantasy, much more so than Todorov (31). She also addresses this in various parts of another collection, *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*. As Tolkien speaks of sub-creation, Le Guin speaks of “translation,” which resonates very strongly with the process of symbol-construction I have referenced earlier from Wayne Booth and Kenneth Burke. Like Tolkien, Le Guin rejects the notion of direct allegory—rather, she embraces the (quite Campbellian/Jungian) idea that lived and imagined experience resonate with patterns, which become symbols, which human beings respond to. She also sets out a number of arguments about what fantasy is and what it does, which I will examine more closely in the next section of this chapter, which lead to some of my more specific ideas about what the act of the fantastic is, does, and means.

Something of a contrasting voice to those of Tolkien and Le Guin, Rosemary Jackson discusses the effects of fantasy in her 1981 work, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. In response to Irwin’s definition of fantasy as that which overtly violates what is generally
acceptable as possible within the Primary World, Jackson argues, “Such violation of dominant assumptions threatens to subvert (overturn, upset, undermine) rules and conventions taken to be normative. This is not in itself a socially subversive activity: it would be naive to equate fantasy with either anarchic or revolutionary politics. It does, however, disturb ‘rules’ of artistic representation and literature’s reproduction of the ‘real’” (Jackson 14). She gives little heed to the works of authors such as Tolkien or Le Guin, arguing that they “belong to that realm of fantasy which is more properly defined as faery, or romance literature” (Jackson 9). She dismisses their works as “religious longing and nostalgia,” failing to accomplish the subversive ends that she discusses (Jackson 9). As this differs from the focus of my own project, I will only observe that Jackson seems to be engaging with the same spectrum of forces that Covino identifies as generative and arresting magic. Instead of delineating which fantasies are subversive and which are not, I will focus on Jackson’s arguments pertaining to the ways in which fantasy may be subversive, drawing on them particularly in a later chapter.

To conclude this literature review, I must return briefly to Tolkien. This project heavily references many of Tolkien’s ideas, which is appropriate given the pervasive impact of Tolkien’s ideas on and use of the fantastic. However, Tolkien’s reputation as a fantasist must contend also with his reputation for racist themes in his work. To that end, first, I must agree that Tolkien’s ideas on race do not reflect any enlightened sensibility. *The Lord of the Rings* alone treats darker-skinned characters from vaguely pastiche “Eastern” cultures as decidedly inferior to its Norse and British coded protagonists and relies on notions of blood purity that carry an uncomfortably eugenic resonance. I must also acknowledge that many attempts have been made to defend Tolkien’s work as aracial, though I do not support this argument. Indeed, even fan websites like the Tolkien Gateway, dedicate efforts to explanations and apologetics for the ways issues of race
manifest in Tolkien’s work. While tracing Tolkien’s relationship with race is not the focus of this project, I must make it clear that I do acknowledge these problematic aspects of Tolkien’s work and do not seek to defend them. In an attempt at fairness, I will note that Tolkien did seem, outside of his fictional work, to oppose overt racism in the material world. When in 1938 a German publisher contacted him to learn if he was of “pure” Aryan stock, Tolkien’s letter in response referred to this question as an “impertinence” and asked, “do their lunatic laws require a certificate of arisch origin from all persons of all countries?” (Qtd. in “Racism in Tolkien’s Works”). In a 1959 Oxford Valedictory address, Tolkien also asserted, “I have the hatred of apartheid in my bones; and most of all I detest the segregation or separation of Language and Literature. I do not care which of them you think White” (Monsters and the Critics 238). This is not to claim that such protestations cleanse Tolkien’s work of prejudice or harmful ideas about race. Instead, I acknowledge that Tolkien did come from a particular social and historical context, and he did show clear prejudices as a result of his Eurocentric worldview.

However, Tolkien’s limitations and weaknesses do not make his ideas about fantasy irrelevant. In fact, as I will discuss at several points throughout this project, this is a useful illustration of the fact that fantasy does not carry, as has sometimes been argues in the past, a necessarily moral component. Fantasy can be used toward many different ends, some perhaps desirable and many certainly not, and Tolkien’s great influence over the practice of fantastical writing and the fantasy genre, itself, do not render his work apolitical, amoral, or above reproach. I will address this idea again, more broadly, in the next section of this chapter, where I move on to defining the act of the fantastic—or, what it means to do transformative magic.
The fantastic as act—creating the fantastical—takes place during this process of sub-creation or translation. Either of these processes could apply to fiction in general, rather than to the genre for which they are known, which leads me to emphasize that in discussing the fantastic, I do not specifically mean “fantasy fiction” as defined by publishing markets. That is, the fantastic need not necessarily be limited to “fictional works containing magic,” nor must it entail the presence of particular fictional concepts (such as Tolkien’s elves, orcs, wizards, and dragons). These are common images and tropes in the popular genre of fiction that is broadly termed “fantasy,” but the fantastic need not include the trappings of any market-driven genre of literature. Similarly, the fantasy genre does not always particularly enact the fantastic as I discuss it. Particularly with its increased popularity and continued market saturation, fantasy fiction may frequently be conventional rather than fantastical.\textsuperscript{6}

Mythopoeia, sub-creation, translation—these concepts each describe communicating ideas through narrative symbolism. These notions are widely associated with fantasy and the fantastic, but what makes them “fantastical”? It would be simple to fall back on Todorov’s concept of the “marvelous” as a defining feature of the fantastic, but when “marvelous” merely means “impossible under known physical laws,” a key distinction is lost. Then, the fantastic would merely be the mythical or the imaginary. However, like Todorov, I argue that the fantastic is not so simple. I argue that the primary fantastical act is transformation. The fantastical act is applied imagination, transforming a cloud into a dancing dragon, an old person into a mysterious

\textsuperscript{6} A “conventional fantasy,” or a story that operates within the established fantasy genre of fiction (however fuzzy that category may be, as I will discuss in my second chapter), tends to rely on extant tropes and concepts previously established within the genre. In such case, the story may be fantastical by association in some way, borrowing from ideas that were once transformative but have since become expected conventions of the genre. They are still a departure from the material or “real” world, but they may lack the same transformative rhetorical capacity.
witch or wizard, or a misty forest into a haunted wood. Yet, this act need not be limited to the
traditional trappings of fantasy, nor do those trappings themselves constitute fantastical acts.
Where Tolkien transformed a moment of boredom into the inception of a hobbit or Le Guin
transformed a wizard from an old man, leading armies, to a young boy who learned to avoid
violence, no end of stories have used fairly “stock” versions of elves, magic, or sorcerers.
Recycling well-trodden tropes may conjure works of fantasy, but it is not a transformative act—it is
not, itself, fantastical.

Similarly, the fantastical act does not need to include the mythical or impossible.
Innovation or activism often include a spark of the fantastical—seeing, in bacteria, the cure for
an illness is certainly a fantastical transformation, as is envisioning a world where the oppressed
become the free. The fantastic may be usually embodied by sub-creation, but it is also what
allows sub-creation to become what Freire called re-creation. It can, of course, be used as readily
for either moral or immoral purposes. The fantastic might serve to liberate, or it might serve to
support entrenched concepts of racism, as described by Chimamanda Adichie:

Now, here is a quote from the writing of a London merchant called John Lok,
who sailed to west Africa in 1561 and kept a fascinating account of his voyage.
After referring to the black Africans as ‘beasts who have no houses,’ he writes,
‘They are also people without heads, having their mouth and eyes in their
breasts.’ (Adichie)

This is undoubtedly a fantastical description of Africans, but the transformation serves to
reinforce a destructive, racist ideology. As previously noted, Tolkien’s own writings have come
under heavy criticism for his problematic depictions of race. At the same time, it was perhaps a
spark of the fantastic that led Ursula Le Guin to make the protagonist of A Wizard of Earthsea
young and brown-skinned, when fictional wizards of the day were popularly depicted as old 
white men with long beards, à la Merlin or Gandalf.

I do not wish to conflate the fantastical act with novelty, however. As Tolkien put it, one 
can certainly build with very old stones. In *The Language of the Night*, Le Guin argues that 
fantasy is not concerned with the presumption of realism, and similarly the fantastic may or may 
not be realistic (43). While the fantastic may be new or old and may be as easily realistic as 
whimsical, what it must do is seek some form of transformation. Consider Gloria Anzaldúa’s 
*Borderlands = La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Anzaldúa was not addressing a new problem, and 
while she used mythical imagery and language, she wrote explicitly of a real world, entirely non-
fiction struggle, utilizing mythopoeia to discuss the Primary world just as (and, I would contend, 
just as effectively) as Tolkien used it to create his Secondary World. Anzaldúa enacted the 
fantastic by transforming the very medium and conventions of her writing—within the text, 
borders are torn down, art and argument became one, and divisions between languages and 
writing conventions blur and dissolve. The mythical spoke to and for the circumstances of real 
life, and the text itself sought to transform understanding of the subject. While an extended 
critique or evaluation of Anzaldúa’s work lies beyond my project, I would argue that her book 
embodies a highly effective use of the fantastic, as well as demonstrating the important 
distinction between enacting the fantastic and reproducing the trappings of genre fantasy. 
Moreover, it indicates that the fantastic need not be removed nor restricted from the Primary (or 
“real”) World. Rather, the fantastic must always, in one way or another, have a direct 
relationship to the living world, even if only by rejecting it in favor of a Middle-earth or 
Earthsea—or, perhaps, a planet Earth where borders do not so violently divide cultures and 
peoples.
Scene

If the “act” of the fantastic as action means transformation, then the question of scene—where this act takes place—conveys the rhetorical situation of the text and, importantly, its relationship to the Primary World. 7 As Tolkien describes sub-creation, a Secondary World can be taken in any direction, serve any function, and tell any story. The sole limitation is that it must retain internal consistency and make sense according to its own logic, much in the way an argument must stand within the parameters established by a claim. Here again, the “realistic” is not the central concern when crafting a Secondary World. As Tolkien describes it, “What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful ‘sub-creator.’ He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world” (“Tree and Leaf” 60). In this passage, Tolkien also discards the (perhaps more conventionally accepted) notion of belief as a childish or simplistic act. Rather, Tolkien frames the act of sub-creation as based in rigorous thought, rather than uncritical acceptance or idle “suspension of disbelief” shared by author and audience. Emphasizing the importance of internally consistent structure, Tolkien continues, “The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside” (60). What Tolkien refers to as “Art” is analogous to Covino’s “magic”: both refer to a particular sort of applied skill, entailing both critical thought and eloquent expression.8

Any narrative should utilize a coherent Secondary World to retain credibility, but in considering the fantastic it is especially important to consider that Secondary World’s

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7 While not all instantiations of the fantastic might traditionally be called “texts,” I use the term here for convenience. Indeed, any such example might plausibly be the subject of rhetorical study as a text.
8 Tolkien capitalizes “Art” at times to distinguish his use of the term from popular understanding, though he has not done so in the quote I reference here. For my purposes, I will distinguish his version of “Art” via capitalization.
relationship to the Primary World. Specifically, in what way is the Secondary World offering a transformation of the Primary World? What is significant about that transformation—what does it illustrate, reveal, or question about the Primary World? One place to begin answering these questions is with Farah Mendlesohn’s *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. As I noted previously, Mendlesohn divides fantasy into the portal-quest, the immersive, the intrusive, and the liminal. Considering the fantastic in these same terms provides a basis for examining the connection between fantastical Secondary Worlds and the Primary World of “reality.”

Where Mendlesohn is mainly interested in the perspectives of readers and characters, however, I place primary consideration on the perspective of the Agent who employs the fantastic and how their constructed Secondary World relates to and differs from the Primary World.

Portal-quest fantasy, as outlined by Mendlesohn, describes fantasy where the narrative begins in one world (usually, but not always, representative of the Primary World) and is transported to another. This can be a literal transportation, such as in Michael Ende’s *The Neverending Story* or C. S. Lewis’ *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, or it can be a figurative transportation, such as in a framing narrative—how *The Lord of the Rings* is, ostensibly, a tale written by hobbits about their adventures in the realm of Middle-earth. (This makes it a “portal” in the sense that it transports the reader from the unseen location of Bilbo’s *Red Book of Westmarch* to the Shire and other settings of the main action of the story. In this way, it could be considered a portal-quest hidden within an immersive fantasy.) For the purposes of my discussion, the fantastic as portal suggests a direct connection between the Primary World

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9 While it lies well beyond my project to interrogate the nature of reality, I find that I cannot refer to objective reality without some degree of reluctance. It strikes me as entirely too similar to referring to other problematic constructions, such as “Nature” or “Morality,” as in some way objective concepts. “Primary World” may not be inherently less problematic or presumptuous, but I find it a more comfortable term, as I can conceive of it in more subjective terms. I understand “Primary” as relative to one’s own perception, while “reality” smacks of the absolute.
and the Secondary World, where the text begins grounded in terms of the Primary World and its concerns before venturing into a Secondary World. Unlike a magical wardrobe, however, opening a “portal” via the fantastic is not simply stepping through a magical door. It means constructing a Secondary World that directly emerges as a response to the Primary World, enabling the fantasist to offer a direct comparison between the Primary World as it is and a Secondary World, explicitly highlighting similarities and differences between them. 10 The same holds true for Mendlesohn’s intrusive fantasy, for if the elements of the fantastic are depicted as entering into the Primary World (or its fictional stand-in), the same direct comparison becomes possible. Both are interested in bridging the ostensible Primary and Secondary Worlds. In contrast, immersive fantasy only overtly inhabits the Secondary World.

Though immersive fantasy can overlap with portal fantasy, such as in the example of *The Lord of the Rings*, it distinctly lacks an overt connection to a representation of the Primary World. Immersed within a realm like Earthsea, comparisons to the Primary World do not cease to exist, but they must be more implicit than explicit. Immersive fantasy may operate in the mode of allegory, or it may rely on more generalized patterns of experience, translated into fantastical terms in the manner discussed by Le Guin and Burke. Much fiction that claims to be set in “the real world if…” is actually immersive in nature. For instance, if one were to describe a story’s world by saying, “It’s exactly like the real world, only there are wizards” or “It’s exactly like the real world, only there is no gender-based prejudice,” one is transforming the world extensively. It might bear many similarities to the Primary World, but to do justice to such a premise, every element of the world would need to be considered, just as much as if one said, “This story is set

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10 I employ the term “fantasist” to mean “one who enacts the fantastic,” differentiated for clarity from “fantasist” as “one who enacts fantasy.” This can mean either the rhetor/author who constructs a fantasy, or it can mean the audience who receives and, in their own imagination, reconstructs and experiences that fantasy.
in the distant land of Oz.” If the suggested change is purely set in the future, then it might branch off into the realm of the portal, where “the future” is the Secondary World. If the transformation is not sufficient to conjure a complete Secondary World, then it may inhabit what Mendlesohn discusses as liminal fantasy, or that which exists only in a passing state. Here, she comes closest to Todorov’s version of the fantastic. For my purposes, the fantastic occupies a liminal space when it unfolds within the Primary World. Generally, this may most readily be envisioned as flights of fancy, daydreams, or other passing imaginings that do not translate into fully realized Secondary Worlds. This might also occur when the fantastic is invoked in a non-fictional context, perhaps in a speech or other presentation advocating for a transformation of society or culture.

Agent

Put simply, the fantasist is a rhetor who seeks transformative effect—either directly in the Primary World, as re-creator, or in a Secondary World, as sub-creator—on their reality. This transformation may be subtle or grand, may be reactionary or progressive, toxic or beneficial, or indeed, many complex combinations of any of these. In one sense, I would argue that anyone who seeks such transformation is engaged in the fantastic. The larger the transformation one envisions and is able to enact, the more fantastical it might be. The fantastical thinker is one who asks not only “What is?” or “What was?” or “What might come next?” but, more freely, “What could be?” The fantasist is not bound by the question of possibility unless they choose to be. The fantasist may engage in “realistic” thinking to determine how to accomplish a goal in the Primary World, but that becomes a question of logistics, planning, and execution. These are not unimportant concerns, but they are not, strictly speaking, fantastical concerns. For the fantasist as agent, questions of rhetoric, conception, and communication are foremost.
Agency

To convey fantastical concepts, fantastical methods may be adopted. The fantasist may employ a kind of “magic” to accomplish their aims—in this case, the magic of symbolism and language that Covino cites as an impetus for transformation. For Covino, the rhetor is the magus, and magic is rhetoric. This resonates strongly with what Covino terms “phantasy,” or the capacity for speculative reasoning. Phantasy is associated with invention, with generative magic, and the ideas and concepts of things that reside in what Covino calls the “mind-soul” become “phantasms” (32). It is interesting to note the similarity, here, to Burke’s discussion of the symbol; a pattern of lived experience gives rise to a symbol, much as an object or concept from the real world gives rise to a phantasm. This connection leads to another conclusion—as Covino writes, “With this view, distinctions between literal and figurative identity are impossible to maintain, because everything is both actual and symbolic: a talisman or a word implies a magic power and is that power” (43). Again, this recalls Burke—a symbol can, all at once, embody, represent, and even trigger a pattern of lived experience.

Returning to his distinctions of magic varieties, Covino distinguishes between “safe” and “dialogic” magic (rather resonating with arresting and generative magic, respectively) to note that dialogic magic is “dangerous”; it may upset the extant order of things (46). In a living universe that lacks mechanical, determinate language and structure, Covino stresses the importance of this magic rhetoric—for ambiguity is a key resource (60). He later draws a direct connection to Burke, in this case to The Philosophy of Literary Form, citing Burke’s “true-correct magic” vs. “false magic.” False magic is mere static incantation, while true magic “is action that creates action, words that create words” (91-92). Further, Covino cites Burke’s claim that “True-correct magic is generative, practiced as constitutive inquiry, or the coercive
expansion of the possibilities for human action,” while false magic is “arresting, practiced as enforced doctrine, or the coercive reduction of the possibilities for human action” (93).

While it is tempting to argue with this dichotomy between “true-correct” and “false” magic—and, indeed, there are some very interesting examples of fantastical fiction and games that would serve richly as sites of inquiry for this debate—I instead argue that the fantastic can (and, perhaps, must) use both generative and arresting magic, as Covino puts it, to achieve different aims. The fantastic is interested in transformation, and to transform a thing requires both the ability to complicate and to limit. While generative magic may be more attractive in a creative sense, arresting magic represents the capacity to stop, to contain, or to direct.

Considering the project of, say, bell hooks, her brand of activism certainly seeks to transform, but it also definitively asserts placing limits and saying, at times, “no.” If it is a spark of the fantastic that grants this capacity to transform, then its “magic” must be both generative and arresting. Adding new, dynamic, and challenging ideas is one form of transformation, but limiting, directing, and simplifying may be just as necessary, and they reflect just as essential an agency of the fantastic.

Purpose

In discussing the “act” of the fantastic, previously, I have already begun to identify the purposes to which the fantastic can be turned and some purposes that it does not necessarily serve. A key question becomes, though: How does the fantastic differ from other art forms, such as from fiction in general? In particular, I would say that it serves particular purposes, and it once again comes down to the matter of essential transformation. The more transformative an act, the more fantastical its conception and, perhaps, execution must be. Considering that I have discussed this transformative power in quite fantastical terms—as magic, as components of
fantasy—it seems reasonable to consider, more specifically, what it might offer. While in some cases this might be as simultaneously simple and complex as improving real-world situations—such as Freire’s project of re-creation—it might also be a great deal smaller or more subtle. Particularly within the realm of fantastical fiction or narrative play, the fantastic can serve some very particular ends.

**Reflection**

One interesting point I have had to grapple with is the question of differentiating the act of the fantastic from the fantastic as an object. I will discuss the latter in a subsequent chapter, but the relationship between act and object bears comment. The fantasist, much like a game designer, must choose what their use of the fantastic is designed to transform, and a key element of that is—what is their audience intended to take away from that? Much as Koster is concerned with designing games that engage learning as play, the fantasist must seek methods that suppose their intended effect. As Bowman observes, there are many possible uses and benefits from experiencing a constructed fantasy, particularly as a shared creative experience such as a role-playing game. So, the various objects produced by the act of the fantastic can most certainly have a variety of intended purposes, and they can be experienced in a number of different ways. As Burke observes, the artist “discovers himself with not only a message, but a desire to produce effects upon his audience” (54). In reproducing the emotions they experience, artists thus produce “a mechanism to produce that emotion in others” (55). This is a simplified version of the basis for producing symbols, but the use of those symbols also gives rise to new experiences to be, in turn, communicated. This is evident as Burke concludes, “The artist's means are always tending to become ends in themselves” (54-55).
This is particularly true for the fantasist. The creation of, say, a hobbit living in a hole in the ground may be a fantastical act, but it goes from being a “means” of enacting the fantastic to an “end” as generations of readers identify with the text that is produced, leading many of them, in turn, to produce texts of their own. This memetic propagation of ideas compounds upon itself, so that on a somewhat “meta” level what the fantastic actually transforms is the overall perception, within a population who may be its audience (directly or indirectly), of what is possible. In some cases, such as the work of liberatory pedagogy, this might mean that those who follow may have a literally transformed perception of what is practically possible within the Primary World. Otherwise, it may have simply opened up new imaginary realms to explore. Those who follow into this realm may contribute fantastically in their own right, or they may simply write fiction that does little to challenge or transform what the previous fantasist has created, much as those who write “realistic” fiction generally do little to challenge what is perceived as possible within the Primary World. In Todorovian terms, they may write of the seemingly uncanny, but they are no longer exploring the marvelous.

Moving forward, I have established a few basic tools to use in exploring the fantastic. For a working rhetorical definition of the fantastic, I have determined that the fantastic is enacted by a rhetor, or fantasist, who imagines some transformation of the Primary World. Le Guin called this “translation.” There must always be a discernable relationship between the Primary and Secondary Worlds, whether the fantasist demonstrates full awareness of this or not. The fantasist instantiates this idea by producing a Secondary World via the method that Tolkien called sub-creation, and that method may be examined as a fantastical pentad, borrowing from Burke and McAllister, which is comprised of act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. The product of this sub-creation can be called a fantasy, and versions of it may be recorded and communicated via
various media of composition. The act of conceiving the fantastic is fundamentally different from the act of experiencing a fantasy. This process has produced, as will be explored in later chapters, but both experiences exist within the liminal space of the fantasist’s imagination. However, the Secondary World, as understood by the fantasist, may serve as a model or impetus to inspire action within the Primary World, thus leading to that world’s re-creation via human action. These fantasies may be overtly fictional or may be entirely grounded in the realities of the material world. In the next chapter, I will set out to further define and explore fantasy as the product and instantiation of fantastical rhetoric.
The definition of a fairy-story—what it is, or what it should be—does not, then, depend on any definition or historical account of elf or fairy, but upon the nature of Faërie: the Perilous Realm itself, and the air that blows in that country. 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. It has many ingredients, but analysis will not necessarily discover the secret of the whole. Yet I hope that what I have later to say about the other questions will give some glimpses of my own imperfect vision of it. For the moment I will say only this: a ‘fairy-story’ is one which touches on or uses Faërie, whatever its own main purpose may be: satire, adventure, morality, Fantasy.

– J. R. R. Tolkien (“Tree and Leaf” 38-39)

Tolkien referred to the realm of fantasy as Faërie, a world inhabited by elves, sprites, trolls, and other mythical beings. It represented the substance of the fantastical sphere, a perilous land of adventures, tests, and transformations. In many ways, this remains a template for the idea of fantasy, particularly as a genre of story, and a useful representation of what can result from enacting the fantastic. The resulting fantasy, thus enacted, may be viewed as an object, something that is produced by use of the fantastic or to embody the fantastic in some way. In fiction, these objects take the form of fantastical stories, such as in the fantasy or science fiction genres. This is useful to consider not only as part of the overarching structure of my project, but
also because it represents where many of the most relevant writings on the fantastic are focused. The vast majority of these writings focus on fantasy and/or science fiction in a genre-defined sense, making this area one that invites exploration.

For Attebery, fantasy remains governed by specific expectations, which he associates with the fairy tale. Casting fantasy in a specifically positive mode, he claims that “fantasy, growing out of the fundamentally optimistic fairy tale, represents a uniquely positive response to disaffection. The fantasist responds to destructiveness by building, to disorder by imagining order, and to despair by calling forth wonder” (*The Fantasy Tradition* 186).\(^{11}\) Curiously, this seems a rather one-dimensional view when considered beside his earlier definition of fantasy, where it is characterized by breaking with what is understood to be “real” in the world, rather than by its morality of purpose. The proposed moral qualities of fantasy are certainly evident in many works of the genre, but they are demonstrably not universal. Attebery does cite some examples of what might be termed “dark fantasy,” such as Stephen R. Donaldson’s *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever*, but he does not seem to reconcile these with his claims about the workings of fantasy fiction. As he claims in an earlier chapter, “The delight of fantasy is not in disordering, but in reordering reality. It reinforces our awareness of what is by showing us what might be, and uses the imaginary laws of the created world to postulate hidden principles on which our own might be organized” (*The Fantasy Tradition* 36). I concur that this—which calls to mind Le Guin’s notion of translation—is plausibly one of the capacities of fantasy, but fantasy is not always used for such an uplifting purpose. At the time of this writing, HBO plans a new television series called *Confederate*, which will explore a world where the South won the American Civil War. Whether or not the series proves to hold artistic or

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\(^{11}\) Calling fairy tales “optimistic” suggests a very specific reading of the term, harkening to the ideas of Tolkien and others, and reflects a common, and I would argue quite limited, view of how fantasy works.
intellectual value, certainly the fantasy of it—the idea that the South won the war, allowing institutions such as slavery to continue—is not one that I would describe as uplifting or as providing a good model for the world to follow. The question of “delight” aside, it is very clear that the fantastic does not always produce such idealistic or moral results as some writers have supposed. If I am to explore the instantiated fantastic, then I must first define my terms.

**Fantasy vs. Sci-Fi and Magic vs. Science**

This brings me to a central question: Shall I call, broadly, that which is produced by the fantastic “fantasy,” or must there be another term? To begin with, I reject the notion of fantasy carrying a specific moral dimension or optimistic tone. Fantasy has mingled and complicated light and dark, good and evil, and desirable and undesirable for quite some time. Another popular HBO series, *Game of Thrones*, is universally accepted as being a fantasy work, yet its morality is as muddled as any might be, giving its audience a world of nearly endless shades of gray with few discernable cases of “pure good” or “true evil.” Notably, decades after Attebery’s writing, one may now take a much longer view of fantasy in a postmodern context. Given this perspective, it seems clear that fantasy may eschew the simplistic good/evil (or light/dark, or desirable/undesirable) binary as readily as other genres of fiction. Just a few years after Attebery’s book, Stephen R. Donaldson published “Epic Fantasy in the Modern World.” In this essay, Donaldson argues (very similarly to Attebery) that “In fantasy, the outside is an externalization, a metaphor, of the internal. And magic is perhaps the most fruitful metaphor available to this kind of fiction. […] Writers of fantasy use the metaphor of magic as a means of discussing the ways in which human beings are greater than the sum of their parts” (8). He also argues for the importance of blending light and dark, of mingling modes of experience. At this point, it seems only reasonable to accept that “moralistic fantasy” is just one more flavor of the
genre, to be contextualized alongside “dark fantasy” as just another point in one spectrum of how the genre might be described. So, fantasy is not defined by a moral or optimistic component. These may, arguably, have at one time been the convention of fantasy as a market genre, but that genre has shifted and evolved over time. Therefore, framing a definition of fantasy presents a necessary confrontation with genre-based conventions, such as to what degree fantasy must be “realistic.”

Irwin also grappled with such distinctions, as demonstrated by his differentiation between science fiction and fantasy. To distinguish the terms, he first borrows from Kingsley Amis’ 1960 work, *New Maps of Hell: A Survey of Science Fiction*. In this book, Amis argued that “Science fiction…maintains a respect for fact or presumptive fact, fantasy makes a point of flouting these” (qtd. in Irwin 33). Similarly, Irwin cites H. G. Wells from 1934, who contrasted himself with Jules Verne in that Verne’s work was concerned “almost always with actual possibilities of invention and discovery,” while likening his own to “a good gripping dream” (qtd. in Irwin 35). Wells also advocated for a central fantastical element, a single “magic trick” that would distinguish the narrative’s Secondary World. If additional fantastical elements were introduced, Irwin observes of Wells’ argument, “the whole invention will seem irredeemable and silly” (36).

While I do not hold explicitly with this perspective, I believe it establishes two important points: the fantastical transformation (the “magic trick”) is key, and it depends upon the integrity of the Secondary World to function. To that end, Irwin observes, “The author of a realistic novel can permit himself more laxity in overt verisimilitude, in the contribution of devices to purpose, in the relationship of parts to the whole. The fantasist has much less freedom; his margin for error is almost nonexistent” (Irwin 10). This acknowledges the difficulty a fantasy may have in engaging its audience if the narrative is not carefully wrought and grounded in the relatable. As an
example, Irwin argues, “It was not simply to amuse his readers that Swift labored to establish in Books I and II of *Gulliver’s Travels* a flawless consistency of detail, all related to size proportions. This was indispensable to his rhetoric” (Irwin 10). This, then, is his example of a solidly built and cohesive Secondary World. The fantastical elements are relatively few for each of Gulliver’s encounters, but the effect each element has is profound. The presence of tiny Lilliputians, for instance, is sufficient to entirely transport Gulliver into a fantastical landscape. The fantasy is created by the key transformations—the presence of the fantastic—in Swift’s work, which supports my working definition of fantasy.

Having demonstrated that the key features of a successful fantasy are an effective transformation and a Secondary World coherent and consistent enough to make that fantastical component accessible and relatable to an audience, there remains the problem of genre. The term “fantasy” remains popularly associated with market genre. Variations and sub-genres abound, as depicted in Eugene Fisher’s genre map (Fig. 3). These forms of speculative or science fiction participate in the same kind of work, as do other imaginative genres, such as romance and horror, and it has certainly become prevalent in contemporary fiction to see all of these mingled and remixed, resulting in romantic franchises such as Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight Saga* or cross-genre fantasy adventures such as Jim Butcher’s *The Dresden Files*, but I will save discussion of specific fantastical franchises for a later chapter. For now, the question of genre must be addressed—specifically, what genre distinctions are useful in defining fantasy, and how do they impact its rhetorical applications?

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12 This map of genres is included for illustrative purposes, even though it is not fully compatible with my conclusions about fantasy. However, as my project is not especially oriented to a taxonomy of genre and sub-genre, I will not specifically discuss those differences at this point.
The most prominent genre distinction within the fantastic lies between what is popularly called “fantasy” and “science fiction.” I characterize science fiction in terms of its Secondary World: It tends to extrapolate a world based on the same natural world as our own, though it tends to ask a key “What if?” question, such as “What if humankind discovered faster-than-light travel?” or “What if we discovered alien life?” Certainly some works that are treated as science fiction also dabble in fantasy by transforming or ignoring our best understanding of natural laws.13 Likewise, many works of horror use science fiction and/or fantasy to create a sense of...
dread or terror, and in those cases of fantastical horror, as Attebery claims, it is often only the purposes of the author and the tone of the writing that create the genre distinction. Horror may be distinguished by its purpose of creating a sense of thrill by stimulating the audience’s sense of fear, whether it is set in a realistic or fantastical world. To borrow an idea from visual art, there is also the consideration of value, referring to the intensity of a color. While red or blue might be used to pale or bold effect, fantasy or sci-fi may each also be considered as a spectrum, ranging from light to heavy in value intensity. Various genre terms exist to try to quantify this. One might call fantasy that departs far enough from the familiar “high fantasy,” while fantasy that seems much more grounded in the Primary World, taking fewer departures, “magical realism.” I do not seek to establish specific genre labels for each possible value of sci-fi or fantasy.

However, as noted earlier in this chapter, the term “fantasy” has been widely treated as, primarily, a literary genre, and this often limits the way fantasy is analyzed. For example, in a move reminiscent of Todorov, Fisher’s rhetorical map of genres focuses first on the divergence of the Secondary World from the Primary World in terms of perceived realism, then second on the use of tropes. I too will examine the relationship between Primary and Secondary worlds in Chapter 3, but in constructing those rhetorical devices, a conventional understanding of genre is not sufficient. For my definition to work, I must illustrate how the fantastic functions across the limitations of market-based or popular genres.

For me, approaching sci-fi and fantasy as rhetorical devices means abandoning the assumptions of market genres and instead focusing on the way the fantastic, when instantiated,

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14 This process operates as observed by Kenneth Burke in his discussion of the power of literary symbolism, where patterns of experience (in this case, actually lived or merely imagined) are codified into a language that triggers a direct emotional response (Counter-Statement 155-156).

15 These are, at best, fast and loose definitions of genre terms like “magic realism,” “high fantasy,” or “speculative fiction,” but as my project is not primarily associated with literary genre, I am using these common labels for the sake of illustrating the point without seeking to establish firmer definitions for the terms.
makes meaning. Todorov distinguished between the uncanny and the marvelous; Attebery uses “fantasy” to describe the genre, while he refers to “the fantastic” as a mode (Strategies of Fantasy 11). I seek to move past a genre-based definition of fantasy, which is often framed in comparison and contrast to another market genre, science fiction. Breaking down this distinction presents the opportunity to demonstrate the difference between fantasy, as I am deploying the term, and the market genre. If, as I have said, I broadly define “fantasy” as that which is produced by enacting the fantastic, then conventional understanding of genre invites a contextualization of related terms, such as “science fiction” or “speculative fiction.” In the previous chapter I discussed the agency of the fantastic in terms of “magic,” and indeed fantasy almost always entails some variety or another of magic. However, it is necessary, also, to avoid conflating the idea of magic too directly with the supernatural. When fantasy does not challenge a contemporary understanding of natural laws, instead speculating on how the world as we know it might change in response to a certain stimulus (a new technology, aliens, etc.), it may be labeled “science fiction” (or sci-fi).16 This distinction may impact rhetorical effect in various ways, particularly if the rhetor’s topic, purpose, or audience necessitates a very “realistic” or material solution. Thus, this distinction is not to be entirely discarded. Genre and medium of course impact how messages are received. However, at this point in my discussion, there is little need to differentiate between fictional “science” or “magic”; they are each, essentially, a form of agency within the narrative (fictional or otherwise). While one is broadly framed as “realistic” and the other as marvelous, both present a means of transformation, leading the narrative from

16 As previously noted, works of fiction are not always (or even, necessarily, often) explicitly inclined toward “pure fantasy” or “pure sci-fi.” For instance, as artistic tools, sci-fi and fantasy might be compared to two primary colors. One may paint with one and not the other, but they are very often blended together in various ways. As rhetorical devices, they might be compared to, say, logos and pathos. It is entirely possible to build an argument using only one or the other, but very often they complement one another.
the familiar to the unusual. Therefore, at this stage of the discussion, I will continue to refer to “fantasy” and “magic,” but these do not preclude an instantiation of the fantastic that is more grounded in the “real” or the “possible.” As discussed in the previous chapter, magic (as defined by Covino) is not a strictly supernatural concept, even if it carries, by its nature, something of the fantastical. Having established a definition of fantasy and confronted the way it intersects with genre distinctions, I can fully address its rhetorical capacities.

Of the fantastical pentad established in Chapter 1, the most pertinent to consider fantasy’s rhetorical applications are scene, agency, and purpose. Scene concerns the relationship between the Primary and Secondary Worlds, including examining the nature of the fantasy world, itself. Agency concerns the means of accomplishing the fantastic within the fantasy, often framed as some form of magic or another. As to purpose, this is an essential rhetorical question to apply to any text, and in this case it offers a chance to examine how effectively the text accomplishes its fantastical transformation—what does it seek to transform, and what does it ask of its audience? Here, the question of “fantastical intelligence,” as raised in Chapter 1, must be considered, though it will prove more so in the next chapter when examining the fantastic as experience. As with any rhetorical analysis, one useful place to begin is in considering the rhetorical situation, so I will first focus on the scene element of the pentad.

**Scene**

How does a less materially realistic—in other words, a more fantastical—Secondary World aid in building meaning? For some, the key element may be abstraction: “For Tolkien, story is the most effective carrier of truth because it works with images rather than concepts, with forms rather than abstract ideas, and with action rather than argument” (Flieger 472-474). While abstraction may be a capacity shared by many forms of literature, Irwin argues that
fantasy requires the participation of the reader in both willing suspension of disbelief and reflection on the fantastical diversions from reality (Irwin 76). Attebery builds on this idea when he writes that “Fantasy is a game of sorts, and it demands that one play whole-heartedly, accepting for the moment all rules and turns of the game. The reward for this extra payment is an occasional sense of unexpected beauty and strangeness, a quality which C. N. Manlove, among others, calls ‘wonder’” (*The Fantasy Tradition* 2). Attebery also asks a central question that offers a stronger way to frame these questions. In the case of each story, he wonders, “How did the author move his story out of the everyday world into the realm of the marvelous?” (*The Fantasy Tradition* viii). Irwin similarly emphasizes the importance of examining the “departures and rhetorical devices” of the Secondary World (57). Put another way, this question asks: What is the relationship between the Primary World and the Secondary World? Specifically, what departures were taken from the Primary World in conceiving the Secondary—and, therefore, what transformation do they represent? What do these specific translations allow the fantasy to accomplish, especially as contrasted with a less fantastical Secondary World? Additionally, if the Secondary World does little to challenge well-established conventions of fantasy, can it really be called fantastical, or has it simply exchanged adherence to the Primary World (material reality) for adherence to those pre-existing conventions? If the primary work of the fantastic is transformation, then the opposite of fantastical must be conventional. Therefore, as discussed in the previous chapter, fantasy that does little to transform our understanding may not, in the end, be all that fantastical. This does not, I note, mean that such conventional fantasies may not have a significant, even transformative, impact on the audience. For example, someone who has never

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17 This idea also borrows from E. M. Forster, as Attebery states: “Forster speaks of the reader of fantasy as being asked to ‘pay something extra’ to accept not only the conventions of fiction but also implausibilities within those conventions” (*The Fantasy Tradition* 2). This passage references arguments made by Forster in his 1927 work, *Aspects of the Novel* (published by Harcourt, Brace & World).
read Tolkien might read a derivative work and perceive it as transformative. Examining fantasy as an experience, however, is something I will focus on in Chapter 4.

In tracing the evolution of fantasy fiction in the United States, Attebery argues that the fantasy world—that which Tolkien called Faërie—serves to reimagine a better past, a pastoral world of idealized virtue. He writes that “This means a certain dimming of the American dream. We turn for consolation, not to America as it is, or even as it might become, but to places that never were. Instead of congratulating ourselves on our gains, we look longingly on values we think we have lost: the simplicity, harmony, and beauty of the archetypal green world that underlies all fairylands” (The Fantasy Tradition 186). This certainly reflects one possible relationship between Primary and Secondary Worlds, mingling nostalgia with escapism to suggest a better way of life, lost to the mythical past. Fantasy stories have demonstrably used this method before—and resurrecting an idealized version of the past might indeed be transformative—but doing so is a rhetorical choice, not an intrinsic element of fantasy. Framing fantasy as by necessity looking backward, creating a fictionally idealized past to be yearned for, entails such a rhetorical choice, and it could serve ends that might as easily be progressive or regressive. It could motivate one to seek a better future, inspired by that past, but it might also inspire more regressive thinking, where the magic (as Covino framed it) of the fantasy arrests progress without offering a generative component. Limiting fantasy to such a backward-looking model significantly limits its rhetorical applications and ignores other forms of fantastical transformation.

Ursula Le Guin offers a contrasting example of how the Primary World might relate to the Secondary World. It is important, first, to note that in the essay “The Critics, the Monsters, and the Fantasists” from Cheek by Jowl, Le Guin writes:
O critic, if you should come upon a fantasy, and it should awaken an atrophied sense of wonder in you, calling with siren voice to your dear little Inner Child, and you should desire to praise its incomparable originality, it would be well to have read in the literature of fantasy, so that you can make some comparisons and bring some critical intelligence to bear.” (30)

Le Guin argued staunchly for better representation of fantasy fiction in academic study and in the literary canon, and much of her work exists as direct commentary on the fantasy genre and challenging assumptions about it. In *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Le Guin’s narrative interrogates the idea of wizards as old white men, instead focusing on a dark-skinned young boy named Ged who is taking his first steps on the path to, eventually, becoming his world’s most renowned wizard. Over the course of *The Earthsea Cycle*, Le Guin challenges other assumptions about fantasy, as well, such as the idea that fantasy must have a moralistic “Good vs. Evil” focus or that it must heavily feature large-scale battles and warfare. Thus, Le Guin’s transformation is of the genre, itself. This serves as not only a demonstration that fantasy does not need to look backward to an idealized past to make meaning, but by re-examining powerful cultural symbols and transforming them, it also demonstrates how fantasy can engage directly with the Primary World.

Thus, fantastical transformation can have a significant impact on the Primary World. In another essay from *Cheek by Jowl*, “Assumptions about Fantasy,” Le Guin describes the reactions from readers who were affected by her decision to depict her young wizard, Ged, as a person of color: “I have received letters that broke my heart, from adolescents of color in [the United States] and England, telling me that when they realised that Ged and the other Archipelagans in the Earthsea books are not white people, they felt included in the world of
literary and movie fantasy *for the first time*” (5). This illustrates the way that fantasy fiction can impact the Primary World, even if only by creating a Secondary World that transforms the assumptions of other Secondary Worlds. Yet, the act of fantastical transformation need not be restricted to fiction. *Teaching to Transgress: Language as the Practice of Freedom* by bell hooks presents a notable example of this. In discussing the work of Paolo Freire, she addresses his sexism: “It is feminist thinking that empowers me to engage in a constructive critique of Freire’s work […] and yet there are many other standpoints from which I approach his work that enable me to experience its value, that make it possible for that work to touch me at the very core of my being” (hooks 49). For hooks, utilizing Freire meant orienting to his work in a feminist context, much in the way that for some of Le Guin’s readers, feeling fully welcome as readers of fantasy required the work to orient itself to them, making the protagonist and legendary wizard a man of color. Feminist thinking and criticism allowed hooks to engage with Freire’s pedagogy. I will address hooks and pedagogy more explicitly in Chapter 4, but for now this illustrates the way that transformation, the central act of the fantastic, can impact the Primary World both through literature and through more realistic, materially grounded texts. Its central transformative capacity, however, is what may be termed “magic.”

**Agency**

I identify the central agency of the fantastic as “magic.” Magic, as defined by William Covino, is heavily symbolic social practice by which ideas are transformed by the imaginative capacity of rhetors and the interplay of generative and arresting forces. As noted in the previous chapter, Covino emphasizes the importance of asking “what sorts of magi/rhetors, under what sorts of conditions, produce what kind of effects” (22). Covino also associates the term “magic” with active transformation. He states, “We perform literate alchemy by presuming that a plurality
of relationships and articulations may affect the transmutation of any ‘pure’ substance, fact, idea, condition” (Covino 28). Covino advocates for interrogating and transforming a broadly accepted or “presumably healthy official body of knowledge,” imagining and offering up alternative modes of thinking and understanding. He characterizes this process as both transgressive and, importantly, “the traditional practices of the magus” (Covino 28-29). In this case, the magus is the fantasist, and magic is the means of transforming the Primary World into the Secondary World and establishing its workings. Attebery similarly characterizes the rhetorical importance of magic, noting that the “essential rules of magic” will reveal any “grander scheme of philosophy” for the Secondary World (The Fantasy Tradition 104). He outlines a set of rules for “satisfying” magic, or magic that accomplishes its narrative ends in a way that retains credibility with the reader and, thus, an intact Secondary World. Those rules are: 1. What is wished for must be paid for; 2. Every magical act sends ripples of consequence to the ends of the world; 3. Magic tends toward chaos unless restrained by patterns of word and number (The Fantasy Tradition 143). Interpreted a bit more broadly, this might be presented as: Magic must have costs, rules, and consequences—in other words, it must be an observable natural force in the setting, not merely a narrative convenience. For the fantastical transformation to have an impact, it must function credibly within the Secondary World.

Tolkien made a similar assertion concerning the nature of fantastical magic, its power, and its purposes. He writes:

The magic of Faërie is not an end in itself; its virtue is in its operations: among these are the satisfaction of certain primordial human desires. One of these desires is to survey the depths of space and time. Another is (as will be seen) to hold communion with other living things. A story may thus deal with the satisfaction
of these desires, with or without the operation of either machine or magic, and in proportion as it succeeds it will approach the quality and have the flavour of fairy-story. (“On Fairy-Stories” 41).

While Tolkien’s idea of the fairy-story was much narrower than the fantasy I discuss here, its power is still created through what Tolkien called “Art,” or magic. He asserts a preference for the former term, though: “Magic should be reserved for the operations of the Magician. Art is the human process that produces by the way (it is not its only or ultimate object) Secondary Belief” (“Tree and Leaf” 73). I appreciate this distinction, but for my purposes, “magic” can certainly encompass what Tolkien preferred to call “Art.” Fictional magic—that is to say, characters interacting with supernatural forces or casting spells within their Secondary Worlds—may most often operate on the kind of “emotional logic” that Attebery described previously with the rules for “satisfying magic.” It is for this reason that restoring the dead to life is generally a feat of extraordinary or impossible magic in fiction, whereas transforming a man into a mouse may be much more possible. From a purely logical perspective, if one can rearrange the molecules and forces that comprise a human being into the shape and biological function of a rodent, then it should not be a difficult thing to repair a broken body. However, because it feels, to a conventional human perspective, that death must be difficult or impossible to overcome, fictional magic often treats death as such, regardless of it seeming that the ability to work other wonders would make this far easier to accomplish. This need for magic to be satisfying is why the “rules” of fictional magic are so tightly bound to the authorial magic employed by the fantasist in the

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18 This does not explore the question of a soul that might depart the body, which for some perspectives is a significant consideration, but my point is more mechanical than spiritual in nature. A similar example could be drawn between transforming a human into a mouse and healing a “mortalily wounded” person; the former is often done with a figurative or literal wave of the hand, while the second is frequently treated as difficult or impossible. This serves dramatic purposes, but it does not necessarily follow logically that magic should work that way.
sub-creation of Secondary Worlds. To create its meaning in a satisfying way, the magic must balance both generative and arresting forces.

Covino addresses the complex relationship between these two forms of magic when he writes, “The recognition that discourse is made of shifting sands, or energies, enfranchises rhetoric as invention, and encourages the generation of multiple solutions, perspectives, formulations, in behavior variously associated with imagination and creativity. But alertness to ambiguity also makes possible its restraint, in the interest of clarity, certainty, authority, and power” (21). In a simplistic sense, generative magic creates or enhances ambiguity and arresting magic reduces it (Covino 22-28). For fantastical transformation, one must be able to both create changes and ambiguities, as well as specify meanings and determine specific, clear ideas. Without this balance, the magic may lack coherence, or worse, become repressive. Covino warns, “Still enclosed in the Enlightenment privileging of plain, unambiguous maxims, and often presuming their speakers’ authority, we are too often victims of a repressive magic that limits the possibilities for action” (Covino 23). Such repressive magics would be the antithesis of fantastical transformation, and indeed, fantasy requires a synthesis of Covino’s generative and arresting magics.

Essentially, fantastical transformation must create ambiguity, then it must specify. Generative magic enables the creation of a hobbit, like Tolkien’s Bilbo Baggins, or a wizard who defies genre convention, such as Le Guin’s Ged, by disrupting the fixed notion that such things do not exist. It challenges and disrupts the known by introducing an uncertainty, an ambiguity, that offers alternatives and conflicting concepts. However, it is arresting magic that enables those shifting and evolving concepts to take specific shape, telling us that Bilbo lives in the Shire, that he has particular habits, that he exists in a certain place in society. Similarly, inviting ambiguity
disrupts the idea that wizards must be old white men, but it is its opposite that defines Ged the wizard as a young man of color. Magic in many forms must always embody both form and force, as seen even in imaginative games that focus on exploring the nature of magical vs. mundane reality, such as White Wolf Publishing’s *Changeling: The Dreaming*, in which players must balance their characters’ existence between the generative forces of the chimerical, or magical, existence with the arresting but grounding and defining forces of what they term “banality.” The player, like the fantasist, may be tempted to see this binary in “good/bad” terms, but in fact both are entirely necessary for the fantasy to exist at all.

**Purpose**

The work of communicating purpose may lie with the fantasist, but those who experience the fantasy that such a rhetor produces will, of course, turn the fantastical object to purposes of their own. This leads logically to discussing the fantastic as an experience, which I will do in the next chapter, but for the moment I will focus on applications of fantasy. Tolkien, for instance, was greatly concerned with what fairy-stories had to offer, and he argued that those offerings ranged from the “imaginative satisfaction of ancient desires” to the essential “eucatastrophe,” or the averted disaster that results in a “happy ending.” This serves as “a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance” and, on the whole, gives “a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief” ("On Fairy-Stories” 85-86). However, these experiences may not be so simple to quantify, let alone to predict, as it might seem. Tolkien also famously disliked having his work treated as direct allegory, and Ursula Le Guin takes that argument farther still.
Le Guin cautions against trying to read fantasy as a direct message and emphasizes the importance of treating it as an expressive art form. She writes, “The untrained mind trying to deal with fantasy is most likely trying to rationalize it—to ‘explain’ it as reflecting an order outside the order of the story, whether a theological order, a psychological, or political, anything so long as it’s familiar. But true fantasy is not allegory” (Cheek by Jowl 34). This does not mean she argues against the social relevance of fantasy, comparing it to poetry in that respect, but Le Guin does argue, “The tendency to explain fantasy by extracting the fantastic from it and replacing it with the comprehensible reduces the radically unreal to the secondhand commonplace” (Cheek by Jowl 35). This may stem in part, perhaps, from the once prevalent (and perhaps still enduring) attitude among literary critics to dismiss the fantastical unless it could be placed in a direct material context, such as an allegory. As Le Guin writes, “Most critics of fiction now eschew such reductive readings; even those who admit that reading a novel may have a profound and lasting effect on the mind and feelings of the reader, possibly including healing and enlightenment, are aware that the effect is not to be prescribed and often may not even be defined” (Cheek by Jowl 35). These arguments suggest what fantasy may offer, what rhetorical purposes the fantasist may turn it to. Such offerings are only a few examples, and they are expanded upon, through the voice of the Fairy Queen herself, in the work of Neil Gaiman.

Gaiman is another author of prevalently fantastical and mythopoetic works, and he continues to produce new work as of this writing. Gaiman discusses the offerings of fantasy, framing a relationship between Primary and Secondary Worlds, through the voice of Titania, Queen of Faerie, in issue three of the serial graphic novel The Books of Magic:

There are only two worlds—your world, which is the real world, and other worlds, the fantasy. Worlds like this are worlds of the human imagination: their
reality, or lack of reality, is not important. What is important is that they are there. These worlds provide an alternative. Provide an escape. Provide a threat. Provide a dream, and power; provide refuge, and pain. They give your world meaning.

(Gaiman)

Here Gaiman identifies the same duality between real and imagined (Primary and Secondary) worlds as Tolkien and offers up one view on the value of the symbolic “escape” that the fantastic offers. What this illustrates is that fantasy addresses a wide range of possible purposes, far beyond the “happy ending” or eucatastrophe. To borrow a term from Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie, there can be no “single story” of what purpose fantasy serves.

Adichie discusses this concept in a TED Talk, titled “The Danger of a Single Story. As she describes the problem, to have a “single story” of something is to understand it in a limited context, to have only a limited or stereotypical view of the concept. For example, a common Western view of Africa might reduce it to a continent of “a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner” (Adichie). While this perception might be based partially on facts, it is at best incomplete; Adichie, for instance, comes from a middle-class Nigerian family. Her father was a university professor, her mother an administrator, and she grew up speaking English, which is Nigeria's official national language. This hardly fits with the tragic story of deprivation and misery that is often the Western stereotype. Instead, having a “balance of stories” humanizes Adichie's experience, illuminating aspects of commonality and connection that allow one to relate to her rather than reduce her to an inscrutable Other.¹⁹ Adichie was not speaking about fantasy, but her

¹⁹ Adichie cites having borrowed the term “balance of stories” from fellow Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe.
ideas offer another way to view Le Guin’s argument, as well as Gaiman’s. Fantasy cannot serve only one purpose. Tolkien’s eucatastrophe—and, indeed, Tolkien’s work in general—have come to be seen at times as a single story of what fantasy might be. Adichie is speaking about the Primary World and the material effects of mischaracterizing cultures and people, but her ideas illuminate a way to examine Secondary Worlds, as well as illustrating the transformative power of the fantastic.

Adichie offers an effective complication of a simplistic view of stereotype and limited understanding, and her most powerful example may be the first anecdote she shares in her speech. Adichie explains how her childhood experiences as a reader and writer were heavily shaped by reading British and American children's books. When Adichie began to write, her attempts reflected the understanding of literature that she had internalized from her reading. As Adichie said in her talk, “All my characters were white and blue-eyed, they played in the snow, they ate apples, and they talked a lot about the weather, how lovely it was that the sun had come out. Now, this despite the fact that I lived in Nigeria. I had never been outside Nigeria. We didn't have snow, we ate mangoes, and we never talked about the weather, because there was no need to.” While Adichie speaks of enjoying those British and American novels, she did not at first know of African books. In reflecting on this lack, Adichie notes that “the unintended consequence was that I did not know that people like me could exist in literature. So what the discovery of African writers did for me was this: It saved me from having a single story of what books are.” For Adichie, discovering African writers was its own kind of fantastical transformation that had a direct impact on her. This comes as quite different, almost entirely different, from Tolkielian fantasy, and indeed it may be difficult to see the fantastic in this story at first glance. However, its power can still be felt in this example.
The magic, here, was a transformation of self-representation. Adichie identifies a prevailing European and American understanding of Africa that is defined by misrepresentations, as I referenced in the previous chapter, such as John Lok’s description of Africans as “beasts who have no houses” (qtd. in Adichie). African writers transform their presence in English literature from an inscrutable and alien Other, taking increased ownership of their own narrative. So, while the fantastical element here is also a very material one that does not carry most of the typical trappings of fantasy, it still illustrates the power and purpose fantasy may serve. This fantasy’s impact on young Adichie enabled her to envision herself as included in the world of literature by showing her literature that included her. This, too, is fantasy, even if a very different vision of it, and it illustrates how the purposes it may serve go far beyond what might be assumed. Fittingly, such fantasy enabled this project to exist—as I will discuss in Chapter 4.

Reflection

Examining the fantastic as a product or object, which is called fantasy, raises several important questions of rhetoric. It is impossible to discuss fantasy and its rhetorical situation without addressing genre, and while genre conventions are important considerations, they do not frame the parameters of fantasy as I discuss it. Science fiction might simply be called a subset of fantasy, wherein the focus and rules operate in a particular fashion—where, so to speak, the magic is science or speculation. Magic, which comes in both a generative form that creates ambiguity and an arresting form that reduces it, is the term for fantastical agency, the method by which fantasy achieves its aims. It uses many tools, from literary symbols that serve particular interest and have particular appeals, as Booth and Burke have discussed, to directly countering dominant narratives through shared first-hand experience. Just because a text is fantasy does not mean that it is untrue, merely that it departs from and transforms an accepted conventional
understanding. Fantasy can be materially real or entirely imagined, but it is always transformative.

What fantasy is and does can take these many forms, and as Brian Attebery argues, these are changing all the time: “The fantasies that are undoubtedly being written today, if they can successfully learn from Le Guin as she learned from Tolkien, without being overwhelmed, will arise from as yet unguessable troublings within American life. And they will convert those irritations—not simply cover over them with coats of pearl but completely reshape them—into meaningful narratives new in insight and richly traditional in form and matter” (The Fantasy Tradition 186). While Attebery was writing of the fantasy tradition in the United States, the idea of working through challenges and difficulties with the transformative magic of fantasy extends far beyond any one nation or continent. However, to see the full impact of such transformations, I must also examine fantasy as an experience, from what in computing is sometimes called an “end-user” perspective. I will focus on this question in the next chapter.
HUMANS NEED FANTASY TO BE HUMAN. TO BE THE PLACE WHERE THE FALLING ANGEL MEETS THE RISING APE.

“Tooth fairies? Hogfathers? Little—”

YES. AS PRACTICE. YOU HAVE TO START OUT LEARNING TO BELIEVE THE LITTLE LIES.

“So we can believe the big ones?”

YES. JUSTICE. MERCY. DUTY. THAT SORT OF THING.

“They’re not the same at all!”

YOU THINK SO? THEN TAKE THE UNIVERSE AND GRIND IT DOWN TO THE FINEST POWDER AND SIEVE IT THROUGH THE FINEST SIEVE AND THEN SHOW ME ONE ATOM OF JUSTICE, ONE MOLECULE OF MERCY. AND YET—Death waved a hand. AND YET YOU ACT AS IF THERE IS SOME IDEAL ORDER IN THE WORLD, AS IF THERE IS SOME...SOME RIGHTNESS IN THE UNIVERSE BY WHICH IT MAY BE JUDGED.

“Yes, but people have got to believe that, or what’s the point—”

MY POINT EXACTLY. [...] YOU NEED TO BELIEVE IN THINGS THAT AREN’T TRUE. HOW ELSE CAN THEY BECOME?

In the novel *Hogfather*, part his *Discworld* series, Terry Pratchett explores the importance of fantasy to the human experience. In the novel, the character of the Hogfather—a Santa Claus analog—is the central figure in the festival of Hogswatch, which represents the rebirth of the sun during midwinter. When the Hogfather is targeted by assassins, the story’s heroes fear that the sun will cease to rise, but eventually the day is saved through the actions of Death (the anthropomorphic personification thereof, akin to the Grim Reaper) and his adopted granddaughter, Susan. In the aftermath, Susan asks Death what would have happened if they had failed to save the Hogfather, and Death replies that the sun would not have risen. Instead, he tells her, “A MERE BALL OF FLAMING GAS WOULD HAVE ILLUMINATED THE WORLD” (Pratchett 380). Susan observes that he must mean that humans need fantasies “to make life bearable” (ibid). Fantasy, as Pratchett’s Death explains, is the path to creating all the most worthwhile ideas in the human experience—justice, mercy, and “that sort of thing.” For myself, I have never come across a more eloquently rendered description of the value of fantasy. With that said, in this chapter I will seek to expand further upon fantasy as an experience, which might be most appropriately called “enchantment.”

One of the most notable texts to discuss the process of experiencing fantasy is Todorov’s *The Fantastic*, which (as noted in my first chapter) examines whether a narrative can be called “marvelous” or “uncanny,” asserting that the fantastic is liminal, occurring in the moment when one is not yet certain whether the narrative will prove unusual—beyond the normal, but possible—or truly beyond what is deemed possible by conventional understanding. Unlike

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20 The Hogfather resonates with many figures from midwinter festivals, including sacrificial religious figures like Jesus Christ, and Pratchett’s narrative explores the cultural shift of how a figure of blood sacrifice can, over time, become a Santa-like giver of gifts. This could make an interesting site of inquiry on its own.

21 In the Discworld series, Death’s lines of dialogue are always written in all capital letters and without quotation marks, uniquely distinguishing him within the series.
Todorov, my concern is not in identifying where the extranormal becomes the supernatural. Rather, I examine fantasy in a rhetorical context and identify the process of evaluating an idea or narrative as fantastical. That is, how does one experiencing fantasy understand what makes a narrative fantastical? Perhaps most significantly to my project, how does the experience of fantasy function as a form of rhetoric, and how does it work upon its audience? Here, I will draw upon the Fantastical Pentad, as well as considering the way fantasies function as rhetorical situations. Considering the audience of a fantasy raises questions of worldview and expectation: how does one negotiate the difference between what would be conceivable in the world one knows, versus what would be fantastical? In this chapter, I will review what it means to experience fantasy. Having examined the available means of fantastical persuasion and the works of fantasy they may produce, I must characterize what it means to experience that fantasy: how does it work rhetorically upon an audience, and what impact may it have?

**Act**

One place to begin is with Tolkien, who argues for the value of what he terms “fairy stories” in an essay that is aptly called “On Fairy-Stories.” In addition to their function as entertainment, he writes, “fairy-stories offer also, in a particular degree or mode, these things: Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, Consolation”—offerings that he considers important to the human mind (“Tree and Leaf” 67-68). Here, Tolkien refers to folk tales and fantasies that either involve fairies (or the magical land of Faërie) or other fantastical elements, which Todorov would have termed “marvelous.” Here, he discusses the offerings of fantasy, as a reader experiences it. While

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22 I note here that I do not attempt to characterize any specific audience for fantasy. As with all rhetoric, the way fantasy can work is relative to its audience, but I cannot presuppose that audience. Specific audiences are as contextual for fantasy as for any other form of rhetoric. While there may exist audiences who, demographically or culturally, may be characterized in some way by enjoying fantasy as a genre, my focus is on fantasy as a rhetorical capacity, not as a genre. As such, any audience to experience a fantasy would depend entirely on the specific rhetorical situation, and the number of potential audiences would be virtually innumerable.
I use the term “fantasy” very similarly to the way Tolkien used the term “fairy-stories,” he defined Fantasy (as he wrote it) as a function of the story, rather than as a label or genre. Tolkien observed that Fantasy offers “freedom from the domination of observed ‘fact’” (“Tree and Leaf” 69). This allowed, he argued, for Recovery: “Recovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a re-gaining—regaining of a clear view. […] We need, in any case, to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity—from possessiveness” (“Tree and Leaf” 77). He claims that those concepts and experiences humans take in as part of themselves tend to become trite through familiarity, and re-visioning them through fantasy can allow one to recover them: “We say we know them. They have become like the things which once attracted us by their glitter, or their colour, or their shape, and we laid hands on them, and then locked them in our hoard, acquired them, and acquiring ceased to look at them” (“Tree and Leaf” 77). As for Escape and Consolation, Tolkien did not hold with the negative attitude he believed generally prevailed. He writes, “In what the misusers are fond of calling Real Life, Escape is evidently as a rule very practical, and may even be heroic. In real life it is difficult to blame it, unless it fails; in criticism it would seem to be the worse the better it succeeds” (“Tree and Leaf” 79). He likened Escape in this sense to that of a jailed person escaping prison, as opposed to what he saw as the critical view, that of a deserter fleeing their loyalties: “In the same way these critics, to make confusion worse, and so to bring into contempt their opponents, stick their label of scorn not only on to Desertion, but on to real Escape, and what are often its companions, Disgust, Anger, Condemnation, and Revolt” (“Tree and Leaf” 79). And yet, Tolkien’s brand of fantasy has also given rise to many forms and formulas, which in turn have perhaps themselves become “trite.”
These formulas, Brian Attebery argues, “can be analyzed to reveal widespread cultural values and assumptions” and that “It is not the literariness of a formula that defines its success but the degree to which it makes the predictable seem fresh and unexpected” (Strategies of Fantasy 9). Thus, formula fantasy can be seen in much the same light as any other variety of genre fiction; however, in so doing it may fail to achieve significant fantastical transformation. Even the most “realistic” fiction must contend with how to present a fresh and/or engaging story within the rules of an established Secondary World (however faithful a simulacrum of the material Primary World it might be). However, mimesis pertaining to a Secondary World (however fantastical it might have been when first conceived) is still emulation rather than transformation. For a work to be truly fantastical, it must do more than include the trappings of a formulaic genre of fiction, even if that genre is called “fantasy” and does not emphasize Primary World verisimilitude. As I argue that transformation is the primary function of the fantastic, the arguments fielded by Tolkien and Attebery remain relevant: transformation can bring clarity and freshness to a narrative, providing a new way to see a story or a situation. So, the act of experiencing fantasy concerns what is transformed and, thus, re-visioned or seen in a new way.

Scene

Rosemary Jackson argues that “The fantastic opens on to a region which has no name and no rational explanation for its existence” (24). However, I would argue that this region has had many names—Tolkien called it Faërie, for instance. While Jackson may object to the focus of narratives such as Tolkien’s, the realm of fantasy remains the realm of transformation. Jackson further argues that this transformation is the basis for creating fantastical worlds: “Fantasy is not to do with inventing another non-human world: it is not transcendental. It has to do with inverting elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to
produce something strange, unfamiliar and apparently ‘new’, absolutely ‘other’ and different” (8). Later, Jackson argues that fantasy “presents a natural world inverted into something strange, something ‘other’. It becomes ‘domesticated’, humanized, turning from transcendental explorations to transcriptions of a human condition” (17). This frames a useful way to consider the relationship between Primary and Secondary Worlds: no matter how alien or unusual a fantasy setting might be, it is still created by someone based on their experiences in the Primary World. Fantasy worlds are always transformations, reimaginings of the known world. Jackson concludes, succinctly, that “Fantasy recombines and inverts the real, but it does not escape it: it exists in a parasitical or symbiotic relation to the real. The fantastic cannot exist independently of that ‘real’ world which it seems to find so frustratingly finite” (20). Given this, it follows logically to consider the relationship between a fantasy’s setting and its audience.

The way fantasy worlds are presented and how they operate comprise a large part of how a work is experienced as fantasy. As mentioned in chapter one, Farah Mendlesohn offers one key way to examine the relationship between a fantasy setting and its audience with her categories of fantasy: the portal-quest, the immersive, the intrusive, and the liminal (loc. 132-133). She elaborates, “In the portal-quest we are invited through into the fantastic; in the intrusion fantasy, the fantastic enters the fictional world; in the liminal fantasy, the magic hovers in the corner of our eye; while in the immersive fantasy we are allowed no escape. Each category has as profound an influence on the rhetorical structures of the fantastic as does its taproot text or genre” (loc. 134-138). Mendlesohn addresses the complexity of, for instance, texts that might straddle the divide between “immersive” and “portal-quest” fantasy, by noting that much “quest” fantasy, which is often set in a completely separate world from our own, “adopts the structure and rhetorical strategies of the portal fantasy: it denies the taken for granted and positions both
protagonist and reader as naive” (loc. 375-376). For example, while *The Lord of the Rings* is set in its own world, the narrative’s attitude toward the reader is instructive, treating the reader as a guest in the world who must be instructed; this makes it, in effect, a kind of portal-quest narrative, despite an ostensibly immersive world. George R. R. Martin’s popular series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, and the television series based on it, *Game of Thrones*, serve as a counter-example: Here, the reader is thrust into the world and given no special instruction. They must learn the world fully through the eyes of its characters. Mendlesohn’s portal-quest seems analogous in many ways to Joseph Campbell’s model of The Hero’s Journey (as set out in his 1949 work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*), moving from the known world into the unknown (and, perhaps, back again). While the model she offers is useful, I must break somewhat with her conclusions about the nature of fantasy narratives.

Mendlesohn frames fantasy stories, particularly in the portal-quest genre, as tending toward very fixed narratives. For example, citing fantasy narratives that include materials such as maps and histories, she concludes, “It is a truism that fiction is about conflict, but in the portal-quest fantasies the possibilities for such conflict are limited by the ideological narrative that posits the world, as painted, as true. Consequently, it is this closed narrative that restricts the plot possibilities for most quest and portal novels” (loc. 701-704). I concede that many stories published within the fantasy genre do suffer from such conveniently ironclad worldviews, but at the same time I argue that this has less to do with fantasy and more to do with the author’s approach to narrative. Mendlesohn also argues that “it is perhaps not coincidental that the classic portal tale is more common in children’s fantasy than in that ostensibly written for the adult market” (loc. 363-365).²³ For example, Mendlesohn recounts an observation by author Diana

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²³ I resist, here, the inclination to argue with this claim, as it would not serve my project, but I hope that nonetheless I demonstrate in this writing that conflating fantasy with children’s stories is, at best, problematic.
Wynne Jones that scrolls in fantasy always seem to reveal truth and so forth. This reinforces the need, within this project, to avoid excessive emphasis on literary genre; any genre can become rigid in its conventions. Thus, I must adapt Mendlesohn’s concept: rather than emphasizing genre conventions, I focus on how the setting of a fantasy establishes a relationship with its audience. This relationship forms a key aspect of the fantasy’s rhetorical situation and how it works effects upon that audience.

In both the immersive and the portal-quest fantasy, the audience is transported to a Secondary World that is held as distinct and separate from the Primary World. Mendlesohn offers one view of what distinguishes the two: the relationship with the audience. The noteworthy rhetorical structures of a portal-quest fantasy, as she presents it, are (1) a static world, where the present and future seldom live up to past glories, and (2) where the world is revealed through authoritarian narration of one form or another, whether via third-person narration or via one or more characters’ first-person perspectives. Change tends to come through the actions of a heroic protagonist, though they are as often as not governed by external forces, such as guides and prophecy, rather than an evolving world of which the heroes are only one part. Here again, these are tendencies common to the genre, but they are not necessarily fixed in place. The thread I will follow focuses on how immersive and portal-quest fantasies particularly make meaning, how they relate to their audiences, and how they facilitate fantastical transformation.

In the portal-quest, the audience members (and, often but not always, the characters) are assumed to begin in either the Primary World or something very much like it. The transformative fantastical element is introduced through physical transportation; the audience is led on a curated journey from the familiar to the unknown, which allows the narrative to introduce its world in specific relationship to the familiar. Comparison and contrast between the familiar and the
fantastical may be overt, and intertextual references may be easily made. This is common in current popular fantasy fiction, such as in Jim Butcher’s *The Dresden Files*, where the entire story is constructed around direct comparisons to other popular culture that exists in the Primary World: the protagonist as a modern-day wizard, but he openly advertises this and functions more like a private investigator in the style of, say, Sam Spade; the characters are not only aware of pop culture, they are often fans, and this informs the way they operate in the world—when one character is bestowed with a magic sword, it even takes the form of a lightsaber from *Star Wars*; the story is not only aware of genre-oriented events, but fan conventions, role-playing games, and movie tropes also sometimes play a significant role in the narrative. This puts the Secondary World of the portal-quest’s setting into direct conversation with the Primary World, while an immersive fantasy can only do this work indirectly. Indeed, in many such cases these comparisons happen only in the minds of the audience members.

The immersive fantasy, as Farah Mendlesohn examines it, “is a fantasy set in a world built so that it functions on all levels as a complete world. To do this, the world must act as if it is impervious to external influence; this immunity is most essential in its relationship with the reader. The immersive fantasy must take no quarter: it must assume that the reader is as much a part of the world as are those being read about” (loc. 1572-1575). This places a key burden on the author: expository reflection is a narrative device that almost always steps outside the narrative, addressing the reader as if they must be instructed, and in immersive fantasy, this is not done. This becomes complicated in instances when the narrator is fully familiar with the world, as in an immersive fantasy, but the story is presented and often narrated in a way that clearly curates the reader’s experience, as in a portal-quest fantasy. *The Dresden Files* series is a good example of this; while Harry Dresden, the protagonist, sees his world as fully normal,
because he assumes his reader is unfamiliar with the supernatural elements of that world, it allows the story to present itself in a much more portal-quest fashion. Without this convenience, the audience can only be guided through the knowledge and discoveries of the characters. Since the point-of-view characters are native to the Secondary World of an immersive fantasy, the author must reveal the world purely by showing it to the audience, who must draw their conclusions about the setting and the events unfolding within it based on the events of the narrative. Comparisons to the Primary World can only be suggested. The Secondary World must, if it is to succeed in the project of immersion, stand convincingly on its own. Otherwise, a different, more curated relationship to the audience is created, such as in the portal-quest. *A Song of Ice and Fire*, for example, serves as a wholly immersive fantasy, despite the fact that George R. R. Martin has stated that the series was directly inspired by the real-world events of the War of the Roses (“Interview: George R. R. Martin” 19). The text offers no direct reference to this fact, and outside of such external statements by the author, the audience is left to draw such connections for themselves. Martin’s world includes elements that are fully consistent with the Primary World, such as corruption in abusive authoritarian regimes and entrenched social prejudices like sexism and racism. The transformation comes when characters who, within this society, would normally be downtrodden and denied many forms of social agency are subsequently elevated by fantastical elements: Arya Stark becomes a face-changing semi-magical assassin, and Daenerys Targaryen does not die when she is immersed in fire, instead emerges unburnt and newly accompanied by three dragons who will help her to change the face of the known world. This may resonate with patterns of experience in the Primary World, but any direct connections must be drawn by the reader. Therefore, the immersive fantasy offers an experience far more removed from the Primary World, its narrative encapsulated within the
Secondary World. As a rhetorical move, if done effectively, this allows a narrative to explore fantastical transformation without direct Primary World context, which may make it easier to apply that transformation to an archetypal rather than specific situation. For example, *Star Wars* may be read as depicting the fantastical, heroic defeat of fascist regimes, rather than speculating on how such heroic fantasy might have played out in the Primary World, such as in the depiction of Wonder Woman or Captain America fighting in one of the world wars. The key difference is in how the type of setting leaves the rhetorical context of the fantasy clearly defined vs. openly adaptable.

Intrusive and liminal fantasy are similar to one another in that both create Secondary Worlds where mimesis is of key importance; they present themselves as occupying the “real” world, not a separate fantasy land. While Mendlesohn places great emphasis on the distinctiveness of liminal fantasy as a form of narrative, I will touch only lightly upon it since my focus is on fantasy, rather than narrative method. In her own discussion, Mendlesohn acknowledges that but for certain narrative techniques, liminal fantasy might be considered intrusive fantasy (loc. 4184). Like Todorov, Mendlesohn is concerned with a kind of chicanery of perspective and perception:

The example to which I want to return, and the one that I have used most often to explain liminal fantasy, is Joan Aiken’s short story “Yes, But Today is Tuesday.” There is a unicorn on the Armitage family’s lawn. When, we, the reader, mentally express surprise, the family tell us, “Yes, and it’s Tuesday, magical things only happen on Mondays.” There is dissonance: we do not see as fantastic what the family see as fantastic; and doubt, because the family seem to question whether anything truly fantastical has happened at all. (Mendlesohn loc. 4338-4339)
Here, a kind of meta-transformation takes place. What is called into question is the nature of fantasy and magic; if magic is commonplace on a Monday but impossible on a Tuesday, then when a magical thing happens on Tuesday, it is not the magic that provides agency, but the unusual circumstances. Thus, Todorov’s marvelous is conflated with his uncanny—it’s not the supernatural that is extraordinary, only its timing. So, what is transformative, and what is fantastical? With liminal fantasy, as with the Torodovian fantastic, it is largely a passing moment for the audience, an uncertainty that provides an impetus for reflection. This uncertainty, as any narrative device, carries its rhetorical considerations, but they pertain more to style of storytelling than to fantasy as I characterize it. In a liminal fantasy, there is often no certain or quantifiable transformation. There is only the suggestion of what might be transformation, varying with audience perspectives and assumptions. In contrast, fully intrusive fantasy does not depend upon such ambiguity.

Intrusive fantasy may be commonly seen in the works of H. P. Lovecraft, wherein nightmarish, alien horrors emerge into the otherwise ordinary worlds of his protagonists, usually driving them beyond the brink of sanity or destroying them. Lovecraft’s work carries an undercurrent of fear of the unknown, however; other intrusive fantasy, such as Neil Gaiman’s The Ocean at the End of the Lane, present a fantastical otherworld that may be at times threatening or scary, but which can also be wonderful and sympathetic. The intrusive fantasy offers an opportunity for direct comparison between the Primary and Secondary Worlds, much like the portal-quest fantasy, but the focus remains grounded in a mimetic representation of the “real world.” Thus, the fantastical is not normalized, as it tends to be in the portal-quest, but remains otherworldly, and it may offer a foil for the characters’ lives in the “real-world” part of the setting. I draw a key distinction, here, between a work like Gaiman’s and the seemingly
intrusive works common in contemporary Young Adult fiction, such as J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series or Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* saga. In these stories, the characters never technically leave the “real world” as they know it, and fantastical elements—invi
tations to a magical school, an adoring vampire boyfriend—do interrupt their otherwise mundane lives. This may in effect make the familiar strange, as intrusive fantasy often does, but the transformation may be more one of personal discovery than of actual crossing of worlds. In many stories the fantastical elements are revealed as having always been a part of the Secondary World, simply unknown to the protagonist, and the narrative normalizes the fantasy as it progresses. By the end, Harry Potter and Bella Swan are fully immersed in their fantastical trappings, Harry a wizard and Bella a vampire, so what really happens is more of a permutation of the portal-quest, where they lead the audience from the known world into an unknown world, one that shares with the immersive fantasy the coincidence that the two worlds occupy the same physical space within the narrative. The different ways that audience and setting may be connected within a fantastical narrative defines one aspect of how the fantasy can transform the known: is the audience being shown a sharp contrast to the known, without comment, or are they being led carefully from the known to the unknown, or perhaps shown a fleeting glimpse of the unknown, bubbling up from within the known, itself?

The relationship between audience and setting, particularly how fantastical elements are presented within the Secondary World of a work, greatly defines the way the fantasy connects to that audience. This may be the primary way that audiences are led to consider and understand what makes a narrative fantastical, in what links the known to the unknown. If the setting provides the audience with a guided tour of the fantasy, as in the portal-quest, then the audience is directly shown where the fantasy is and how it abuts the known. Similarly, if the setting
presents a seemingly realistic Secondary World wherein the fantastical elements intrude from a magical otherworld, the audience is led to examine the clear line between the fantastical and the mundane, though perhaps (as in the liminal fantasy) with more opportunity for ambiguity. In the immersive fantasy, the audience is made to negotiate the fantasy for themselves. In an immersive world, potentially everything that is presented may carry an element of fantasy, and only the rules of the world, as presented, will allow the audience to determine how it is represents a fantastical transformation of the known. This immersion allows for greater ambiguity, allowing the known to be called into greater question.

Differentiating these types of settings offers opportunity to demonstrate clearly that not only magic offers transformation in fantasy: presenting such a drastically different world carries its own brand of transformative potential. In other words, the setting of a fantasy and how it relates to its audience constitutes its own form of rhetoric, even if the narrative itself and the characters’ means of agency within it suggest no other fantastical transformations. Even if Luke could not use The Force, there would be transformative fantasy in *Star Wars*: alien creatures coexist in (relative) peace, an observable cosmic balance between good and evil is presented, and so forth. Different approaches to framing these narratives, defining the relationship between the narrative and its audience, affect the way this setting may rhetorically impact said audience.

**Agency**

As I have borrowed William Covino’s arguments to claim, the major rhetorical power of the fantastic is its magic, and the effective magic of fantasy comes through the transformative manipulation of symbols and concepts. As such, the function of symbols in fiction is particularly important to my discussion. Kenneth Burke’s *Counter-Statement* offers a useful discussion of how symbols function by offering key appeals to the author’s audience. Burke argued that,
among these appeals, symbols can serve as: interpretation, transforming the audience’s understanding of a situation; acceptance, transforming the audience’s attitude toward a situation; corrective, demonstrating how a situation could or should be transformed; exercising “submerged” experience, or allowing the audience to experience through fiction capacities that would remain unaccessed in the Primary World; “emancipation,” or the ability to experience through fiction that which would be unacceptable in the Primary World; and various artistic effects, such as stylistics and other considerations of craft and writing skill (Counter-Statement 154-156). These appeals also serve what Wayne Booth, in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, considered three major types of “interest.” The first is what Booth terms “intellectual or cognitive” interest, which reflects the desire of an audience to know “the facts” of a situation, pertaining to interpretation, motivation, and states of being. Second is qualitative interest, which reflects the audience’s satisfaction at seeing the completion of a pattern or the fulfilment of a form, such as in the case of a story that fulfills the expectations of its genre. Finally comes practical interest, which orients to the human element, wherein an audience will relate to and derive satisfaction from the fate of a character, such as if a character is admired or hated and how the character succeeds or fails in pursuing their goals (Booth 125-128). So, in terms of agency, a narrative may provide an audience with Burke’s appeals and serve Booth’s interests. As I will seek to illustrate, these interests can serve as key sites for fantastical transformation, particularly as they relate to Burke’s appeals.

The first of Burke’s appeals, serving as the interpretation of a situation, functions metonymically; the narrative portrays symbolic experience to stand in for lived experience. This contextualizes the experience and provides meaning, giving “simplicity and order to an otherwise unclarified complexity” (Counter-Statement 154). Allegory offers one approach to this
appeal, using symbols more removed from a situation and perhaps less grounded in the Primary World, and fantasy may offer further, more transformative approaches. Consider C. S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia. The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is widely read as an allegory for Christianity, with Aslan the lion functioning as a Christ-figure of salvation and the magical land of Narnia, in *The Last Battle*, serving as an analog of Heaven. However, in so doing, Lewis created a complexity that he had perhaps not anticipated: there has long been unresolved controversy over the fate of Susan, one of the protagonists of the original novel, who is left out of this Narnian version of Heaven. She is hardly mentioned in the book, receiving only the following dismissal from the narrative:

“Sir,” said Tirian, when he had greeted all these. “If I have read the chronicle aright, there should be another. Has not your Majesty two sisters? Where is Queen Susan?”

“My sister Susan,” answered Peter shortly and gravely, “is no longer a friend of Narnia.”

“Yes,” said Eustace, “and whenever you’ve tried to get her to come and talk about Narnia or do anything about Narnia, she says, ‘What wonderful memories you have! Fancy your still thinking about all those funny games we used to play when we were children.’”

“Oh Susan!” said Jill. “She’s interested in nothing nowadays except nylons and lipstick and invitations. She always was a jolly sight too keen on being grown-up.” (*The Last Battle* 75).

Author Neil Gaiman addressed this controversy in his short story, “The Problem of Susan,” in which he tells Susan’s side of the story: grappling with the violence she experienced at a young
and critical age, lost in a realm torn by fantastical warfare; the emergence of her sexuality, which Gaiman reads as the reason for her exclusion from Narnia-Heaven; and the struggles she faced alone after all of her family were taken from her by tragedy.24 The story allows the audience to explore Susan’s fate, offering context and resolution by transforming the dangling thread from a *deux ex machina* fantasy ending into a human and relatable story. Lewis’ novel served Booth’s qualitative interests, giving the principle characters their happy endings, while Gaiman provides a glimpse of more facts and understanding—intellectual interest—while also offering an exploration of Susan’s experience as a human being beyond the supposedly happy ending, serving Booth’s practical interest. This fantastical element is at once textual and meta-textual, transforming not only the fate of a character cast aside by the original narrative but also the experiences of the audience, who may have felt unresolved conflict (as I, as a young reader, certainly did) over Susan’s abrupt dismissal from the story and its cursory explanation.

Burke’s second appeal refers to favoring the acceptance of a situation, relating to circumstances in which “our minds have been closed to the situation” (*Counter-Statement* 154). This may be interpreted as revealing unseen obstacles, but it can also be seen in a more liberatory fashion, such as when something previously unacceptable to society is rendered acceptable, even normalized, by its treatment in media. Devin Faraci writes of such a case in his article, “Ozma: L. Frank Baum’s Trans-Positive OZ Heroine,” in reference to Baum’s story, *The Marvelous Land of Oz*. This novel depicts a character, Tip, discovering something shocking about himself—that he’s a girl who had only been mystically transformed into a male body and identity—and coming to terms with it. Tip has been the story’s protagonist, and by the end it’s revealed that

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24 In *The Last Battle*, Susan’s brothers and sister vanish from the train they are riding in Britain and are instantly transported to Narnia. They never return to Earth, and it is later revealed that the entire family—including Susan’s siblings and parents—were all killed in a railway accident (*The Last Battle* 100). Susan is left behind, and Gaiman’s story envisions the young woman being forced to go through the grisly process of identifying their bodies.
he’s the missing princess, Ozma, whose disappearance has been a central plot point of the novel. As Faraci writes, “It’s unlikely that L. Frank Baum was writing a book about transgendered people, but Ozma works pretty well as an LGBT metaphor. Ozma lived in a boy’s body, but she had been a girl all along. Tip is at first unsure that he wants to be a girl, but with the support of his friends he embraces his true self.” The transformative element of fantasy, here, allows someone who has been presented as a boy, assumed to be male, for the entire narrative to be, by the end, accepted as not only female, but as the much-needed princess of the kingdom. This satisfies a deeply practical interest: the acceptance of part of oneself, as well as the humanization of a character who underwent such a change. Much as Faraci indicates, this is significant for the audience, especially perhaps for someone struggling similarly with gender identity, regardless of the original intentions of Baum.

The third appeal Burke offers comes as the corrective of a situation. This appeal of the symbol offers recompense for a given lack, such as representing the charms of country life to one who lives in the city. It fits closely with his fourth and fifth appeals. The fourth appeal functions as the exerciser of “submerged” experience. This appeal refers to granting the reader or audience a vicarious experience that they might otherwise be denied. The fifth appeal functions as an “emancipator”; this grants readers something they could not have experienced, in this case because the experience would conflict with the character or morality of the reader (Counter-Statement 155). In other words, a reader may experience through the narrative that which they would never choose to do in the Primary World, such as participating in a criminal act or taking an unacceptable personal risk. These appeals, which provide through fiction that which a reader cannot or would not choose to experience in life, may function very similarly to Tolkien’s claims about fantasy, particularly his ideas of Escape and Consolation. Fantasy can offer the chance for
such things on a direct level, such as portraying the experience of flying on the back of a Luck-
Dragon over the land of Fantastica or accompanying the Fellowship of the Ring to the Land of
Mordor, but this can also function on more complex levels.

In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* José Esteban Muñoz adapts
the ideas of philosopher Ernst Bloch to offer a view of what Bloch termed “concrete utopias,” or
utopias that are directly “relational to historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is
actualized or potential” (3). He later continues, “Concrete utopias can also be daydreamlike, but
they are the hopes of a collective, an emergent group, or even the solitary oddball who is the one
who dreams for many. Concrete utopias are the realm of educated hope” (Muñoz 3). In Muñoz’
argument, the fantastical concept of a utopia refers not to a distant mythical land, like Middle-
earth or Narnia, but to a better way of ordering the Primary World. A shallow (and, probably, far
too common) view of Escape and Consolation is challenged, and a very different, very material,
kind of emancipation is envisioned. By considering how the Primary World might be
transformed, this approach to fantasy looks forward, rather than to a distant, separate world:
“Queerness as utopian formation is a formation based on an economy of desire and desiring. This
desire is always directed at that thing that is not yet here, objects and moments that burn with
anticipation and promise” (Muñoz 26). Looking at how to transform the Primary World by
building a better future fulfills Booth’s practical interest, relating to the future of marginalized
human beings, but it goes farther, fulfilling Burke’s notion of corrective appeal. Muñoz puts
forth a way to envision a future that would transform the Primary World to improve the lives of
marginalized human beings, in this case queer people of color. While exploring this specific
struggle lies outside the scope of my project, it suggests an important realm of consideration:
fantastical transformation within the Primary World. I will further explore this kind of material,
real-world connection in Chapter 4, but here Muñoz offers a pertinent example of how experiencing fantasy may work directly upon an audience. A fantasy may not be a simple, direct message to be plainly decoded, but it conveys effects upon its audience, whether the fantastical effects are more imaginary or more practically material. In either case, breaking from the known has observable rhetorical impact.

Burke's final appeal comes as a vehicle for “artistic” effects. This appeal is perhaps best termed “craft,” tied to notions of eloquence and artistry (Counter-Statement 156). What, then, is eloquence of fantasy? Muñoz offers one answer, discussing what he calls “astonishment,” a glimpse of the wonderous from amidst the mundane or quotidian. He writes of this effect: “Astonishment helps one surpass the limitations of an alienating presentness and allows one to see a different time and place” (5). Others have called this quality by other names—much as Longinus referred to the Sublime—but Muñoz’s description is of interest because it is not intended to refer to fantasy, yet it fits quite well. Apart from envisioning the wonderous, fantasy can also recontextualize the known.

One of the harsher criticisms of mass culture, which would include most if not all works of fantasy, is that it serves little purpose beyond distracting the masses from the ills of the Primary World. In their 1944 work, Dialectic of Enlightenment, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno offer just such a criticism, arguing that the culture industry utilizes mimetic fiction to achieve this distraction. They write, “The whole world is passed through the filter of the culture industry. The familiar experience of the moviegoer, who perceives the street outside as a continuation of the film he has just left, because the film seeks strictly to reproduce the world of everyday perception, has become the guideline of production” (Horkheimer and Adorno 99). Their arguments are not limited to the world, either, as they also assert that heroic characters also
serve a largely mimetic function, making cultural conformity desirable and then commodifying that desire: “The heroizing of the average forms part of the cult of cheapness. The highest-paid stars resemble advertisements for unnamed merchandise. Not for nothing are they often chosen from the ranks of commercial models. The dominant taste derives its ideal from the advertisement, from commodified beauty” (Horkheimer and Adorno 126). This criticism illustrates the power of transformative fantasy and its purposes. Like Muñoz, the fantasist can suggest a transformation of the known into a new form that subverts cultural conformity. This, perhaps more than anything, demonstrates why fantasy’s greatest agency comes when it is transformative, rather than when it simply reproduces genre expectations derived from a culture industry that values conformity over innovation or subversion.

Artistically well-rendered fantasy may well provide Tolkien’s Recovery, allowing audiences to re-vision the world with a fresh perspective or to suggest new views of culture and society, subverting the conformity of the culture industry. This, as other fantastical transformations, is accomplished through applications of Covino’s magic, which by turns complicates or simplifies an audience’s view of circumstances.25 Indeed, I conclude that magic is the real artistry, the true eloquence, of fantasy. Whether fictional sorcery or creatively presented narrative transformation, it is this magic that makes fantasy. Whatever other effects fantasy may have, however they may be measured, they can be described in terms of how the fantasy’s magic is cast. In other words, to understand the way the fantasy makes its magic is to understand how it presents its own rhetoric of transformation.

25 As previously noted, it cannot be assumed that all transformations will be subversive, nor that they will be desirable to all people. These are rhetorical capacities that can be turned as easily to conformity as to subversion or liberation, but I have chosen to illustrate these capacities in what seems to me an ethical and worthwhile fashion.
Agent & Purpose

In any rhetorical situation, the question of how the author’s message works upon the audience may be raised. Ursula Le Guin once wrote, “I welcome any socially conscious reading of fantasy, so long as it isn’t ideologically puristic, for too many modern fantasies are intolerably trivial and complacent in their half-baked feudalism” (*Cheek by Jowl* 36). Here, she acknowledges that repetition of genre tropes without a clear purpose can result in works with dubious literary meaning and value, and in so doing acknowledges that fantasy should carry sufficient purpose and meaning as to be of literary value—to merit “socially conscious” reading. However, Le Guin (like Tolkien) objected to attempts to read fantasy stories as direct messages, particularly as allegories:

> The purpose of a fantasy may be as inexplicable, in social or political terms, as the purpose (to paraphrase Maxwell) of a baby. To expect to explain or understand a fantasy as disguised ethics or politics is to fall into the reductionist trap. The purposive, utilitarian approach to fantasy and folktale of a Bettelheim or Bly, and in general the “psychological” approach to fantasy, explaining each element of the story in terms of its archetype or unconscious source of educative use, is deeply regressive; it perceives literature as magic, it is a verbomancy. To such interpreters the spell is a spell only if it works immediately to heal or reveal. (*Cheek by Jowl* 35).

While it would be easy to read this as a rejection of reading deeper meaning into fantasy, the key phrase is “if it works immediately.” Le Guin is rejecting the idea that fantasy should serve a quick, simple purpose or that value should only be seen in immediate or utilitarian readings.
Rosemary Jackson explores this idea as well, as she advocates for fantasy as a subversive mode of thought. Jackson critiques what one might term the classical view of 20th Century fantasy, particularly that of writers like C. S. Lewis or J. R. R. Tolkien, by saying, “Literature of the fantastic has been claimed as ‘transcending’ reality, ‘escaping’ the human condition and constructing superior alternate, ‘secondary’ worlds” (2). She rejects the idea of fantasy “as fulfilling a desire for a ‘better’, more complete, unified reality,” which she claims “has come to dominate readings of the fantastic, defining it as an art form providing vicarious gratification” (2). Jackson frames fantasy as typically seeking to “compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints” that explores desire for what is absent or lost due to said constraints (3). While I believe this represents, as Le Guin put it, a reductionist view of Tolkienian fantasy, Jackson nonetheless frames a compelling argument about how fantasy makes meaning and achieves its purposes. Jackson writes, “Like any other text, a literary fantasy is produced within, and determined by, its social context. Though it might struggle against the limits of this context, often being articulated upon that very struggle, it cannot be understood in isolation from it” (3).

Much as Secondary Worlds are linked inextricably to the Primary World, so are the purposes of fantasy. Jackson suggests that fantasy “traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’” (4). This could be read as prescriptive, but Jackson also later clarifies that “This is not to imply that an ideal theoretical model exists to which all fantasies should conform. There is no abstract entity called ‘fantasy’; there is only a range of different works which have similar structural characteristics and which seem to be generated by similar unconscious desires” (7-8). Whether or not fantasy is generated by such unconscious desires, Jackson’s point is well taken. Fantasy serves no single purpose, but its transformative capacities and power to enable reimaginings allow it to relate to many
elements of culture or society that might otherwise be taboo, subject to erasure, or made Other. This may work as others have claimed—Tolkien’s Escape or Recovery, Burke’s appeals, Booth’s interests—on the audience, but it may also reach beyond the limits of that audience. If nothing else, then fantasy can call social assumptions about what is, can, or should be into question. As Jackson argues, “Presenting that which cannot be, but is, fantasy exposes a culture’s definitions of that which can be: it traces the limits of its epistemological and ontological frame (23). This allows the fantasy to do what all rhetoric does: work effects upon its audiences and, through them, on a broader social scale.

Reflection

If, as Pratchett’s Death would have us believe, fantasy enables human beings to create the necessities for humanity—creating fictions that may become fundamental understandings or beliefs in a broader social context—then it may do so by working upon its audiences in many ways. It may provide, as Tolkien claimed, a way to recover what might be lost to the numbness of familiarity and routine, escaping from a banal worldview to perceive elements of the human experience in new and meaningful ways. It may offer comfort or, in the vein of Burke’s symbolism, give to audiences what they might otherwise be denied, presenting imagined recompense or inspiring transformations. It may satisfy cognitive or emotional interests from the genre-based to the human-interested, in the manner of Booth’s observations of literature. On the other hand, it may inspire audiences to take actions of their own, even if only to create more art and more stories, such as Gaiman’s drive to revisit the fate of Susan Pevensie from *The Chronicles of Narnia*. It may feed or inspire desire for real-world change, functioning like the “educated hope” that Muñoz describes. These ends are accomplished by the magic of transformation, the fantastic as experienced by its audiences. An audience may be led through a
doorway on a curated portal-quest, immersed in a fantasy that requires them to find their own way, or even be visited by it (whether in a fleeting, liminal glimpse or an undeniable intrusion) in a version of their own world. Through whatever means and in whatever relationship to its audience, the fantastic experience is an enchantment that is created by perceived needs in the Primary World. It transforms the circumstances of those needs within Secondary Worlds, and journeys between the two may bring much to light that should not be overlooked, neglected, or forgotten. Perhaps most importantly, it may inspire transformation within the Primary World—real, material change—and in the next chapter, I will explore that possibility within one site of inquiry.
Chapter Four: The Fantastic in the Composition Classroom

Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as permanent re-creators. In this way, the presence of the oppressed in the struggle for their liberation will be what it should be: not pseudo-participation, but committed involvement.

– Paulo Freire (Pedagogy of the Oppressed 69)

Fantasy exists prominently in various forms of fiction, but as Covino illustrates, its magic can be applied just as readily to the Primary World. To apply fantastical thinking to material reality is to approach transforming the world. I approach my role as a composition instructor with this view of fantasy and transformation in mind, particularly in how I seek to engage my students in the classroom. In this chapter, I will explore how transformative fantasy may be applied to composition pedagogy, particularly examining how Freire’s idea of “re-creation” may resonate with Tolkien’s idea of “sub-creation.” To frame that discussion, I would like to first relate a brief story that illustrates a key fantastical point of departure: A professor sits at a desk, scoring written student exam papers. In this moment, he serves as an academic authority, enforcing the power structure of the teacher-student paradigm: students are tested, and the professor evaluates them. Both prescribed roles are constrained by the mechanism of traditional academic authority and by the regime of “proper” writing. The professor sighs as he moves on to
another exam, pen poised for marking and scoring. Then, coming across a blank page in the
stack of a submissions, he makes a sudden departure from his role. Turning over the paper in
front of him, he writes upon it: “In a hole in the ground, there lived a Hobbit.”

According to his 1955 letter to W. H. Auden, this is how J. R. R. Tolkien first began
writing *The Hobbit*, a book that embodies his love of mythopoeia, or myth-making. This story
marks a transformative moment, a moment where Tolkien departed from what Chimamanda
Adichie might call the “singe story” of his role as an examiner—and I will return soon to that
idea and what it may represent—but in considering this moment, I realize it illuminates a central
tension in my own struggle to find my place in academia. Reflecting on my time as a student and
scholar, I must note how long I felt that I did not fit with or belong within the academy as I
perceived it. Studying creative writing, literature, and composition led me—based largely on the
interests of my teachers—to believe in another sort of single story of academia, one in which I
could only ever study inscrutable texts to which I could hardly relate and that did little to hold
my interest. With occasional exceptions, I saw myself in neither the texts I studied nor the
discourse surrounding them. I perceived no place within the scholarly study of English for me,
certainly not the “me” I envisioned myself to be. Where others were fascinated by Jane Austen
or William Faulkner, I preferred to discuss the works of Tolkien, Frank Herbert, or Michael
Ende. So, this project is a significant step along a road for me that is very much illumined by
the kind of transformation Adichie speaks about.

This is not to say, of course, that no actual place for such studies of the fantastic existed;
it was years before I discovered that someone with my interests could do scholarly and
pedagogical work and be taken seriously without compromising those same interests. In one
dimension, this entailed discovering broader interests. I discovered, for example, a love for
teaching and working with others in collaboratively developing writing skills. I also found room for play in the learning process, something that I continue to believe is absolutely necessary—and, indeed, is very compatible with T. R. Johnson’s model of renegade rhetoric, as I will address later in this chapter. However, the discovery that I could pursue one of my great passions with academic diligence and intellectual fervor transformed my experience. For me, the transformative moment was discovering that I could write seriously about the fantastic—in particular, fantasy fiction and related concepts. A professor, Scott Miller of Sonoma State University, introduced me to one of Tolkien’s essays, “Tree and Leaf,” and led me to first examine a rhetoric of the fantastic. This saved me from my own single story of what academic work could be, and this was a key moment along my path to engaging in the study of rhetoric and composition. Tolkien’s essay served as a handy point of entry for me, allowing me to draw connections to writers such as Peter Elbow, Paulo Freire, Kenneth Burke, T. R. Johnson, and William Covino. I owe much to Dr. Miller and to Tolkien, but I owe much of my ability to recognize this transformation to Chimamanda Adichie.

As in Chapter 2, here I borrow from Adichie’s argument, but I am not attempting to entirely link the central point of her argument with my own. Rather, I return to a moment from Adichie’s TED Talk that I discussed previously: the instance of her re-discovering literature in the form of African books. For the young Adichie, the ability to envision herself as being included in the world of literature required knowledge of literature that represented people like her and reflected experiences like hers. In other words, she could not feel included in literature until she realized that literature, in fact, could include her. Adichie called this problem having a “single story” about literature, which she was then able to overcome. A single story, as Adichie uses the term, is a limiting and reductive representation of a people or a situation. Studying
Tolkien may have dispelled my single story of academia, but it was Adichie’s talk that gave me a way to understand and discuss the obstacle that I had faced. I was able to acknowledge that, much as literature holds room for a girl from Nigeria to tell her stories, academia holds room for me as a scholar. Here is the magic of fantasy, in this case arresting a misconception about what might be included in, for Adichie, literature and, for me, academic study. In turn, this magic generates the opportunity for new understanding, departing from the narrow and exclusive view into one that is more broad and inclusive.

This magic, too, is what Tolkien’s anecdote of pausing in his marking of papers to write about a hobbit was able to do. It represents a transformative moment when a writer seized agency against the constraints of a single story of academia, one that offered no specific opportunity for pleasure and in which the teacher-as-examiner exists merely to enforce the institution’s structures and metrics. In departing from this role, writing of a fantastical creature instead of scoring an exam, Tolkien resisted the single story of his institutional position and engaged in an act of subtly renegade behavior, diverting from his role of academic enforcement to one of creative play. This moment may be seen as a reflection of the tension between creativity and the more rigid confines of convention, where one’s role is defined by prescriptive expectations, but it also illustrates how an act of fantastical transformation may provide a way to engage and perhaps even disrupt such circumstances. Similar tension may be observed between students entering academic communities and many of the expectations and conventions of the institutions around whose structures those communities are centered. Much as the story of Tolkien serves as an example of a person utilizing the fantastic to transform a moment of academic drudgery into a moment of imaginative pleasure, this use of fantasy may similarly
provide a way to transform other such tensions within the academy. To that end, in this chapter I will examine the pedagogical applications of this rhetoric of fantasy.

In a return to the fantastical pentad, I characterize fantastical pedagogy as the Act. The Agents are teachers and students, and their Purpose is defined by that relationship. I will assume, for this discussion, at least some measure of “co-intent,” as Freire puts it, in that teachers and students in this model are legitimate in this purpose: they wish to learn from one another and, ideally, to be empowered as Agents in the world. That is, in fantastical terms, they seek to utilize transformative power through “committed involvement” to become the “re-creators” that Freire discusses. The question of Scene, in a pedagogical sense, is a complex one that I will only lightly address; the focus of this project is not to holistically approach the circumstances that comprise a contemporary academic setting. However, I do engage conceptually, at least to some degree, with the experience of entering the university as a place and a culture for the purpose of discussing what will be the main focus of this chapter: Agency. I ask, what does it mean to seize fantastical agency within the realm of composition pedagogy—as Tolkien did in the previous example—and to what ends can that power be turned?

In this case, transformative fantasy provides a means to seize agency in the face of a tedious or intellectually inhospitable situation. The story about Tolkien first conceiving the idea of a hobbit embodies T. R. Johnson’s concept of renegade rhetoric, in which Johnson argues for the importance of teaching that emphasizes the magic and pleasure of writing in order to break free of masochistic institutional systems. Such “masochistic” systems represent a cog-in-the-machine model of academia, and this model is a form of the single story problem identified by Adichie. Johnson’s renegade rhetoric serves as a means of fantastical transformation, countering this single story of academia and allowing students to transgress when necessary against a
system that can be oppressive and limiting. In this case, the fantastic as renegade rhetoric may enable students to seize agency and, perhaps, empower them to work toward each becoming, as Paulo Freire termed it, a “re-creator” of the world. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, this is a thread I have followed for years, beginning when I first considered a connection between Tolkien’s sub-creation and Freire’s idea of re-creation. Both are engaged in fantastical transformation, in re-imagining worlds, much as Johnson is engaged in resisting masochistic systems by seeking to turn toil and suffering into pleasure and engagement. This is a direct example of how the fantastic may be applied within the field of composition pedagogy.

Renegade Rhetoric

The fantastic is deeply built into Johnson’s arguments. He describes “renegade rhetoric” as a “pleasure-oriented, magical tradition,” an approach to composition as something powerful that can be enjoyed (4). For Johnson, the key transformation is from toil to pleasure. In framing this discussion, Johnson cites ancient Greek philosopher Gorgias’s theory of rhetoric, noting that the first step to students’ learning of composition, particularly persuasion, requires the student to “first learn to experience composing itself as a kind of pleasure-charged performance” (2). Further, Johnson derives from Gorgias a “working definition of authorial pleasure,” describing it as “the feeling that ensues during the composition process that is roughly analogous to the transformation of pain and alienation into knowledge and connection, and its contagious quality is the stuff of persuasion, perhaps of communication” (2). However, Johnson also observes that “[Gorgias] explicitly understands the contagion of pleasure in terms of magical spells and witchcraft” and that occult thematic symbolism surfaces throughout the history of rhetoric whenever pleasure is discussed, right up to Peter Elbow in the 1990s (3). There is a mythopoeic quality to this argument, evoking Tolkien’s image of constructing a new tower out of ancient
stones. Johnson uses Gorgias’ arguments to challenge models of composition study that leave little room for pleasure. Central to the concept of renegade rhetoric is the idea that educational institutions are often intellectually inhospitable to students who do not conform to a particular model of expectations. Understanding this claim is essential to observing how its circumstances might be transformed.

Johnson cites the contrasting interest in pleasure—indeed, in magic—such as discussed by Peter Elbow and William Covino as “explicitly remote from the centers of mainstream, ‘official’ institutions,” noting that:

So divergent, in fact, are the aims of school-based rhetoric and the pleasure-oriented, magical tradition led by figures like Gorgias that Covino has characterized the latter as ‘renegade’ (1988). This renegade line of thought values rhetoric not as ‘formulaic discourse’ or pure technique, but rather as the activity of learning and wondering; a process that eschews the constraints of a singular ‘purpose or end or stance’ and cultivates instead a ‘suppleness of mind’ well-suited to address continuously evolving social contexts (44-45). (Johnson 4)

This operates in direct opposition to claims from more traditionalist theorists—such as David Bartholomae’s 1990 dismissal of pleasure as something for “suckers” in “A Reply to Stephen North” (128). In fact, Johnson argues, mainstream academia is far more likely to use pain than pleasure to police the thinking and performance of students. Further, he is not alone in his argument for the importance of pleasure in learning. As bell hooks observes, “Given that critical pedagogy seeks to transform consciousness, to provide students with ways of knowing that enable them to know themselves better and live in the world more fully, to some extent it must rely on the presence of the erotic” (194). It must be noted for clarity that hooks in the same
paragraph writes that “we must move beyond thinking of those forces solely in terms of the sexual”; however, either way she is very pointed in arguing for a pedagogy that embraces, rather than denies, passion and pleasure. This, then, is part of the Scene—the pedagogical environment into which fantastical agency must venture. Another key part of the Scene concerns the students themselves and what they bring with them. Transforming this Scene is essential to Johnson’s effort.

Students, of course, come from diverse backgrounds and many different literacies (and, indeed, many different languages—even Englishes), and in the traditional model of composition education that Johnson seeks to challenge and transform, the move to correct, to normalize, student writing is enforced by the harsh correction of deviations from standard usage as “error” that is characterized as a failure, a source of shame. Johnson states, “By embarrassing students this way, we slowly but surely initiate them into a certain set of affiliations, into a kind of membership that, as Patricia Bizzel (1986) and Robert Rodriguez (1993) both note, can unfold as a painful repudiation of their home culture” (8). Certainly, there is no shortage of thought on this point, and in Johnson’s claim I felt echoes of various concerns, such as the CCC’s “Students’ Right to Their Own Language,” or Rosina Lippi-Green’s thorough examination of linguistic subjugation in her book *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States*. In setting himself against this practice, Johnson establishes that the transformative magic he utilizes must not only be generative, creating more options and complicating an understanding of language and how students may use it, but it must also be arresting, in this case curtailing practices that would exclude students based on repressive ideas about language and culture. If the status quo is to treat students or language, then that must be disrupted in order to transform the masochistic system of which Johnson writes.
In framing his criticism, Johnson warns that education, under the wrong approach, can be “a totalitarian machine designed to produce, coerce, even ‘clone’ a certain legitimate kind of subject” (10). Citing Gilles Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition*, Johnson goes so far as to relate students’ obsession with correcting errors in order to attain higher grades to masochism (21). On students writing only to satisfy the needs of education as a means to an end, Johnson asserts, “When students write in the hopes of anchoring themselves to a particular niche, they do not write for the sheer adventure of the process. Rather, the only pleasure they know is the sort that comes when the writing is finished, when they can breathe a sigh of relief and feel ‘glad to have it over with’” (17). Having framed this criticism and established what he believes must be transformed, Johnson seeks to establish what his brand of magic will be to transform the situation.

Johnson’s method of magic requires some measure of interpretation. He borrows heavily from Covino in constructing this version of fantastical agency; however, in discussing Covino’s magic, Johnson asserts that “what I’m interested in here is generative magic rather than arresting magic. The latter is a kind of lockstep incantation that is the opposite of critical and creative thinking” (Johnson 39). Here, Johnson seems to read Covino much differently than I do, as I would argue that critical and creative thinking must apply both arresting and generative magic to be effective. While Johnson’s reading of Covino’s magic differing from my own, his purpose aligns in many ways with those of Paulo Freire, setting himself in opposition to oppressive social forces that utilize mass culture (or, perhaps, academic conventions) to mesmerize a people and render them passive, precluding them from seizing agency or taking action in the world (Johnson 39-40). Similarly, Freire describes his social aims near the end of Chapter 1 of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which I have quoted at the start of this chapter (Freire 69). In discussing his model of
problem-posing education, Freire refers to the importance of enabling students to be re-creators of their own worlds. Both Johnson and Freire offer up arguments about what forms of agency and action may be useful to enact fantastical transformation, but Freire himself offers up another example of where transformation may be needed.

Freire’s ideas in and of themselves may not strictly be accessible to all educators—for, just as students may struggle to identify with the academy, teachers may need to work to find Freire’s work compatible with their own pedagogical aims. Bell hooks addresses this in *Teaching to Transgress* when she discusses Freire’s sexism: “It is feminist thinking that empowers me to engage in a constructive critique of Freire’s work […] and yet there are many other standpoints from which I approach his work that enable me to experience its value, that make it possible for that work to touch me at the very core of my being” (hooks 49). Hooks offers a feminist transformation of Freire’s work, allowing her to apply his ideas to her own work as an educator. Where Johnson offers a transformative way of viewing issues of inclusiveness in the academy, hooks offers a transformative reading of Freire, allowing her to work past the limitations of his thinking. For hooks, feminist criticism was the impetus for her magic, allowing her to engage with Freire’s pedagogy. What was for hooks “transgression” is not unlike Johnson’s idea of a “renegade” approach. Both confront the limitations of systems and ways of thinking, and both offer transformative approaches to operating within those circumstances. In service of their own interests, each has in their own way turned to a blank page and written defiantly across it. These departures may not resemble mythopoeic fantasy, but they represent the same fantastical transformation—the same magic—as Tolkien’s departure. These approaches have heavily informed my own thinking, serving as models for how fantasy in the more Tolkienian tradition
of mythopoeia may be applied to composition pedagogy to achieve transformative effects. In other words, their magic inspires how I approach building my own.

In the one sense, mythopoeia represents the active practice of fantasy through myth-making, transforming the ancient into the new. This power may also be utilized in student writing. Mythopoeia as transgression or renegade rhetoric uses the writing of fantasy to transform the actual situation of the classroom. This operates similarly to Johnson’s magic, seeking to transform work that is often characterized as toil into something pleasurable. In Johnson’s model, the “magic” of inspiration happens when writing proceeds as fluently and naturally as speech, when the writer is able to inhabit the “mysterious, highly pleasurable territory” of that fluency; writing ceases to be only a struggle, instead tapping into a voice—not necessarily an expressivist “true voice”—that approaches the comfortable familiarity of speech (Johnson 30). In describing his own method, his own magic, to achieve this, Johnson emphasizes stylistics such as rhythm, noting that “what Cicero, Isocrates, and others understood is that these stylistic devices are not merely fun, not just toys for writers, but tools by which writers can create certain effects on readers, physical feelings of comprehension and power, knowledge and connection” (Johnson 37). Johnson’s use of stylistics offers a rich and engaging way to approach student work and an interesting example of how to “do” renegade rhetoric in the classroom.

To similarly enact fantastical transformation in the classroom, I suggest the value of Tolkienian mythopoeia. So, I return to the connection between Tolkien and Freire. Where I began with the task of transformative pedagogy, à la Freire and his task of re-creation, I come to Tolkien’s sub-creation. This connection may seem unlikely, given their widely differing ideologies: Tolkien was a staunch monarchist and political reactionary, Freire a revolutionary who strove to liberate the Brazilian underclass through education. Yet Tolkien’s brand of
magic—in this case, playful mythopoeia as a pedagogical mode—can be applied toward goals such as those held by Freire. Of course, to apply fantastical rhetoric is not necessarily to apply Tolkien, but in this case Tolkien’s ideas serve as a useful example of how the fantastic may be enacted. With this in mind, I approach the concept of pedagogical play.

**Play is Learning: A Fantastical Transformation**

Magic, rhetoric, and writing share ancient connections. Historically, the perceived mystic qualities of writing were strong enough that the word “gramarye,” which refers to magic and occult studies, comes directly from the Old French *gramaire*—or, literally, grammar. This connection is observed anew by writers and thinkers such as Johnson, Covino, and Peter Elbow (whose *Writing with Power* forms another part of Johnson’s magic). Indeed, the very prevalent lack of understanding of exactly how the writing process works, cognitively speaking, may justify such terminology. How many students of writing are left feeling, at one time or another, that the rules of writing—its gramarye—are tantamount to obscure arcane rituals? Considering the magic of language may serve as a reminder that transformation can come directly through language. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, powerful fantasist-realist Gloria Anzaldúa writes, “The first time I heard two women, a Puerto Rican and a Cuban, say the word ‘*nosotras,*’ I was shocked. I had not known the word existed. Chicanas use *nosotros* whether we’re male or female. We are robbed of our female being by the masculine plural. Language is a male discourse” (76). This project does not focus on the failings of male-gendered language, but Anzaldúa’s story relates the way that one word can significantly transform an entire perspective.

Game designer Raph Koster cites another word origin worth exploring in *A Theory of Fun for Game Design* when he asks, “What is fun?”
If you dig into the origins of the word, it comes either from ‘fonne,’ which is ‘fool’ in Middle English, or from ‘fonn,’ which means ‘pleasure’ in Gaelic. Either way, fun is defined as ‘a source of enjoyment.’ This can happen via physical stimuli, aesthetic appreciation, or direct chemical manipulation. (Koster, ch. 3) I am particularly attracted to the Gaelic “fonn,” as it resonates nicely with Johnson’s rhetoric of pleasure, but the correlation stands in the broader sense either way. Koster also defines games, loosely, as structured systems designed to teach players specific information. This happens via a process called “chunking” that he observes from cognitive science, a system of recognizing patterns and aggregating them into data that the brain can use and process, whether one is memorizing facts, learning to play a musical instrument, or playing a video game (ch. 2). Therefore, Koster argues, “That’s what games are, in the end. Teachers. Fun is just another word for learning. One wonders, then, why learning is so damn boring to so many people. It’s almost certainly because the method of transmission is wrong” (ch. 3). Koster does not engage in an extended critique of educational methods, instead focusing on how games can most effectively hold player interest and facilitate the intended patterns of learning, but he does make some useful observations about learning.

As learning takes place, Koster argues, the “chunked” patterns of understanding become unconscious, as our brains operate to some degree on reflex and habit. He notes, “We’re usually running on these automatic chunked patterns. In fact, most of what we see is also a chunked pattern. We rarely look at the real world; we instead recognize something we have chunked, and leave it at that” (ch. 2). The difficulty comes in preserving the learning process—keeping the “game” effective—long enough to maximize what the player can learn. Eventually, if the game teaches effectively and maintains the player’s engagement, the player may internalize what has
been learned to the point of grokking it. “Grokking” is a term that Koster borrows from Robert Heinlein’s novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*, relating it to the kind of understanding that surpasses conscious thought, much like the (somewhat inaccurate but commonly used) concept of “muscle memory”; the concept has become so familiar that it operates nearly as a reflex (Koster, ch. 2). This term can be adapted as a means to consider how one learns to write.

Koster’s use of grokking offers a kind of goal: rather than seeking to teach mastery, we can emphasize engaging with the “game” until playing it becomes intimately familiar, even comfortable (as with Johnson’s stated goal that writing proceed with the comfort of spoken language). Johnson uses the term “fluency,” which is a useful way to think about grokking: grokking is fluency in a task, but fluency is not the same as mastery. Attaining fluency does not mean that one cannot continue to develop one’s aptitude in that task.

What Koster provides, in the end, is another fantastical transformation. In this case, the fantasy disrupts the idea of learning as toil, much as Johnson seeks to do, and re-frames it as a form of play. Considering the way players learn from games suggests a way to approach thinking about student learning in the writing classroom. Much as a game might seem arbitrary or incomprehensible when first encountered, if students can be encouraged to keep “playing,” then they may work toward achieving a certain level of functional literacy—of “grokking” their own writing process. This translates practically into maintaining student engagement, which as Freire illustrates is both more effectively and more ethically achieved by facilitating student agency. That is, we can envision this model as the problem-posing educator providing opportunities for students to learn, and the experience becomes “fun” not because of artificial or extraneous elements of the curriculum but by tapping into the modes of pleasure that are hard-wired into the brain itself. To better understand these game components and how they work, Koster asks,
“What are the other fundamental components of a game element, the atoms of games, so to speak? Game designer Ben Cousins calls these ‘ludemes,’ the basic units of gameplay [...] such as ‘visit everywhere’ and ‘get to the other side.’” (Koster, ch. 7). Thus, one might ask: what are the ludemes associated with writing or composition instruction? Even thinking of teaching writing in terms of game mechanics represents a transformation, one that invites instructors to broaden their understanding of learning and student engagement. If in this case a ludic approach to teaching is the magic, the question then becomes: how can it be done, and what must be understood about the situation before trying to do it?

While a “gamified” approach of this type might only seem useful to those who already understand the ludemes—perhaps meaning, in this case, conventions of academic writing—I suggest another touch of fantasy. A game player is not initially aware of a game’s ludemes. They are discovered through game play, through learning as grokking. In thinking about what the ludemes of composition might be, one effectively takes on the role of the game designer, not the game player. So, how does one communicate these ludic elements to students, and how is this any different from other forms of instruction? In other words, where is the renegade rhetoric—what is fantastical or transformative about this approach? So, while much has been discussed on the complexities of teaching specific elements of composition, such as “construct a grammatically functional sentence in Standard American English” or “use an assertive topic sentence,” how does one make the “atoms” of writing closer to actual ludemes, the functional motes that comprise a game? How can this help to transform learning as toil into learning as fun? Fantasy, in the tradition of Tolkien’s mythopoeia, may offer one answer. Fantastical transformation can embody not only Freire’s project of re-creation, but it may itself be a method of unlocking the pleasure that Koster and Johnson argue should be implicit in learning.
Creative Inclusion as Renegade Rhetoric

The fantastic, as a method, takes the known and familiar and transforms it via magic, in the sense that William Covino discusses, to the unusual, providing alternative perspectives and the opportunity to see what something might be or might become, as opposed to what it, in the present moment, is. To that end, consider the fascist oppression confronted by Paulo Freire in terms of Tolkien’s traitorous wizard Saruman, whose mind was occupied by the wheels and smoke of machinery and who made free people slaves to his will. Presented this way, Saruman may be easily read as a metaphor for oppression—or, taken another way, for industrialization. Tolkien was famously opposed to excessive modernization and was highly inclined to romanticize the pastoral, such as is demonstrated by his idyllic depiction of life in The Shire of Middle-earth from *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

However, Tolkien also did not see his fiction as direct allegory, preferring instead to allow mythic imagery to appeal to the beholder across time, taking relevance in varied cultural moments and contexts. This makes the image all the more applicable to multiple interpretations, but however one reads him, Saruman remains a potent representation of the oppressor, the authoritarian antagonist of any age. One might feel from the erstwhile White Wizard the rumbling sociopolitical machine of a fascist state. Just as easily, one might see Saruman as a colonial, runaway capitalist power, consuming natural resources to industrially perpetuate his own power over the subaltern tribesmen of Dunland. This, of course, is the power of literary interpretation, but it is also the power of myth: iconic tales can be interpreted to suit varied cultural contexts, facilitating an understanding of the contemporary world at least as much as when the tale was made. Mythopoeia uses this tool to accomplish fantastical transformation in fiction, but it may also serve as a way to interpret the same problems that Johnson poses.
This symbol of the oppressor might even be used to represent the hostile, even violent regime that too often concerns composition. The sado-masochistic gauntlet embodied in testing, the ritualization of certain forms and styles, or the over-focus on mechanics—á la Saruman’s cogs and wheels—all serve to “guard the tower” of the academy against students who might otherwise be welcomed into the community of writers as writers, wielders of fantastical agency. Denying students this inclusion, refusing them this agency, leaves them in no position to step beyond the strictures of a banking-oriented or masochistic model of writing. Learning remains only a form of toil, and students’ potential may languish, locked away within a critical Isengard. Allowing the free play of writing fantasy, coloring outside the lines a bit to see where the crayon might go, may alleviate some of this problem, as I will explore in the next section of this chapter.

The difference between these two models of writing, as Johnson might observe, is that for composition students (particularly those students who do not readily self-identify as writers or do not perceive themselves as included in a writing community) one form is often characterized by toil and drudgery while the other is seen as fanciful escapism. To successfully change the toil of the one into the pleasure of the other, it is necessary to better understand what separates the two. Put another way, one must understand the problem enough to see what aspects of the situation may be transformed and what magic, both generative and arresting, is necessary to do so.

One key difference between the two is perceived agency; the writer as sub-creator is granted authority over their Secondary World, while the student is often cast as the subordinate, merely striving to satisfy the strictures of a writing assignment most often set by an instructor and too often lacking any direct investment in the project apart from earning a grade. I hardly need justify the importance of students—or, indeed, anyone—being invested in their work, but as Johnson notes, taking pleasure in that work is a potent mode of creating said investment.
Johnson’s renegade model does not only seek to transform the miserable into the pleasurable, but it also seeks to put their developing abilities into actual use. Johnson writes, “As a writing teacher, then, my goal has become not simply to avoid turning students into masochists, but to turn them into artists by teaching them how to play with prose style” (32). Creative work allows students to step, however briefly, into that space of being the artist, the sub-creator. Johnson advocates heavily for stylistics, which he finds students enjoy playing with, but the idea can be carried farther than that. Inviting students to play “renegade,” creatively seizing back the page from the regime of masochistic writing toil, feeds their identities as writers. It also represents a key fantastical transformation, from passively reproducing a model of writing in which they may not be at all invested to taking ownership and authority over their own writing.

When students are empowered to identify as writers, and when teachers treat students as actual members of a writing community with agency of their own, students can put theory into practice to realize it as more than meaningless information to be banked. Freire writes, “Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry, human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (72). Moreover, it is the job of the educator to present the opportunity for this praxis, trusting in the creative powers of the students. For this to happen, we must certainly invite students into a space of inclusion, of generative creation—debunking the single story of composition as toil, as misery, as disconnected from student interests—as, at worst, institutionally imposed Sisyphean labor without meaning. This is not to say that students do not understand the value of learning to improve their writing ability, but that comes back to Johnson’s argument: oppressive systems do not best teach the value of strong writing, but instead they emphasize investment in the system of toil and grade-based rewards. Students may be aware
of the value of stronger writing, but that does not necessarily mean that composition instruction practices always best serve those students, nor that said practices are as inclusive to students as they might be. This is the case for bringing creative play into the classroom, but to state this as a goal differs strikingly from actually enacting it. In the next section, I explore mythopoeia as a mode of applied creative play within the classroom and how it may represent the fantastical transformation that Johnson seeks the magic to accomplish.

**Transformation in Practice: An Example**

The inevitable question, of course, is the difficult one: How does one “do” fantastical transformation in the classroom? In my experience, mythopoeia as creative play is a very useful method of transforming student experience. One of the first examples I have of this is a series of “playshops” that I conducted while working in the writing center at Sonoma State University when I was working on my master’s degree. I have repeated this exercise many times since then. In one activity, students were asked to choose an image from a collection of randomly assembled postcards and then write one hundred words based on whatever inspiration they took from the image. The group I worked with that first time was comprised of first year students in their second semester—they had been asked to perform various writing activities throughout the term, but they did not generally or readily identify themselves as “writers.” In other words, they were very similar to many other students in foundational writing courses. When I told them about the activity, they showed initial reluctance—to them, clearly, writing still held associations with work, a nigh-punitive and too-often joyless task. However, these students were fortunate: not only had they come to our writing center, a place where we embraced language play and writing experimentation as a valuable pursuit, but they had also spent the semester learning under a professor who encouraged such play and strove to make writing a positive experience. So, when
I laid their task before them, the students pushed past their initial hesitation. Many smiled and began to show signs of real interest, each selecting a postcard with growing enthusiasm and then setting pens to paper. I watched their ideas sweep across the pages as the allotted time ticked by, each group filling their word count (or in several cases choosing to go beyond the requested length). Once they had finished, we shared what they had written. Most had written narratives of one kind or another, but what struck me was how many had written stories with fantastical themes. Most of these students, with no prompting from me whatsoever, were writing fantasy.

The playshop participants seemed to find fantastical symbolism easily relatable and within their grasp. They wrote of mysterious urban shadows with transformative powers, stepping into the woods and seeing the ghosts of one’s lost parents, and a world parallel to our own whose frightening, alien-seeming residents were not at all hostile and just need to be shown love. Others went even further into the realm of fantasy, including the tale of a queen who trapped the souls of others in her necklace to try to force people to like her; folktale, such as the creature fable of a bird and a frog who traveled together to Ireland and found true love; and myth, embodied by the story about a lost world, devoid of hope, where a woman had to find God to ask him to help her have a child. Perhaps most interestingly, each piece showed elements of fresh, creative energy. Instead of merely parroting or parodying the genre, the majority of students showed a dramatically inventive use of symbols. They had not read Booth, Burke, Le Guin, or Tolkien, but their writing reflected these theorists’ appeals, interests, and creative ideas all the same.

These students, as with many who have come after them, stand out in my memory as a lasting example I have witnessed of the effectiveness of creative writing play. The exercise they were given is called writing a “drabble,” a term used for flash fiction of (usually) exactly one
hundred words. The students were not told to write fiction, only that they had to pick a single, focused topic and discuss it in a quick writing of that length. I have used drabbles as a creative composition exercise for years now, and I have found that the form offers two general strengths: for one, it gets students thinking about word choice and economy of phrasing; for another, the form is short enough that students do not feel overwhelmed and are easily able to produce a reasonably structured, engaging piece of writing even if they are less comfortable with their writing-selves. This may not teach them the principles of the academic essay, but it does serve as a possible ludeme in the process of transforming the reluctant or non-writer, even if only by one small degree at a time.

After teaching for around ten years now, I have noticed that the fantastic has made regular appearances in the creative play students undertook when given opportunity to do so. I do not suppose that many, if any, of these students were thinking of Tolkien’s Secondary Worlds any more than they were thinking about Freire’s liberatory pedagogy or Johnson’s “renegade rhetoric.” They did not approach playshops or exercises with concerns about how using mythopoeia and iconic concepts would enhance their writing in some way. They operated, as much as one might consider possible, consciously outside the theoretical framework I have put forth. None the less, it was present all through much of what they produced. However they come to it, many of my students—often, most of them—seemed to find a power they would not have expected within the realm of creative play, and a great many of those who did also seemed to tap into the transformative power of fantasy, much in the same way that Tolkien did when he paused in grading papers to spontaneously invent hobbits.

It is worth observing that many of these students did more than simply exemplify Johnson’s model of non-masochistic education through joyful play. They also grappled with
concepts from grief and loss to redemption and community. These students showed the ability, when given the freedom, to reinvent *ways of knowing*. They utilized creative play as a mode, turning to mythopoeia as a method to take ownership over not only metaphorical symbols and concepts but of writing itself. I have often seen students who claim to dislike writing sit and take pleasure in puzzling over word choices when composing poetry or muse extensively about which careful turns would enhance the story arc of a narrative essay. This is more than mere empty practice of a theoretical skill. Instead, students put their abilities to work. Mythopoeia in the classroom has limitations, of course. It does not directly serve the institutionally privileged forms of composition that instructors need to teach—though, I should note that I have seen similar results in more conventional assignments when students are given sufficient freedom and are taken seriously as writers—but in offering students the chance to engage in the work of creative play, instructors can at least offer them the opportunity to engage in meaningful and even artful expression as writers. The magic of creative play arrests the students’ perceptions of composition as mere work, generating complexities wherein the student takes on additional roles: game-player, sub-creator, fantasist, or even simply trying on the role of authority over what they have written, not merely a student who has suffered through emulating a form with the best hope of an “A” as what Johnson would call a masochistic reward.

Exploring genres of writing beyond the purely academic may also offer other, very practical benefits. In his essay, “‘Memoria’ Is a Friend of Ours: On the Discourse of Color,” Victor Villanueva argues that “Academic discourse is cognitively powerful! But the cognitive alone is insufficient. It can be strong for logos. It can be strong for ethos. But it is very weak in pathos. Academic discourse tries, after all, to reach the Aristotelian ideal of being completely logocentric, though it cannot be freed of the ethical appeal to authority” (12).
continues, reflecting that even Aristotle, despite his disapproval of emotional appeals, knew that it was emotions that held the most sway over an audience. Here, Villanueva advocates for the personal: “The personal here does not negate the need for the academic; it complements, provides an essential element in the rhetorical triangle, an essential element in the intellect-cognition and affect. The personal done well is sensorial and intellectual, complete, knowledge known throughout mind and body, even if vicariously” (14). Perhaps this is another useful transformation, for if mythopoeic fantasy is not always seen as the strongest embodiment of logos, it may instead provide considerable offerings for expressing personal stories and experiences and for developing a facility with pathos. My own experiences, both as a writer and as an instructor, certainly stand in agreement with that perspective.

Reflection

Peter Elbow discusses the concept of a “magical” quality in writing in Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process, refuting the concept of individual words having inherent power with a concise discussion of how easily it is to rationally disassociate signifier from signified, but he also counters that the true magic of writing arises from context and the harder to quantify aspects of eloquence (359-368). For Elbow, magic is an elusive quality, such as “voice” or what he terms “juice,” but it remains entirely real. He asserts soon after, “If you succeed in really believing your tale is deeply important, you already and automatically believe in magic without giving the matter any awareness at all” (Elbow 369). He seeks to link these concepts to “truth” and authentic experience, which are certainly difficult enough arguments to prove, but even Elbow advises writers to “practice lying whenever possible” (370). Thus, if lying can avail the writer in creating Elbow’s “magic,” perhaps this process might be framed as fully inhabiting the conceptual space of the text one produces; it may
be that the “authenticity” that really counts is the ability to take ownership of a text, to both claim and belong to the project.

If so, then to achieve this ownership, it follows that one must be able to envision oneself as an authority over the text. One must see oneself as a functional Agent in the composition classroom. Put another way, one must see past a single story of writing, of academics, that would preclude such participation. Like Tolkien in the exam hall, one must be willing to turn from the expected page and write as defiantly as necessary across a blank leaf—because whether writing, teaching, speaking, or learning, it is through the belief that Elbow discusses that one is able to take the steps necessary to create one’s own space, find one’s own voice, in that community. Like the young Adichie discovering that there was a place for her in the world of literature, finding one’s own agency as a writer and ability to be situated within the academy entail the capacity to imagine them as possible—to believe, even when that act requires a renegade subversion of expectations. These are powerful examples of how transformative, fantastical thinking may be applied to the composition classroom, as well as some of what one may hope to accomplish in doing so.

In a project that focuses on fantasy, this has been in many ways my least conventional chapter. Its focus has been on the magic and agency of fantasy, transforming toil and frustration to pleasure and engagement. To accomplish this, the other necessary components of the fantastical pentad must be present. The Agents, both instructors and students, must together pursue the Act of education to achieve the Purpose of learning as best as is possible within the Scene provided by the academy. The remaining question concerns Agency: what is the magic that addresses the needs of composition pedagogy? Adichie, hooks, and Johnson have each articulated their own needs and what magic they used to transform the situation to meet those
needs. As to my own purposes, this chapter has aimed to demonstrate one way of looking at how
mythopoeia and creative play can be applied with reasonable realism to transform the classroom
to foster greater inclusiveness and student engagement with composition practice. In the next
chapter, I will follow the thread of play raised in this one and look beyond the composition
classroom, examining the way fantasy operates in fantastical play, particularly in the realm of
imaginative games.
Human beings need fantasy for healthy psychic and social life. Regardless of time, space, or cultural background, the constraints of everyday society offer limited roles for people to inhabit. Each of us is expected to fulfill our assigned duties without complaint or conflict. We experience the psychic strain of trying to portray these socially-imposed identity roles, which invariably fall short of who we originally thought we would become. Children often state their dreams for the future at a young age: their desire to become a fireman, a famous singer, a cowboy, etc. If we become lucky, our adult lives will mirror our childhood dreams in some fulfilling way. More often than not, however, we find ourselves forced to make certain compromises as we shift from the fantasy realm of our childhood dreams to the reality of the cultural consciousness to which we all must adapt.

– Sarah Lynne Bowman (The Functions of Role-Playing Games 7)

Games embody active, engaged fantasy perhaps more than any other medium, from their creative inception and production to the act of playing them. Fantastical games can range from collectible card games to contemporary computer games, along with many variations between them. Of these many forms of games, I will focus most directly on collaborative role-playing games. These games (widely abbreviated as “RPGs”) represent one of the most active and immersive forms of fantasy entertainment today. The genre came to prominence starting in 1974 with the release of Dungeons & Dragons, which in turn inspired many other RPGs. The first of
them focused on original settings with the flavor of medieval fantasy, following the fashion of *The Lord of the Rings*, but since then they have expanded to include nearly every type of fantasy adventure, from swords-and-sorcery and steampunk to dystopian sci-fi and space opera, including games set within established fictional worlds, from classic fantasy settings like Tolkien’s Middle-earth or Martin’s Westeros to interstellar adventures like *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*. Similarly, the focus of the games has expanded and evolved. Where *Dungeons & Dragons* tends to focus on strategy and creative combat, many games since have come to explore transformative identity in much deeper and more elaborate ways. In this chapter, I will examine the way that role-playing games offer specific opportunity to observe fantastical transformations to their players, as well as what use those transformations may offer. To better understand this, I will also to a limited degree trace the way trends in role-playing game design have shifted to differently facilitate these transformative opportunities for players.

Sarah Lynne Bowman explores the development of role-playing games by focusing on a major shift from external, strategy-based focus to a more internal, character-based focus. She marks as a major point in this shift the publication of *Vampire: The Masquerade* by White Wolf in 1991. As she writes in *The Functions of Role-Playing Games*, games such as this “surged in popularity during the nineties and in the early part of the twenty-first century, thematically exploring this sense of hyperawareness and critique of power, consumption, and greed” (21). As Bowman explores, *Vampire* was part of a setting known as the World of Darkness, which embodied a shift in how conflict was handled in role-playing games. The games came to focus, rather than on “an external ‘dragon’ to be slain,” instead on qualities “specifically present within the self” (21). She continues:
Unlike games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, in which characters tend to face external manifestations of absolute forms of evil, the World of Darkness focuses on both inner and outer struggles. While characters vie for dominance amongst each other, responding to the deterioration of the moral and spiritual values of the world, they also must battle their own cynical and exploitative natures, attempting to regain some sense of moral conscience. Thus, *Vampire* represents a more introspective form of role-playing when compared to previous RPG offerings.

(Bowman 21-22)

This is not to suggest that earlier games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* did not afford the opportunity for such introspective storytelling. The host of the game—called, depending on the parlance of each specific game, by such titles as Dungeon Master, Game Master, or Storyteller—has broad latitude to tell nearly any story imaginable, and players can create characters in any game who are as nuanced or as straightforward as they wish. However, White Wolf popularly transformed the focus of game narratives from the primarily external to the largely internal. This was not only a choice made by hosts and players, but it was written directly into their gaming materials. Take, for example, this passage from *Mage: The Ascension*: “To reflect our characters’ public and inner personae, we give them *Natures* and *Demeanors*. One represents the character’s inner self, her true personality; the second sums up the side most people notice” (Brucato and Wieck 114-115). These Natures and Demeanors are fully developed as a system within the game, requiring a player to address, and inviting them to fully explore, the character’s inner self. The way the character’s psychology and public presentation of self are depicted are an active part of how the game is played, both thematically and mechanically. This marked a transformation in
the way the support materials of role-playing games presented themselves, providing a more robust approach to creating fantastical characters and stories.

Where *Dungeons & Dragons* classically emphasizes mechanics for sword-and-sorcery adventure, *Vampire* spends many of its pages exploring concepts such as theme, mood, and character. Even in the basic “Core Rulebook” of many editions of the game, there are whole chapters dedicated to these ideas and to guiding players into the fantastical world of the game. This makes the White Wolf games particularly useful for my discussion in this chapter, and I will draw on them heavily for my discussion of role-playing games. In particular, they and Bowman offer a robust discussion of characters, who (along with their players) represent fantastical agents within these games, the act of transforming one’s identity in the game, the agency of what players and characters can do within the game (particularly in terms of the depiction of magic in these games), the purposes for playing these games, and the scene— including where the players physically play the games (such as around a table or online) and the way they explore the games’ settings. Through this application of the fantastical pentad, I will demonstrate the way that such games embody rhetorics of fantasy. Of all varieties of fantasy, role-playing games may be the most active and participatory. Rather than something like a film or novel, where the audience participates in making meaning only by interpreting the message, in role-playing games the audience also takes on the role of author, creating a uniquely rhetorical and deeply transformative variety of fantasy.

**Agent: Creating the Character**

Players are the agents in a role-playing game, and they exercise their agency through their characters. This mechanic, as well as the creative investment players often have in their characters, makes the process of character creation an essential part of examining the fantastical
agents in an RPG. At a basic level, a character serves as the player’s avatar within the world of the game, whether the game exists in person (such as in a “table top” setting) or in a virtual environment. The term “avatar” is derived from its documented 1784 meaning, “descent of a Hindu deity,” from Skt. avatarana “descent” (of a deity to the earth in incarnate form), from avadown’ + base of tarati ‘(he) crosses over.’ In computer use, it seems to trace to the novel Snow Crash (1992) by Neal Stephenson” (“avatar”). It is notable that in the novel Snow Crash, Stephenson postulates a futuristic Internet-like setting called “The Street,” where users interact via sophisticated virtual avatars that can be nearly any sort of self-representation that the user might wish. In Stephenson’s world, the avatar becomes as vital an aspect of how a person self-identifies and expresses him or herself as one’s clothing, hairstyle, and physical features. In a role-playing scenario, however, the character ideally moves beyond being merely an avatar, a stand-in agent, and becomes something more, a somewhat separate agent in its own right.

Bowman likens the creation of a character to the growth of a seed. This seed represents the initial concept for the character, designed to serve a purpose, such as filling a role in the group of other players and characters in a game, exploring a concept or identity, or something else that the player “needs to express or wishes to explore” (156). This seed or core concept develops through initial planning activities, from writing out the character’s back story to the character-building framework of the game’s system, and then evolves based on the scenarios and events explored in the game’s narrative, itself. Specifically, Bowman outlines four central stages to the development of characters in RPGs: Genesis, Development, Interaction, and Realization (156). Each of these stages offers possibilities for fantastical transformation.

Genesis represents the initial concept, which arises from “some combination of inherent archetypes, game-specific mechanics or abilities, narratives from literature, popular culture
references, and personal experiences” (156). This offers the most immediately obvious opportunity for fantastical transformation, as this is the stage where the player conceives the central concept for the character. Bowman identifies several sources for this inception. For one, a player may wish (or have been asked) to fill some role that is needed in the gaming group, whether for narrative or game mechanic reasons. (For example, the group of player characters, often called a “party,” may need a character with specific skills or powers to complete a task, ranging from a burglar to break into a secure location to a healer to help keep the party alive in case of a violent encounter.) It is also common for a player to be inspired by some specific source, such as from popular culture, fiction, or even the Primary World, such as from history or their own lives. They may also just be interested in the game as a social outlet. On the other hand, players may find themselves, whether consciously or less so, exploring avenues of experience or personality that they might not otherwise encounter in the Primary World (Bowman 157). This resonates with some of Burke’s interests, such as serving as exercising submerged experience or emancipation, as I discussed in Chapter 3. In creating the character that will serve as their proxy agent within the game, the player’s choices in the genesis of the character will serve as major sites of transformation, whether of how they represent themselves or as to which experiences they will seek.

Once the character concept is decided, the player develops the concept into a more fully realized character. For some, this may be as simple as filling in a “character sheet,” or deciding what the character’s abilities and resources will be within the game system. Whatever degree of development the player undertakes, this stage “allows the player to more fully delineate the details of their character before introducing him or her into the game world” (Bowman 158). Bowman observes that this process may include visualization elements, such as finding or
creating images to represent the character, perhaps even finding props or costume elements to help the player bring the character to life. It may also involve narrative elements, such as writing detailed character histories or discussions with other players or the game host. Finally, Bowman writes, “Though the Development stage can be co-creative, this part of character evolution usually marks the last point at which the player has creative control over the character” (158).

Developing the concept into a game-ready character refines the initial ideas, seeking to situate them within the game’s setting and game rules, as well as preparing the character to participate more effectively in the collaborative game experience alongside other players and their characters. Here, the player must make many of the same decisions as the fantasist, considering how this proxy agent that they have constructed will best allow them to act with agency within the scene or setting of the game to best serve the purpose they bring to the table.

The interaction stage, Bowman writes, “distinguishes role-playing from other, more solitary forms of character creation, such as novel writing” (158). This is where collaboration begins to outweigh individual desire and choice.26 The player retains control of the character’s choices, but the character’s actions are limited based on the choices of other players, as well as the way the host presents the game world. As Bowman puts it, “The Storyteller ultimately decides the fate of the character, though other players certainly help influence the unfolding of the plot” (158). It is through this process of interaction, over time, that the ideas of the character’s concept and initial development are tested and, most often, begin to evolve. Bowman observes, “The players of these personas often describe the strange experience of a mild form of splitting of their consciousness, in which the primary Self and the character think and behave

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26 At least, it must generally do so for the RPG group to be successful. There may be exceptions to this, where a game with imbalanced group collaboration may still be enjoyable, but it is not usually ideal. I will avoid a full discussion of this here, however, as an in-depth examination of what has sometimes been termed the “social contract” of role-playing would distract from my purposes here.
differently from one another” (158). As a note, I have been playing and hosting role-playing
games for over twenty years, and in my experience, this is the hallmark of a realized character:
They become, at least in some small way, explicitly distinct from the player. While player and
character may share many things, a realized character goes beyond the initial concept, however
transformative it may be (which, of course, might have been created in sharp contrast to various
aspects of the player, but this goes farther than that). A realized character represents a
transformation of part of the player, a sub-created agent who transcends functioning as merely an
avatar and has independent experiences, ideas, and motivations. This can serve a variety of
purposes, as I will discuss in a subsequent section of this chapter.

Bowman writes, “When a character becomes fully Realized, the player has a distinct
sense of the character’s past and present motivations, their complexities and idiosyncrasies. A
fully Realized character will still develop and evolve over time based on new scenarios and
interactions, but the player has established a strong understanding of the persona as a distinct
entity, rather than just a concept” (157). However, the degree of distinction—and thus, of
transformation—varies considerably depending upon the relationship between the player’s self
and the character that is created. Bowman puts forth several different typologies to describe this
relationship, each based on a different relationship between player and character: The
Self, The Idealized Self, The Oppositional Self, The Experimental Self, and the Taboo Self (164-
176). Each of these relationships represents a different degree of transformation, beginning with
the doppelganger self, wherein the character is little more than an avatar, standing in for the
player. Though this is on the surface the least transformative relationship between player and
character, it can sometimes be used very transformatively—such as in the example Bowman
gives, wherein the players played a “mirror” game, imagining themselves if they were suddenly transformed into vampires and had to navigate White Wolf’s World of Darkness (164). Other times, as in the devoid self, the character may have little thought put into them, such as if they are designed merely for mechanical effectiveness within the game rules, or the character may resemble a variation on the player—such as a version of the player who is augmented or idealized in various ways. The fragmented self represents a character based on some specific aspect of the player, and in the case of the repressed self may seek to revive a part of themselves that the player has left behind, such as embodying the wonder and innocence of childhood. Alternatively, the character may be oppositional or experimental, representing ideas alien to the player or that seem challenging for the player to embody in the game. This may include confronting social taboos, which may range considerably. For instance, a player may create a criminal or villain character to blow off steam if they feel hemmed in by the rules of society, or they might play a transgender character, wanting to explore the game world from the perspective of someone not fully accepted by society. Whatever the relationship between player and character, however transformative the character’s realization might be, the player has the opportunity to step outside the self that they customarily occupy, exploring other elements of their psyche and engaging the story of the game from a modified, even highly contrasting, perspective. This is in many ways the core fantastical transformation of the RPG, inviting players to inhabit a literally transformed persona that invites alternative modes of thinking by participating in the act of role-playing.

Act: Inhabiting the Role

Bowman cites Tolkien’s ideas on fantasy, particularly pertaining to Escape, Recovery, and Consolation (56). Indeed, as I discussed in Chapter 3, fantasy may provide many avenues of
experience that might be otherwise denied, and as Tolkien argued, this may allow one to “re-
vision” the world. As Bowman observes, the Escape leads to a Recovery. The moral dimension
of Tolkien’s Consolation may or may not be present, though role-playing games often ask
players to engage with moral questions: if one is playing a vampire who must drink blood to
survive, for example, how does this affect one’s respect for living things? Games such as
*Vampire: The Masquerade* require the player to consider these questions, as there are
consequences built into the game. If one is too moral, one may fail to do what is needed to
survive. If one loses too much of one’s humanity, then one risks descending into a bestial,
monstrous state. So, one essential component of the act of role-playing is to experience a “re-
visioning” that is not only a fresh perspective on the Primary World, but it also entails
considering ideas, questions, and quandaries that might otherwise never arise. Bowman writes,
“Just as when reading a book or watching a film, role-players must inhabit a different head space
and identify with someone ‘other’ than themselves. RPGs push this identification a step further,
allowing that ‘other person’ to evolve as the player’s own creation, rather than a
conceptualization by an author foisted upon the passive reader of a book” (57). The act of role-
playing, at its core, is the act of transforming perspective. It asks the player to not only consider
situations that might never have come up (however fantastical they might be), but it can also ask
them to step fully into different ways of thinking and relating to different people than they
otherwise might.

Bowman describes this by saying that “Fantasy role-playing involves fracturing reality
and refracting it from a different perspective” (57). She argues that this invites self-reflection and
group unity, adding that “Not only can people share repressed, sometimes frightening parts of
themselves in a safe space, but they can better understand the perspectives of others” (57). She
claims that this process prompts players to develop “a theory of mind,” a term she credits to psychologist Mike Eslea, in which players “think ‘as if’ they were someone else in a unique set of circumstances” (58). Bowman explains that this, according to her interviews with role-players, often indicated an increase in empathy toward others. Not only did they often meet other players whom they might not have normally interacted with, but also, “the enactment of different states of consciousness inherent to immersive role-play often makes players more aware of prejudice and oppression in the ‘real world’ and their own relationship within those systems of power” (59). Bowman observes a number of key ways these “theories of mind” manifest during the course of play, where taking on a particular role was transformative for a player.

One example of this concerns social prejudice. Bowman writes, “Some participants emphasize that, due to the conflicts built into the game world, they were forced to adopt belief systems alternate to the ones they hold in real life, particularly with respect to race and gender identification” (62). Players cited examples such as playing out fictional bigotries in games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, which invited them to think about what causes and sustains such prejudices. Bowman quotes one player as saying, “I've played a tavernkeeper for a human settlement that doesn't like gnomes or elves. So I have to think.... ‘Why would someone blindly hate somebody for no reason?’ And it's hard to kind of think of those things” (62). In many cases, she observed that players and their characters worked to bridge such gaps through game play. This is likely in part because, in their Out Of Character (OOC) culture, players see prejudice as a negative thing. However, as Bowman observes, “in order to provide a sense of realism to the proceedings, the player does not wish to force the persona to behave against-type” (67). This struggle to engage realistically with the fictional culture while also critically
examining, it may call for players to transform their understanding, both of prejudice in general and of its manifestation within the game world.

Another common site of transformation that Bowman observes is that of gender identity and performance. In particular, Bowman observes many instances where male-identifying players choose to portray female-identifying (and presenting) characters. She observes, “The motivations behind the desire to play such a character are multifaceted, but in my research, players often cite a wish to attempt to understand the mindset of the opposite gender” (63). She gives examples such as “Alex,” a heterosexual male player who frequently portrays females. He explains that in exploring why he chooses to play so many female characters, he initially thought it might be symptomatic of gender-based or sexual confusion or frustration, but after considerable reflection he realized that he wanted to better understand female identity and experience (63). In a tabletop setting, this sort of play may engage more with the experience and comfort of the players with varied gender presentation, but in an online setting, where many of these examples came from, the other players often have no way of knowing the gender of the player as separate from the gender of the character. Thus, online, a male player may gain somewhat greater insight into a female experience than in an in-person tabletop game. Other reasons for exploring transformative gender play range from players exploring their own gender identity and expression to wanting to experience romantic encounters from a different role, but in many (if not most) cases, players seemed to be seeking to better understand gender (and gendered experience) on one level or another.

In determining what these acts of personal transformation mean to a player of fantastical role-playing games, the question must be: What do they do? If one considers Raph Koster’s arguments about games, then one might argue that a role-playing game, as a game, must be
teaching the players something. While cooperation and interpersonal skills may be part of what is taught, along with the ability to understand game rules and statistics, immersive role-play must also be teaching something about identity, which concerns much of role-playing. Empathy might not always be what is learned from this transformation of identity, but if the game is achieving a transformation of the self, then thinking from a new perspective must be part of that. Perhaps by stepping into alternate identities and examining human problems (however couched in fanciful or dramatic terms) from these identities, players may engage with these problems as game objectives rather than entrenched social ideas or ideologies.

This functions similarly to Tolkien’s preference for applicability over allegory. For example, if one reads the tensions between an elf and a dwarf as reflecting a specific racial tension in the Primary World, or if one reads the war between the Free Peoples of Middle-earth and the forces of Mordor as a direct representation of, say, World War II, then one may become a direct metonymy for the other. Essentially, whatever strongly held ideas one already has toward that aspect of the Primary World is unlikely to be much changed by a thinly veiled, direct analog in the Secondary World. However, if one engages directly in the racial tensions between elves and dwarves and comes, from that narrative exploration, to develop new ideas or perspectives on an interracial conflict, these ideas or perspectives may carry over to the player’s thinking about racial conflicts in the Primary World. Thus, the player may be able to glean fresh understanding from the act of fantastical role-playing by what Tolkien called recovery, or “re-gaining” a clearer view of a situation. This demonstrates how immersion in a role and operating within that role as part of a narrative represent an effective instantiation of the fantastic. Such play invites departure, potentially arresting established ways of thinking and of seeing the world while generating new and alternative perspectives. Taking on a character identity is important to
this understanding, but the agency that such games afford the player within the narrative and its
telling represent notable fantastical transformations as well.

Agency: Shaping the Narrative

Transformative agency takes two forms in role-playing games, occurring simultaneously
within both the Primary World and the Secondary World of the game. In the Primary World, this
agency allows the player to transform themselves and their experience, placing them in a hybrid
role of both consuming and co-creating the fantasy. Significantly, this depends on collaboration
between the game’s host and players. In the Secondary World, fantastical agency exists much as
it may in any other fantasy story; the main difference is that it must be governed by a system of
rules that the players can fully understand, providing a framework for players to interact with
each other and with the environment of the game and the non-player characters (NPCs)
controlled by the game’s host. Characters may have a wide array of powers and abilities in a
game, many of them overtly fantastical in their own right. To examine the way this agency works
within the game, I will broadly refer to it as “magic.” Here, as in the broader sense of fantasy,
magic represents the power of transformation. In this case, it represents the players’ ability,
through their character, to enact direct transformations on the world around them, whether they
be very simple changes, such as throwing a fireball or transforming the character from a human
shape to that of a wolf, or literally bringing dreams to life within the Secondary World of the
game. Magic in an RPG can work in a way that is more static or more freeform, and each
provides different opportunities for player and character agency within the narrative.

Bowman describes the collaborative nature of agency in role-playing games:

RPGs allow individuals to participate in the construction of their own narratives
in a group practice of co-creation. In a traditional play, novel, or film, the author
uses the medium to communicate a story to the members of an audience, who experience the narrative in a state of passive observation and are allowed only momentary expressions of affect. In role-playing, though an author might have created the original world in which the action takes place, the majority of the story develops through a continual process of involved interaction and creativity on the part of participants. Thus, the ‘audience’ of a role-playing game invents the narrative as well as experiences it. (Bowman 13)

This shared agency leads directly into the questions of purpose that Bowman also addresses, as I will come to in a later section of this chapter. In brief, I could frame the purpose of this discussion as an example of how the fantastic is enacted, both in terms of storytelling within the game and of transformation of identity as exploration of self. What this demonstrates in terms of my broader project is that role-playing games offer a robust, uniquely collaborative opportunity to explore rhetorics of fantasy. The reality is, to accomplish anything at all in an RPG, participants must collaborate. Even in cases where one or more players choose to act in an uncooperative way, the game only works while the group continues to agree to play and to follow the shared story. As part of my research for this chapter (and in my own previous experience), I found many descriptions of what makes for good or bad collaboration in players and in game hosts. These robust discussions of what makes for a successful gaming experience lie outside the immediate focus of this project, but they demonstrate just how complex the shared experience of storytelling becomes in role-playing games. Within the game’s narrative, however, the transformative agency has much more to do with what players’ characters can do—essentially, it depends on what magic they can do and what its rules are.
To demonstrate differences in how the game rules of an RPG facilitate fantastical agency, I will draw on two examples from the same game setting, White Wolf’s World of Darkness. The first of these games, *Changeling: The Dreaming*, follows a Tolkienian view of the legacy of Faërie, with players taking on the roles of people born with fairy blood, which grants them certain magical abilities. The second game, *Mage: The Ascension*, puts players in the roles of human beings who have been magically “awakened,” allowing them to actively manipulate the laws of reality around them. The games vary thematically and narratively, but the aspect I want to examine is the way magic is handled within the game rules. In many ways, these rules themselves represent a transformation in the way role-playing games portray the function of magic as practiced by player characters. Classically, in the tradition set by *Dungeons & Dragons*, magic in the hands of players consists of a finite spell list with each spell offering a specific effect. For instance, if a *D&D* wizard casts a *fireball* spell, the rules state exactly what the spell can do: how much damage it can inflict (variable, based on a roll of the dice), how many targets it can affect, its range, etc. It does essentially the same thing every time every character uses the spell. *Changeling* follows this tradition, using a system of static magical powers, while *Mage* departs dramatically from that precedent.

In *Changeling: The Dreaming*, players’ characters perform magic via “Arts” (in an apparent nod to Tolkien, who also favored the term). Each Art represents a category type of magic, such as primal natural connections, illusion and trickery, or supernatural travel. Each Art is then divided into specific spells, called cantrips, each of which has a specific, fairly static effect, much as in the case of *Dungeons & Dragons*. These range from “Holly Strike,” a nature-based cantrip that lets players attack other characters (much like *D&D*’s *fireball* spell) to “Flicker Flash,” which teleports the character from one location to another (Lemke 204-205). In contrast,
*Mage: The Ascension* treats magic as a fluid, open-ended concept. In *Mage*, magic is similarly divided into broad categories. Where *Changeling* has Arts, *Mage* has “Spheres.” These Spheres separate reality manipulation into nine specific categories. These include, for example, Correspondence, which has to do with traversing space; Entropy, which governs order and predictability vs. chaos and chance; and Forces, which concerns the manipulation of kinetic and electromagnetic energy. Unlike *Changeling* or *D&D*, however, *Mage* does not restrict the player character to a list of spells. (It does provide spell lists, offering sample magical effects called “rotes,” but these are provided as examples and guides for players, not as rules or restrictions.) Instead, each Sphere is broken up into five levels, and each level indicates an increasing understanding of and influence over the aspects of reality associated with the Sphere. So, if a character understands Mind at the first level, they can shield their thoughts against unwanted intrusion, or if they understand Forces at the third level, they can move objects around with kinetic energy or ignite flames at will. By definition, each level of each Sphere does not define one static effect. Instead, it explains a new level of transformative influence over the game’s reality. The effects of different Spheres can be combined in complex and creative ways, allowing the player to do nearly anything they can imagine—though, of course, there are rule systems in place to govern how difficult more powerful or complicated magical effects will be for the character to achieve (Brucato and Wieck 160-165). Thus, what was a static list of pre-determined effects becomes an open space for creative possibility, allowing players to invent their own effects, create their own spells, and embrace their imaginations.

The transformation from static magic spells to fluid and dynamic magical effects, open to the player’s creativity, is itself fantastical. Where game developers and even hosts always had the ability to introduce new kinds of magic into their fantasy worlds, creating a game
system that allows players to invent their own open-ended effects on the fly represented a shift in agency, both within the game’s narrative and within the play dynamic of the game taking place in the Primary World. This introduces, in Covino’s terms, a much more generative magic to the game play, but more than that it transforms who has what power to use magic as a tool for agency within the game. This specific example of literal magic within fantasy RPGs, of course, does not represent the only way that fantastical agency might be examined. Whether one looks at other versions of what “magic” might be—such as special powers in a game with a superhero theme or use of The Force in a game with a *Star Wars* theme—or at game structures, such as games that allow players more narrative freedom by giving them different degrees of direct control over the story, the degree to which players have the ability to creatively affect the fantasy world around their character reflects their agency within the game. Effectively, game systems represent simulacra of generative and arresting magic, placing limitations and definitions upon players alongside offering them opportunities to explore creative approaches to game-based situations, complicating or even challenging an understanding of the Secondary World of the game. The capacity to interact with and transform this fantasy serves, in turn, as a vehicle for the player to explore fantastical transformation of identity, of interpersonal relationships with other players, and of their own way of connecting to the Primary World around them, as the Primary World always exists in some relation to the Secondary World of the game.

**Scene: Setting the Stage**

The narratives of role-playing games, like any form of fantasy, can unfold just about anywhere the participants can imagine. To that end, much that I could say about the “scene” in which they take place has already been said in previous chapters. Inevitably and almost invariably, role-playing games take the form of a portal-quest fantasy, as they exist with the
specific context of players gathering together in the Primary World to tell a story within a Secondary World. Removing the presence of this reality is nearly impossible, as the players collectively and overtly venture through the portal together, whether it be over a kitchen table, in a well-decorated gaming room, a booth at the local pizza parlor, a convention center, or a computer interface. There are various ways that role-players attempt more immersive methods, such as Live-Action Role-Playing (LARP), where players may enter a game-space fully in character and even in costume, but these are still inevitably governed by rules and other contrivances, both for the sake of enacting the game’s fantasy elements and for ensuring the safety of the players. However, if there is one medium for role-playing that bears consideration in this regard, it is immersive online role-playing.

Bowman writes that “Online role-playing games typically follow the quest-based, hack-and-slash model. The text-based model of this style of RPG is the Multi-User Dungeon (MUD)” (30). In a MUD, players can collaborate, but the function of the game is much more like that of a conventional computer game, such as a Massively Multiplayer Online game (MMO). Bowman further observes that players typically “have little role in shaping the game universe. The game world is preprogrammed with monsters, rooms, and items” (30-31). Certain players may achieve more empowered status, but in most MUD settings, the game mechanics tend to take precedence over character or storytelling. (This phenomenon is sometimes called “roll playing,” in reference to rolling dice as part of the game mechanics, rather than “role-playing.”) In 1993, Wired magazine described MUDs thusly: “They are online virtual worlds built from words. They are so popular that educators are alarmed. MUDs are the latest rage on college campuses all around the world” (Kelly and Rheingold). A MUD is a text-based virtual world, a database of characters, rooms, and objects. However, there are other, similarly immersive and text-based environments
that may take a different approach. Bowman acknowledges the existence of a similar codebase, known as a Multi-User Shared Hallucination (MUSH), and other popular forms have included MOOs (MUDs Object Oriented), MUXes (Multi-User eXperiences), and other variations on the theme. Today, there are online role-playing media that allow for a more tabletop-like experience by allowing players to see each other via webcam while sharing a “virtual table” to roll dice or place character avatars upon. These include, for example, software like *Fantasy Grounds*, or the web-based Roll20.net.

Broadly called “MU*,” this type of game software allows anyone with server space and a knowledge of the code to create a fully customizable virtual world for characters to inhabit. I have worked on and personally developed many such worlds since I first became involved with MU* in the 1990s, and the way they handle the “scene” of role-playing varies. In some cases, they strive to be almost fully immersive, keeping the Out-of-Character (OOC) parts of the game limited and separate, so that once the character enters play, the player may have only very In-Character (IC) means to interact with others. However, despite attempts to be immersive, every game must have rules and systems in place at some point to facilitate the use of the game in one way or another. Even if the game mechanics remain entirely invisible for a time, eventually one may encounter a “problem player” who causes trouble, thus requiring them to interrupt play and seek assistance from one of the game’s administrators, or perhaps they might be interrupted by a bad network connection or other Real Life (RL) elements. For these reasons, I contend that role-playing is always a portal-quest fantasy, always entered into with scaffolding, negotiation, and direct references to the Primary World. These elements do not necessarily compromise the fantasy, of course, but they do give it context, and one of the first lessons most role-players learn is the need to keep a healthy separation between the IC world and the OOC or RL world. As
discussed in earlier chapters, understanding the relationship between Secondary Worlds and the Primary World is key to understanding what fantastical transformation is possible and what it might accomplish. In this case, the game as portal-quest is an essential consideration when looking at rhetorics of fantasy in role-playing games.

Purpose: Playing the Game

Bowman argues that collaborative, creative storytelling of this kind can serve as a type of sense-making (13). This resonates with Koster’s arguments about games; we make sense of information games present to us through various ludemes, “chunking” them into what our minds can process. Eventually, these learned patterns and permutations become familiar to the point of “grokking,” or thorough understanding. Learning the game is itself a function of rhetoric, though perhaps less itself a fantastical transformation and more a means of attaining fluency in the kind of play that may facilitate the fantasy in the RPG. In Game Work, Ken McAllister reviews three functions of rhetoric as put forth by Barry Brummett’s The Rhetoric of Popular Culture. He applies these functions—exigent, quotidian, and conditional—to discuss the development of computer games (McAllister 78-80). Much as electronic games of varying sorts can be examined in terms of development, so can more traditional “tabletop” or “pen-and-paper” role-playing games. Exigent rhetoric, McAllister explains, is that which overtly seeks to understand and answer questions, offering explanations in the manner of a tutor (79). Exigent rhetoric manifests in role-playing games in a broadly “how to” function as well, with game materials, hosts, and other players instructing (for example) a newer player in the workings of the game.

Twenty-some years ago, I sat in a Round Table Pizza booth with my first borrowed copy of Vampire: The Masquerade in hand, trying to understand what it meant to portray a vampire in this game. Ideas of Count Dracula swirled in my mind, and I sought to reconcile those with the
game system, which drew on many and varied influences—far beyond my own limited experience with vampire media. I told the host and other players that I felt it was most important that my character be able to turn into a bat, which in my mind was the signature ability of a vampire. In game terms, they explained to me, that was a high-level power called “Shape of the Beast” within a discipline of power known as “Protean,” and my novice character would not likely be able to manage it. Their efforts were mainly to explain the game, but they also carried the subtle intention of persuading me—in this case, persuading me to change my expectations and embrace a different view of vampires and, by extension, accept the way the game worked. I don’t remember what character I created afterward, only that I was not yet sure of what I wanted from the experience. (Also, my character drove a classic 1966 Mustang, which seemed terribly important at the time.) The point I want to make, here, is that a rhetorical transformation took place in this moment—convincing me to abandon preconceptions and to embrace the game on its own terms—but it was not a fantastical transformation. It was not until I became both more fluent in the experience of the game—both in terms of socialization and understanding the game’s rules, mechanics, and setting—that I would experience fantastical transformation or understand what purpose it might serve in this context.

So, the questions of purpose remain. To this end, I might ask: What is accomplished by participating in role-playing games? Some of this might be answered in terms of considerations in the earlier sections of this chapter, such as considering what transformations are enacted or experienced by players and/or characters. Bowman argues that “Role-playing games offer people the chance to actively take part in their own alternate expressions of identity, exploring parts of themselves that were previously submerged or repressed by the dominant culture and the requirements of daily roles” (8). She argues that the impact of playing RPGs extends beyond
individual players, since role-playing games establish a sense of community through a ritualized, shared storytelling experience. They offer a system for enacting scenarios and solving problems. They allow players to explore alternate identities. These roles can provide, through play, practice for the “real” as well (11-12). In later chapters, Bowman extensively examines role-playing in terms of their benefits, and I will not attempt to reproduce her arguments here. I do not contend that social development or improved ability for problem solving or collaboration are not valuable transformations, but these questions extend again outside the focus of this work.

Instead, I come to rest on a hypothesis that may remain, for now, speculative. Players may discover role-playing games for any number of reasons, from genre or franchise interest to seeking a social outlet. Yet, for whatever reason and in whatever way, players who go on to participate in role-playing games and experience some significant transformation discover a kind of purpose. In fact, players may discover many purposes, and enduring social outlets or genre interests may well be among them. Some players may enjoy the hobby but never get more deeply invested than they would in a simple board game. However, one purpose among players who experience these fantastical transformations must be that they find being transformed agreeable—or, at least, insufficiently disagreeable—to continue seeking them out through play. Put another way, a significant number of players, if not a clear majority of players, intentionally explore characters who differ from their actual selves and lived experience, whether in terms of agency (such as playing a Jedi Knight who can use the Force or a wizard who can cast spells) or of broad character traits (such as a normally honest person playing a deceptive thief). Thus, my

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27 For example, I doubt I would have retained my interest in role-playing, early on, if I were left to contend with understanding the varied mysteries of *Vampire: The Masquerade*. It was the *Star Wars* role-playing game that first really drew me in, and in those days the novels and RPG were the only way to experience new stories within the franchise, to which I was—and remain—deeply devoted.
supposition is that the key purpose of role-playing, in terms of the interests of this project, is to experience the various forms fantastical transformation that RPGs can provide.

Reflection

Role-playing games have been a major mode of fantasy storytelling since the 1970s, and they have transformed over time to allow for increasingly diverse styles of play. One major change in how role-playing games work came in the 1990s, when publishers like White Wolf began creating games with a more overt focus on narrative and character elements. The 1990s also saw the rise of the online, text-based role-playing game, which provided one of the most immersive environments for players to explore their characters’ identities. Online, players could explore any identity they liked in a more immersive way than in Real Life, as factors like gender and physical appearance, even physical disability, played less of a factor in the social experience of role-playing than they would have in a face-to-face tabletop role-playing game. Text-based interfaces were the only online option for many years, but with the increase in webcam quality and Internet speeds, players spread across the world can now host and play tabletop-style games together. This may remove some of the anonymity of the text-based interface, but as technology improves, I cannot help but wonder how possible it will be for players to present very different avatars than themselves. The medium through which role-playing takes place has a great deal of influence over what kind of transformation may be easily portrayed to others, but role-playing games need not be fully immersive media for their fantastical transformations to be effective.

However complex or immersive the game system, what it provides is a framework for players to share a narrative experience, shaping it together and utilizing the agency provided by that system and by the social experience. While adherence to a system may seem limiting and authoritarian, it should be remembered that the rules of role-playing games exist almost purely to
give context to the storytelling and to create satisfying game encounters for the players. Some game publishers, such as White Wolf, even include as a major game feature—what White Wolf calls “the golden rule”—that any game rule or mechanic that does not make for a satisfying play experience should be discarded. This is a unique form of shared storytelling, but it also allows for an unusually in-depth exploration of character. The role-player must become writer, director, actor, and occasionally prop-manager, lighting director, and so forth. To whatever degree they choose, they may design and embody the character in tremendously intimate detail. This makes exploring a character who is different from oneself a potentially very transformative experience, as one sees not only through the eyes of another character, but acts with their hands, walks in their shoes, and speaks with their voice.

I do not suggest that role-playing games are always positive experiences; they are social, human endeavors fraught with all the usual drawbacks, pitfalls, and limitations that come along with that reality. However, as a medium they have the capacity to forge a deep, involved connection between player and character, one that comes with tremendous potential for fantastical transformation—perhaps much more so of the player than of the fantasy, itself. As an example of active, engaged fantasy, they illustrate the rhetorical power of fantastical transformation perhaps more directly than any other medium, focusing on not only telling stories that reimagine the world in some way but on deeply immersive explorations of what it means to transform the self and the world that self inhabits. My central argument has been that the fantastic represents departure, transformation, and alternative modes of thinking, which can be explored as the act of (generative and arresting) magic, the creation of a fantasy, and the

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28 There is also the very common practice of “house rules” to consider. Essentially, players can and do frequently alter games and game rules to suit the stories they want to explore. This is itself a kind of fantastical transformation, where the game rules themselves can be reworked to varying effect, but as an examination of that practice would require deep technical immersion in the mechanics of game systems, I have chosen to avoid addressing it fully here.
experience of enchantment. Role-playing games offer a chance for all of these elements simultaneously, wherein players have the opportunity to depart from their known worlds and roles, to transform themselves by inhabiting a character with a different identity, and to practice the different forms of thinking that such a character would have. They are also simultaneously exploring the magic of creating the fantasy, exploring the fantasy as it is created, and experiencing the enchantment of that fantasy as audience as well as authorial fantasist. In that sense, role-playing may be the most significantly fantastical activity that I have explored within this project. In my next chapter, I will examine the genre of fantasy fiction, itself, exploring the relationship between fantasies and their audiences, as well as how key examples of fantasy literature have differently framed that relationship over time.
“And the magic?” Janey asked when Goninan fell silent.

She’d been having trouble making the connection with what he was saying to what she had supposed they were talking about.

“Is real,” he said. “It is your perception of it that makes it true—our recognition of the true shape or spirit of a thing. But like legend and myth, magic fades when it is unused—hence all the old tales of elven kingdoms moving further and further away from our world, or that magical beings require our faith, our belief in their existence, to survive.

“That is a lie. All they require is our recognition.”

– Charles de Lint (*The Little Country* 337)

For all that this project seeks to frame and examine “fantasy” as a form of rhetoric, the term may be, for at least the present cultural moment, inextricable from the concept of genre, whether in terms of literature, cinema, television, games, or what have you. As in the Charles de Lint quote above, where the characters are discussing the concept of magical worlds and their relationship to human belief, the question of whether one believes in or supports a conventional understanding of genre may be irrelevant. However, to borrow from the idea, genre must still be recognized. I have largely built my arguments on observations from these sources and from the writings of those who create or criticize them, and as a final inquiry into the workings of the fantastic as a rhetorical mode, I will return to those texts that have built the foundation of this rhetoric of fantasy. In particular, I will examine several works and, applying my own claims,
attempt to identify and explore what about the work has been fantastically transformative, whether within the context of its genre, medium, or beyond either.

To accomplish this, I will examine several popular fantasy texts, tracing the way each transformed one particular aspect of the fantasy genre: the relationship between the audience or reader and the fantasy. I will begin with *The Lord of the Rings*, which established a new relationship between readers and the fantastical epic, then move on to explore how *The Neverending Story* transformed the portal fantasy, and how the Harry Potter franchise transformed the concept of intrusive fantasy, in both cases making the fantasy more accessible to readers and including them more deeply in the fantasy world. Finally, I will examine the subversion (and simultaneous utilization) of this trend in the popular television series, *Game of Thrones*. In each case, the fantasy genre grew or evolved in some way, but more particularly, the fantastic aspect of each narrative was used as a different rhetorical approach to relate to the text’s audience, which is the thread that I will follow through each text. This means examining the genre, but my emphasis will be this specific focus rather than attempting to holistically discuss the entire history of the fantasy genre, but this still necessitates a starting place. To that end, perhaps fittingly, it all begins with hobbits.

**Establishing a Genre: The Lord of the Rings and the Familiarization of the Epic**

J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* functions in many ways as an established template for fantasy fiction, as it in many ways originated the genre and has heavily defined and influenced it for decades. As Brian Attebery argues, “Indeed, no important work of fantasy written after Tolkien is free of his influence” (*Fantasy Tradition* 10). In many ways, what might be called centrally transformative about the work is just that: it transformed what was previously a tradition of legends, myths, and folktales and combined them into a more modern literary
presentation, and his Middle-earth created a precedent for the style of fantasy legendarium that would follow in later works, particularly in terms of relatively immersive fantasy settings.\textsuperscript{29} (The archetype for portal-quest fantasy, the other perhaps most prevalent variety of the genre, is probably C. S. Lewis’ \textit{The Chronicles of Narnia}, establishing the idea of “crossing over” from a simulacrum of the Primary World to an overtly fantastical Secondary World, but that seems to be the most lasting legacy of Lewis’ own series. I will return to the topic of portal-quest fantasy later in this chapter, when I discuss Michael Ende’s \textit{The Neverending Story}.) For each aspect of the fantastical pentad, \textit{Lord of the Rings} established major elements that would have to be either supported or transformed by later works of fantasy.

The \textit{Lord of the Rings} follows a number of central characters, but it presents three primarily archetypal protagonists: Frodo Baggins, Samwise Gamgee, and Aragorn (alias Strider, King Elessar Telcontar, etc.). Frodo is the ostensible main character, but he shares his adventure from start to finish with Samwise, who gradually takes on more of a protagonist’s role as the story unfolds. By the climax of the narrative, Frodo has become a shadow of his former self, and it falls to Samwise to take action, where his companion has faltered. Indeed, Frodo and Sam present a complex Agent between the two of them. Together, they embody an element of the unwanted burden of the “chosen one” archetype (though neither so much as Aragorn), as well as the role of the point of view character who, coming from an out-of-the-way place and ignorant of

\textsuperscript{29} I refer here to Middle-earth as an immersive fantasy setting, while in Chapter 3 I argue that it functions structurally more like a portal-quest fantasy setting. It is true that the attitude of the text toward the reader is instructive, making references and giving explanations to the reader to help establish the setting, which is the style of a portal-quest fantasy, this is also a function of narrative style. The setting of the story is generally presented as immersive, in that the characters are all from that setting and know nothing of the Primary World. (Middle-earth is presented as taking place in distant antiquity on planet Earth, more or less, and there are hints that hobbits and other creatures may even “still exist” in the Primary World, but again this only exists in the narration, which is not a point of view shared by any of the characters in the story.) Contrast this with the \textit{Chronicles of Narnia}, where the characters not only have knowledge of (a simulacrum of) the Primary World, but the protagonists actively cross over through the “portal” between worlds, originating in the Primary-like World to have adventures in the (overtly) Secondary World.
the wider world, stands in for the audience’s own ignorance. These characters obtain various companions along the way, from the contentious and challenging Boromir to the more culturally foreign Legolas and Gimli, who are most unlike humans or hobbits; the comic sidekicks, Merry and Pippin, who become heroic figures in their own right by the end, and the elder mentor, Gandalf, the wizard who (as he did previously in *The Hobbit*) sets the entire quest into motion. I will not focus heavily on these supporting characters here; they heavily follow Joseph Campbell’s concept of “allies and aid,” as described in his model of the hero’s journey. The central agents, in terms of driving the story, are Aragorn, Frodo, and Sam.

In the end, even Aragorn is a figure who feels more directly lifted from an epic, like a Gilgamesh or a Beowulf, but like Bilbo (the protagonist of Tolkien’s earlier work, *The Hobbit*) before them, the hobbit protagonists Frodo and Sam read as much more human and relatable than Aragorn, the largely idealized epic hero. Frodo is himself a tragic hero, as the very selfless choice that leads him to offer to undertake the books’ central quest, carrying the cursed ring to the blighted land of Mordor, also leads him to the brink of destruction, from which he never fully recovers. Frodo in fact fails in his quest, as by the end of his quest he has been corrupted by the ring, claiming its cursed power for his own, and it is only by a relative accident that the book achieves its eucatastrophe, diverting disaster for a “happy ending.” Antagonist Gollum tries to take the ring from Frodo, claiming it by biting off Frodo’s ring finger, but in his jubilation at claiming his prize, Gollum slips and falls to his death, and both he and the ring are destroyed by the fires of Mount Doom. Frodo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee are eventually brought back home, honored for their deeds, but Frodo is left physically maimed and emotionally scarred, unable to take joy in the world he set out to save. It is Sam who receives the “happy ending,” gifted the Baggins’ wealth and ancestral home, even starting a family, but at the cost of losing
his best friend, Frodo, who chooses to leave Middle-earth forever. While this form of tragic hero is not unheard of in myth and even in other fantasy, it is interestingly much more typical of later works—which, in genre terms, are often labeled “dark fantasy”—than of the hero-driven fantasy that arose from many of Tolkien’s emulators. Essentially, if Frodo and Sam transformed the concept of an agent, a protagonist at the center of a fantasy, then it was by being more humanized, down-to-earth figures who do not even accomplish the great deeds they set out upon, as opposed to more traditional epic heroes like Aragorn.  

In terms of act and agency, Tolkien’s characters do much that is the same as characters might have done in classical myth and legend. Most of them are heroic figures doing grand and heroic deeds. What is interesting is that the hobbit characters, who feel perhaps more like folk or fairy tale characters than mythical heroes, bring their own skills to the narrative. While the unerring marksmanship of Legolas, the wizardry of Gandalf, and the martial prowess of Aragorn accomplish many things in the story, there are crucial moments where the “plain hobbit sense” of Samwise Gamgee may be just as important. This, much as in the case of the protagonists themselves, has a way of rendering the distantly epic more personal and human. In much the same way, much of the setting of Middle-earth feels mythical, with grand mead-halls such as Beowulf might have visited and castles where a figure like King Arthur might seem at home, there is the hobbits’ home, The Shire, which much more resembles a pastoral and perhaps idyllic yet vaguely more modern representation of English country life, where characters tend their gardens, take tea, have birthday parties, and carry pocket handkerchiefs. In his 2011 work, J. R.

30 Rather than making an absolute claim about what sorts of heroic figures have ever existed in myth and legend, my intent here is to allude to Frodo as existing in contrast to the stereotype of the mythical hero, which lies much closer to a figure like Aragorn. Frodo has much more in common with the tragic protagonist of a novel, such as Shelley’s Dr. Frankenstein, than the classic figure of a mythical hero, which illustrates the way The Lord of the Rings transformed mythical themes and figures, distinctly establishing the literary genre of fantasy.
R. Tolkien: Author of the Century, Tom Shippey makes extensive observations concerning the relative modernity of hobbit society, from their social mobility to having a postal service (Shippey 7). Given this, the Shire and the hobbits continually serve as a kind of intermediary between the Primary World (or, at least, one version of it that held appeal for Tolkien) and the Secondary World of legendary places with grand names, a juxtaposition between characters with what would have been, to Tolkien, familiar-sounding names like “Sam Gamgee” or “Carl Cotton” and those with more mythical names like “Aragorn, son of Arathorn” or “Arwen Undómiel.” This connection served a rhetorical purpose: bringing the epic closer to the reader, the myth closer to modernity.

Shippey also observes that Tolkien wished to create a British mythology, comparable to Norse or Germanic myth (233). This makes the inclusion of what were, for Tolkien, relatable elements of then-contemporary British life a logical choice. It also helps connect Middle-earth to our own Earth, which is itself no accident. As Shippey points out, Middle-earth is, in fact, meant to be a version of ancient Earth, which Tolkien described as imagined “long ago in the quiet of the world, when there was less noise and more green” (qtd. in Shippey 6). So, Middle-earth was treated as a version of Earth in its mythological antiquity, not as a wholly separate world, but it can easily be read as such. Tolkien did not originate this, either. In A Brief History of Fantasy, Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James credit William Morris as being the first to use the “full fantasy” world: “In such books as The Wood Beyond the World (1894), The Well at the World’s End (1896) and The Water of the Wondrous Isles (1897), William Morris constructs a world as if it is the only world that exists” (Kindle loc. 387-393). This is to reinforce the concept that what Tolkien originated was a tradition of storytelling that became what is often termed the modern “fantasy genre,” rather than the fantasy novel, which has a much longer pedigree.
So, in originating the literary genre of twentieth century fantasy, which in turn informs much of the contemporary fantasy genre (however messy that category remains), Tolkien was, by his own description, not creating anything new. He was presenting many very old ideas in a new way. As Brian Attebery puts it, “I do not want merely to claim that one can find myth in fantasy, though that is certainly the case. Rather, I am looking at the way writers use fantasy to reframe myth: to construct new ways of looking at traditional stories and beliefs” (Stories about Stories 2-3). That is the central fantastical transformation of The Lord of the Rings, the recontextualization of the mythological epic, such that even the most direct sub-genre of fantasy it inspired is often still called “epic fantasy.” It transformed the way that the fantastic was enacted, and it brought the enchantment of epics and myths from distant antiquity into readers’ front gardens. Given this established baseline for fantasy, bridging the contemporary and the classical, it is understandable why so many who discuss fantasy are preoccupied with concepts like time and history. However, this was only one dimension of transformation. Other fantasies that I will examine in this chapter have transformed, for example, settings, the way readers relate to those settings, and the expectations those readers have for the fantasy genre.

The Bookworm as Chosen One: The Neverending Story and the Accessibility of the Portal

If The Lord of the Rings took the idea of the epic and made it more relatable by inserting a point of reference with the familiar (to his intended audience) British-toned Shire, then actual portal-quest fantasies, such as The Chronicles of Narnia, take this a step farther by having characters from the “real world” visiting worlds of fantasy. The most widely recognized portal-quest fantasy is probably The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, the first book in C. S. Lewis’ Narnia series, wherein four seemingly random children wander through a magical wardrobe and end up in a magical land, where they help to defeat the evil white witch, Jadis, and eventually
become kings and queens of the land, Narnia. While there are certainly noteworthy portal-quest fantasies that precede Lewis’ novel, such as L. Frank Baum’s 1900 novel, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, or Charles Lutwidge Dodgson’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, which he published in 1865 under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll, Lewis’ initial Narnia novel remains perhaps the most archetypal portal-quest in many respects. It certainly left its mark on the genre, perhaps because it transformed the “portal” itself into something so seemingly mundane as an old wardrobe, which seems to suggest that a trip to the magical land of Narnia might be more accessible than to its counterparts, such as Oz or Wonderland, as doorways to Narnia might appear in any mundane location, even within the civilized confines of an otherwise boring old country home. Another famous portal-quest, which Farah Mendlesohn identifies as one of the most explicit of the genre in some of its central themes, transforms the portal into something even more accessible: a book (Mendlesohn Kindle loc. 380).

Michael Ende’s 1979 novel, *Die unendliche Geschichte*, was translated into English by Ralph Manheim and released in the United States in 1983 as *The Neverending Story* and as a feature film of the same name, directed by Wolfgang Petersen, the following year. While the novel is a significant work and proved impactful for many readers (including myself), it is difficult to say whether the novel or the film has had the most enduring legacy. However, the central fantastical elements of the film and the first part of the book (if, perhaps, not every aspect of the narrative) are similar enough that I can to some degree address both; I am more interested in how the story utilizes fantasy as a form of rhetoric than in explicitly tracing its lasting impact.

31 While in Dodgson’s 1871 *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* transports Alice through a mirror, which might seem as mundane as a wardrobe, there is a long history of magic mirrors in fiction. As such, and perhaps for other reasons, mirrors already carry a certain mystique, which makes them arguably less mundane as objects than wardrobes. Further, the Alice stories emphasize the possibility that her adventures are merely dreams, while the journey to Narnia was always treated as fact, not merely a fancy of the children’s. There is certainly room to examine various fantasy “portals” in greater detail, particularly those that occur in nature such as fairy rings or enchanted woods and the like, but this is not necessary to illustrate my point here.
on the genre. To this end, the book becomes slightly more applicable for one clear reason: the
book is *about* a book, which in some ways meant to seem to be the same book that the reader is
experiencing, and the fictional book is a literal portal to a magical land. Given that the physical,
actual book in the Primary World is, via the imagination, a portal to the magical land of the
Secondary World, this seems a particularly clever way to frame the journey from the
Campbellian ordinary world into the special world of the fantasy. This framing device, that the
reader is experiencing a book that is a portal to a magical land, resonates with the element of *The
Neverending Story* that I argue is most transformatively fantastical: the magic of the narrative is
the magic of creativity, itself, and the agent is a child reading a book. In essence, the novel
celebrates and emphasizes the significance of the very audience it is written for.

The novel begins with a framing device: Bastian Bux, the story’s protagonist, steals a book and hides in the attic of his school to read it. This is presented as a prologue that precedes the first chapter, and so at first it seems as though the reader is merely experiencing a book within a book. The first chapter is not ostensibly presented from Bastian’s point of view until, just as the crisis of the first part of the novel has been introduced and the reader learns that the magical land of Fantastica seems to be fading out of existence because of a horrible force of unmaking called The Nothing, Bastian suddenly intrudes on the story. He reflects on how he likes that the book is not mundane or “humdrum,” relishing how it engages his imagination. Then, Ende quietly establishes what will be the source of Bastian’s magic throughout the rest of the story: “Because one thing he was good at, possibly the only thing, was imagining things so clearly that he almost saw and heard them. When he told himself stories, he sometimes forgot everything around him and awoke—as though from a dream—only when the story was finished” (Ende 27). Here, the novel clues the reader in as to what is special about Bastian and what will
draw him more and more needfully into the story. Contrary to de Lint’s quote at the start of this chapter, *The Neverending Story* asserts that stories need humans to not only believe in them, but to participate in them, to provide creative fuel, to give them names and context. Bastian’s special power is, essentially, having exactly the kind of imagination that the book asks its readers to have. At the completion of the quest that comprises the first part of the book, the section that was adapted into the 1984 film, the Childlike Empress who has given the quest explains the entire purpose of Atreyu’s task: “‘Do you understand now, Atreyu,’ she asked, ‘why I had to ask so much of you? Only a long story full of adventures, marvels, and dangers could bring our savior to me. And that was your story’” (Ende 177). So, Atreyu, who has been the apparent hero of the story so far, is revealed to be little more than a lure to bring in the true hero of the story, the reader, who in this case is Bastian. Bastian, by believing in the empress enough to call her by a new name (he chooses “Moon Child”) restores the balance of the land of Fantastica and actively enters it, and there the story takes a complex turn. What follows is an extensive narrative exploration of what it means to lose oneself in a fictional world and, eventually, to return to the Primary World, and this part of Bastian’s story makes up the rest of the novel. Any reasonable attempt to discuss the remainder of the novel would diverge from the focus of my argument, but it is not necessary to do so in order to address the way the novel transforms the relationship between the portal and the reader.

In explaining what happens when a human enters Fantastica, the Childlike Empress also articulates one statement on the value of fantasy, and it resonates quite a bit with what others, such as Tolkien, have also argued. Speaking of humans who have come to Fantastica, the world of stories, she says:
Every human who has been here has learned something that could be learned only here, and returned to his own world a changed person. Because he had seen you creatures in your true form, he was able to see his own world and his fellow humans with new eyes. Where he had seen only dull, everyday reality, he now discovered wonders and mysteries. (Ende 176)

The value of fantasy to humans is stated in a very similar way to how it has been stated by others, before, but what is different is the way the narrative articulates the concept that the fantasy needs humans. Specifically, the narrative frames the concept of the “never-ending” story, itself, as a link between a narrative and those who read it, which is symbolized by the ouroboros shape, AURYN, which in the novel is the symbol of the Childlike Empress and the power of Fantastica (see Fig. 4, based on the film’s interpretation of the symbol). This demonstrates how the reader and the story are inseparable, transforming the portal from a wholly external object that transports the reader to the magical land by a separate form of agency (such as the Wardrobe transporting the Pevensie children to Narnia) to a device that requires the reader’s participation to function: a book. So, the magic becomes participatory, and the reader, symbolized by Bastian, becomes the hero of the story.

Beyond the world of narrative, the rhetoric of this novel can of course be read in many different ways: that transformative effect (magic) requires action, not merely passive observation; that there are consequences to those actions, and they may exact a cost from those who take them; that vulnerable populations (such as fantasy characters and children) may need to
rely on one another to survive; and so forth. However, in terms of shaping the fantasy genre, this effectively brings the reader closer still into the Secondary World. Where Tolkien brought the epic together with the familiar, Ende brings the portal into the fantastical world directly and literally into the hands of the reader, effectively telling them that they are not only active participants in making meaning, who have stakes in the process of understanding a story rather than merely being passive consumers, but also that their participation—their belief, their own storytelling—is where the power of the fantasy comes from in the first place. This is a significant genre development in terms of the relationship between the fantasy and the reader, and it also demonstrates how fantasy narratives represent evolving embodiments of the fantastic over time. Where Tolkien sought to transform ancient epics into a new kind of myth that might have relevance to the Britain of his day, Ende explored the power that the audience and stories have over one another, conceptually transforming his audience from observers to participants. This represents a complex use of both arresting and generative magic to bother offer up new ideas as well as to explore their limitations. Understanding this shift between the narrative and its audience leads readily into another, subsequent development in this relationship. J. K. Rowling was able, nearly two decades after Ende, to not only bring readers into her world but to, in turn, make them feel that her world had extended into their own to include them in its fantasy.

The Wizard as Student: Harry Potter and the Democratization of Wizardry

Harry Potter, the boy wizard who attended a magic school called Hogwarts, was genre-bending for many readers who had never considered the idea of combining a wizard with a school setting. However, looking at the broader genre of fantasy, by the time J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* was published in 1997, the idea of stories following a wizard through school was hardly a new one. Ursula Le Guin had already explored this through
Ged, the protagonist of *A Wizard of Earthsea*, who attends a specialized academy for wizards. Le Guin, who had observed that the vast majority of wizards she read in fantasy were riffs on the Merlin or Gandalf archetype—an old white man with a beard—decided to explore the idea of a young wizard, just learning to explore his power, and then follow his career until he became the more archetypal figure. As I discussed in Chapter 2, she also chose to make him a person of color, which was transformative in its own right; it showed many readers that fantasy need not be so monochrome. Ged’s experiences as a student wizard differ strikingly from Harry’s, as Ged lives in a world much more distinct from the Primary World; Earthsea is a wholly different planet than Earth, an immersive fantasy setting that does not directly interact with Earth in any way, while Harry lives in a fairly intrusive fantasy, where magic and supernatural elements emerge from hidden spaces to inhabit a world that is, ostensibly, otherwise quite like our own. However, there is another notable student of magic who precedes Harry Potter: Mildred Hubble, protagonist of *The Worst Witch*.

Jill Murphy’s 1974 novel, *The Worst Witch*, follows the adventures and misadventures of Mildred Hubble, a girl who has trouble fitting in at her magical school. These are the opening lines of the book:

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Miss Cackle’s Academy for Witches stood at the top of a high mountain surrounded by a pine forest. It looked more like a prison than a school, with its gloomy grey walls and turrets. Sometimes you could see the pupils on their broomsticks flitting like bats above the playground wall, but usually the place was half hidden in mist, so that if you had
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32 I speak, here, of fantasy as a market genre, wherein protagonists of color have been traditionally underrepresented. Often, fantastical works by non-write writers has tended to be sorted into other genres, such as “world literature” or “magical realism” for one reason or another, but to do justice to an exploration of that issue would require far more devotion than falls within the scope of my project. So, while I do not in any way wish to neglect writers of color or those writing non-white protagonists, now or historically, in the 1970s Le Guin’s Ged was significant within the landscape of the fantasy genre of the time. An argument could very likely be made that he still is, considering that most popular fantasy franchises of the last few decades have also tended to have white (often male) protagonists.
glanced up at the mountain you would probably not have noticed the building was there at all. (Murphy 1)

Here is a setting and depiction that feels very similar to Harry Potter’s world: students attend school at a castle, they ride broomsticks, their world is a representation of contemporary Earth where magic hides beneath the notice of mundane society, and even the names in the series sound fairly similar to those used in the Potter series. I do not argue, here, that *Harry Potter* is necessarily a derivative work, only that while Rowling’s stories were following an established tradition of witch and wizard students attending school, and so that feature itself was following a sub-genre of fantasy, rather than transforming it.

Much of the Harry Potter series, taken as a fantasy, does not particularly transform the genre. In a rhetorical sense, it is not terribly fantastical. It mainly takes a number of very familiar ideas—point and cast wand-based magic with pseudo-Latin incantations was essentially a genre staple, even in 1997, and most of the varieties of magic and the way they impact the setting are similarly standard fare. Even the narrative of the series is a very familiar one: a boy from obscure origins and poverty discovers that he is a chosen one, foretold by prophesy, and that he comes from a special pedigree, is actually wealthy, and must grow up to save the world. Rowling does play with this idea a bit in the series, revealing that it was two boys of similar backgrounds who fit the prophecy, and the villain of the story made Harry the chosen one by choosing to believe that he must be. This is a potentially interesting wrinkle, but apart from Harry sharing a small portion of the finale of the story with the other potential chosen one, Neville, little comes of this. Neville is able to, at a critical point, have a heroic moment, but Harry gets to sacrifice himself and return to life, adding a Christ-metaphor to his protagonist resume. Whether these elements are satisfying or not may be best left up to readers to decide, but the point is that the stories of
Harry Potter are largely mimetic of the genre, rather than transformative. They are fantasy, in the genre sense, but they are not rhetorically very fantastical—except, perhaps, with one very significant exception.

While Harry, himself, is a fairly typical protagonist in many ways, what Rowling’s series does transform is not the hero, nor the magic, nor the setting of fantasy, but the relationship of the reader to that setting. Much like The Neverending Story, Harry Potter offers up the idea that a child who believes in (or, in Harry’s case, is at least receptive to believing in) magic and stories may be carried off into a world where that belief will be useful and perhaps even important. However, Ende’s Bastian is another chosen one, the special human child who gets to go to the magical land and be important there, but Harry is not the only student who gets to attend Hogwarts. In the Harry Potter stories, the other students are significant to the narrative (particularly his friend and classmate, Hermione Granger, who is credited as a much more talented student of magic than Harry is), but it is the concept of being a Hogwarts student that has proved, as best I can observe, the most transformative. Here I must step back from the novels, themselves, or even the films based on the novels, and reference the fandom, itself: Harry Potter fandom seems to exist based largely in part on the idea that its readers identify with the idea of being students at Harry’s school. In the years following the success of the novels and films, it has become very common for fans to proclaim allegiance to one of the school’s “houses” and to very richly imagine themselves as part of the story. One way or another, Harry Potter managed to bring “being a wizard” into the mainstream in a way that even Dungeons & Dragons, a game that invited anyone who wanted to be a wizard to pick up a wand more than twenty years before Harry Potter arrived on the scene, never quite did.
There are no doubt many reasons for this. For one, fantasy has enjoyed a great deal of popularity in the last two decades, and so much of this democratization of wizardry may in fact be due to the popularity and cultural pervasiveness of Harry and his world. While *The Worst Witch* has always had a following (including a cult-popular film from 1986, in which Tim Curry delivers a memorably campy song about the virtues of Halloween), it never quite reached the same level of popularity. Mildred Hubble’s story has also been at least twice rendered as a television series (in 1998 and 2017, respectively), it still lacks the broad impact of all things Potter. In the end, I cannot say exactly what quality of the Harry Potter franchise seems to have sparked such fervor, but I assert that a large part of it must be the sense of accessibility it managed to create around the idea of being included in the otherwise often exclusive fantasy world of witches and wizards. Further, while it is certainly possible that Harry Potter owes much of its success to timing, I cannot ignore the “coincidence” that the rise of mainstream popularity in fantasy does seem to date fairly specifically to just around the time that Harry’s first book was published. Presumably, this was bolstered by the arrival of Peter Jackson’s *The Lord of the Rings* film in 2001, but then again, the first Harry Potter film was released in that same year. I cannot argue with absolute certainty that it was Harry Potter who broke the barrier of fantasy being something that (as Ursula Le Guin observed in her 1974 talk, “Why Are Americans Afraid of Dragons?”) was seen as outside the mainstream, an Other in the realm of genre that would never be taken seriously as literature. It may have had as much or more to do with other cultural influences, the coming of age of the Millennial generation who had grown up on the boom of fantasy films in the 1980s, or a confluence of many other factors. However, it does seem that, whatever tide she may have ridden, Rowling brought witchcraft and wizardry to the people in a way that few, perhaps none, had done before.
While this fact exists well outside the narrative of the novels, it does mark a way that they visibly transformed aspects of the genre and its relationship to fans. This demonstrates not only developments in the genre and its public appeal, but, as I have noted in earlier sections of this chapter, it shows a further transformation of the genre and the narrative’s attitudes and approach toward its audience. This presents an opportunity to examine how fantasy, in this case as embodied by the literary genre of the same name, serves as the medium in which audiences experience enchantment, or the effect the fantastic has on them. In this case, it is not only the genre but the relationship between the narrative and the audience that is transformed. As I have noted before, the fantasy genre is not always itself necessarily fantastical, but some clear transformation, at least within the genre, is evident here. Further, the trappings of genre fantasy may suggest the fantastic by long association. In Rowling’s Harry Potter stories, the fictional magic of her world and all of its associative agency is made increasingly accessible to her audience. With this in mind, it may then be interesting to consider a kind of polar opposite approach, a fantasy wherein the audience is shown, largely by virtue of subverted expectations, how little their own participation matters to the narrative.

The Fantasist as Indifferent: Game of Thrones and the Subversion of the Fantastic

George R. R. Martin’s *A Game of Thrones*, the first book in the series *A Song of Ice and Fire*, was published in 1996. It seems to follow in the tradition of writers like Michael Moorcock, whose Eternal Champion series heavily influenced the dark fantasy genre throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and Stephen R. Donaldson, whose series Thomas Covenant series comprised two trilogies at the time (*The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever*, ranging from 1977 to 1979, and *The Second Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, ranging from 1980 to
Moorcock’s stories featured a hero, dubbed “the Eternal Champion,” who in fairly immersive alternate-Earth fantasy stories would be reborn over and over, often recurring as a tragic hero, such as perhaps his best-known protagonist, Elric of Melniboné, who in the course of his story loses everything, including all his loved ones and, in the end, his own soul. Donaldson’s Thomas Covenant is a portal-quest protagonist who, in the “real” world, suffers from leprosy and has lost much in life as a result. In the fantasy world, which he believes is merely a delusion, he is made whole again and gifted with magical powers, but he is as often abusive with his gifts and, when he does return to the “real” world, is little better off than when he left it. This dark fantasy tradition was well established by the time *A Game of Thrones* was published, and much of what was transformative about it had more to do with narrative intent than the function of fantasy. Magic had generally not been presented, in earlier works, as a panacea for all ills, so its failure to be such is not especially transformative. Instead, dark fantasy was a tradition of telling fantasy stories that did not conform to Tolkien’s idea of the eucatastrophe, or harmonious ending, and generally uplifting tone common to many other fantasy stories. However, Martin’s take on dark fantasy marks a shift of another kind, where instead of fantasy becoming more inclusive to its reader and drawing the reader more deeply into its magic, the fantasy elements of the narrative were used quite differently.

I have argued that the fantastic represents a combination of generative and arresting magic that results in departure from and transformation of the known. In this case, I have traced a trajectory in fantasy genre literature from Tolkien, who departed from convention by making the epic fantasy world more accessible, to Ende, who put the portal and agency of magic into the reader’s hands, transforming them from observer to participant. In turn, Rowling’s stories

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33 Donaldson would later write a final tetralogy, *The Last Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, between 2004 and 2013.
brought the magic of her world out from within the constraints of the narrative and into the broader lives of her readers. In each case, the writer transformed not only their own narrative but their narrative’s relationship to the fantasy fiction genre. In each case, the relationship of the text to its audience was presented in a new light, offering a different way to conceive of that relationship. Tracing this development over time, the magic of the fictional worlds seemed to open up more and more, including the audience more deeply, but *A Song of Ice and Fire* makes another departure, reversing this trend and perhaps even wholly repurposing the relationship between the series’ fantasy narrative and its audience.

Martin scales back his use of magic and creates a world where the fantastical seems more in decline than active. This approach is echoed in the better-known adaptation of his work, the television series *Game of Thrones*. While Martin’s books enjoyed definite popularity, as had Moorcock’s and Donaldson’s, the television series has become widely popular, more on the scale of *Harry Potter* than Thomas Covenant. As the show is still ongoing, it is difficult to say what its ongoing impact on the fantasy genre might be, but the way the novels and, perhaps even more particularly the show, establish relationships between themselves and their audience(s) can be observed. In contrast to the previous trend I discussed, where various series had been bringing fantasy closer to their audiences and making it more accessible, *Game of Thrones* makes its fantasy sparse, tucking elements of it into a world that is presented as doggedly “realistic” in most respects, keeping the fantasy limited to mainly low-key elements (such as the lingering threat of monsters, little seen until late in the story, the presence of dragons, who emerge as a consideration as the story progresses, and occasional bits of often subtle sorcery). While discussing the narrative of *Game of Thrones* lies outside my immediate focus, it must be addressed in order to discuss the show’s use of fantasy.
Narratively, *Game of Thrones* seems to approach its audience with the very overt intent of keeping viewer interest, perhaps even more than in telling a particular story, and one major way that it seems to approach doing so is through building up and then subverting viewer expectations. Much as in the original novel, the show builds up the character of Ned Stark to serve as the apparent protagonist of the series, only to kill him off at the end of the first season. Following this, it seemed that Ned’s wife, Catelyn, and his son, Robb, would prove the actual heroes of the story, but they were massacred in what has come to be known as the Red Wedding in the third season episode “The Rains of Castamere.” Fan responses to this event were so extreme that Internet reaction videos became briefly popular, often staged by book readers who knew more or less what to expect from the show. As Adam Carlson wrote for *Entertainment Weekly*, “And then the big, bad thing happened and everyone freaked out. Some were shocked, some were nauseated, some were sassy, and some vowed to give up on Westeros and its never-ending civil war forever.” Following this, the prevailing wisdom concerning the show was that “any” character could die at “any” time, and much of the show’s tremendously high body count seems to support this. In essence, the show subverted the popular genre expectation many fans of fantasy had that, apart from one or two strategic deaths of secondary or supporting characters along the way, fantasy stories tended to have (as Tolkien argued they should) generally positive endings and that their protagonists generally survived the story. This created tension concerning the fates of characters in whom the audience had largely become invested, and this kept much of that audience watching through no end of narrative twists and turns.

This manipulation of genre expectations extends also to the actual fantastical elements of the show. Consider that the deaths of most characters came about by purely mundane means, from the machinations of politics and the brutality of warfare to physical hardship or religious
zealotry. Where fantasy did manifest, it was also used to manipulate audience expectations in some way. When a character seemed too well protected to be killed by traditional violence, such as Renly Baratheon who had an army to protect him, the show (as in the book) has his brother father a shadow demon with a sorceress, sending it to kill Renly off and raise the stakes further by showing how magic in this world is dark and dangerous. The narrative and all its fantasy elements have worked consistently to build narrative tension, but at no point do they become particularly accessible to the audience. Few rules are ever given for the magic, and little is understood about the fantastical nature of the world. Sometimes, fantastical elements will be used to fill in plot pieces or to further mysteries, but all the effects seem focused on raising the stakes, increasing the tension. In this world, the audience is not invited to participate or feel included in the fantasy. They, like the characters in the world, remain largely alienated by the magic, and any hint of safety or certainty that the genre might have been assumed to offer is thoroughly subverted at every turn. Tempted as I am to speculate as to why this might be, there are few certain answers, and the show has not yet concluded as of the time of this writing, making it difficult to satisfactorily examine this strategy.

What *Game of Thrones* represents, whether as a progression of dark fantasy or as a subversion of more classical fantasy, is a rejection of the safety and comfort that have often been associated with the genre, only to emphasize the more dangerous, high stakes side of fantasy. Here, there are no fairy godmothers, but there certainly be monsters. Couple this with a narrative that seems entirely designed to keep its audience on the edge of its seats, eager for more, and what emerges is a fantasy that does much of what Tolkien, Ende, and Rowling did: it seeks to use elements of the fantasy to draw its audience further into the story. However, where Tolkien sought to make the distant epic more accessible, Ende made the reader feel placed at the center
of the story, and Rowling made the wizarding world seem to open up around the reader, Martin and the show his novels spawned draw the audience in with uncertainty and dramatic tension, using fantastical elements and genre expectations as simply opportunities to more deeply hook that audience, promising that as the narrative escalates, as heralded by the often-repeated mantra “Winter is Coming,” the stakes will become only higher, and no corner of the fantasy world will be left unaffected by the increasing epic drama.

This is a vastly different kind of inclusion than the other narratives I have examined offer, but all the same it seeks to draw its audience in and hold it fast with its enchantment. What is transformed is, again, the relationship between the narrative and its audience. In the case of *Game of Thrones*, the relationship is not only changed, but it takes an entirely different track than that followed by Tolkien, Ende, or Rowling. This departure transforms the experience of the fantasy narrative from one that is increasingly inclusive or empowering to the audience to one that seems, instead, to all but hold the audience hostage, offering only small doses of the genre’s fantastical qualities. (A metaphor concerning drugs and addiction comes to mind, which might be interesting to explore in a future writing.) While this offers many points of consideration for the fantasy genre and the narratives that comprise it, it also demonstrates the transformative capacity of the fantastic in a very immediate way.

**Reflection**

Following this particular thread of how different instantiations of the fantasy genre of literature over time have related their use of fantasy to their audiences has illustrated something of the rhetorical capacity of the fantastic as it exists within the literary genre that is broadly called “fantasy.” As discussed in earlier chapters, I could certainly have expanded this sample to include science fiction, horror, or other fantastical narratives, but I felt that by limiting my focus
to more clear-cut and conventional examples of the genre I could avoid departures from my central argument to discuss how those texts fit within the context of fantasy. What I observe that arises from this discussion is the understanding that, within literature, the way a narrative employs the fantastic can have a tremendous impact on how the reader can experience the text. There is an overt difference between the reader, through Bastian, having the power of the fantasy placed (literally and figuratively) directly into their own hands versus, as in *Game of Thrones*, having the fantastical elements of the narrative be elusive and high-stakes, treated as a vehicle for building dramatic tension and thus building audience interest and buy-in. To take a critical (and perhaps cynical) perspective, this latter and most contemporary take on fantasy may suggest, rather than a democratization of fantasy as has already been seen, a newfound commodification of fantasy. In this more recent approach, the experience of enchantment is a scarce resource within a narrative, and it is used entirely to further the most basic need of the content producer: if not “butts in seats,” then perhaps “eyes on screens.” This shifting view may also impact a broader understanding of fantasy beyond the literary genre. Much as arresting and generative magic are intertwined, as might be represented by the ouroboros symbol of AURYN, the fantastic as a rhetorical capacity has connections to the fantasy genre that are difficult to separate. The public understanding of the fantastic is largely shaped by genre fantasy, and what affects the genre may transform, at the least, the popular understanding of the fantastic, itself.
People think that stories are shaped by people. In fact, it’s the other way around. Stories exist independently of their players. If you know that, the knowledge is power.

Stories, great flapping ribbons of shaped space-time, have been blowing and uncoiling around the universe since the beginning of time. And they have evolved. The weakest have died and the strongest have survived and they have grown fat on the retelling… stories, twisting and blowing through the darkness. And their very existence overlays a faint but insistent pattern on the chaos that is history. Stories etch grooves deep enough for people to follow in the same way that water follows certain paths down a mountainside. And every time fresh actors tread the path of the story, the groove runs deeper.

This is called the theory of narrative causality and it means that a story, once started, takes a shape. It picks up all the vibrations of all the other workings of that story that have ever been.

– Terry Pratchett (*Witches Abroad* 2-3)

I read Terry Pratchett’s novel *Witches Abroad* in the same class where I first began to conceive of what would become the first seeds of this project. I was fascinated by the way Pratchett theorized narratives in a fantastical capacity, anthropomorphizing them as independent agents. While I do not argue that this is literally true, I do believe there is a clear truth to the idea that as stories—ideas, really—are repeated, they gain strength and can become powerful social
forces, increasing in power as they are repeated and reaffirmed. The novel explores the difficulty of being caught up in a story that one did not originate, the corruption inherent in manipulating such stories to control other people, and the need to resist the power of such stories that would entrap the people who do become caught up in them. For me, the impact of this idea, that beliefs and social forces shape one and seek to force one into their patterns, was made all the more effective through Pratchett’s use of the fantastic, transforming a social phenomenon into a kind of magical curse, a dangerous and malicious self-aware force that, despite being initially conceived by people, would go on to prey on more and more people, using them to further itself. Seldom have I encountered such a vivid depiction of the viral nature of ideas—especially destructive ideas, such as bigotry or hatred.

When it comes to the significance of studying fantasy, I owe much to thinkers like Tolkien and Le Guin, but I find that no one articulates the significance of fantasy more than Pratchett. Much as Pratchett’s character, Death, articulates in the quote I cited at the opening of my third chapter, fantasy allows the conception of that which is lacked by nature: justice, mercy, and “that sort of thing.” Here, Pratchett similarly identifies the danger of being caught up in something that stifles deviation, individuality, and growth: stories that are viral and self-propagating rather than transformative. He does not argue that fantasy is the solution to this problem. Indeed, his character Granny Weatherwax, often a source of wisdom in his stories, argues that “You can’t make things right by magic. You can only stop making them wrong” (310). In this case, however, Pratchett was referring to magic as an in-universe, fictional concept, a kind of shortcut that may or may not be analogous to the idea of fantasy. However, if “magic” is the term for enacting the fantastic, then I argue that magic can be an explicit method of
fighting toxic stories. The only way to defeat such a story is to change it, to transform the narrative, and as this project has argued, that is the central function of fantasy.

In 1974, Ursula Le Guin explored what kinds of issues fantasy engages with when she asked, “Why Are Americans Afraid of Dragons?” Observing why interest in fantasy might be deemed impractical, she wrote, “The kind of thing you learn from reading about the problems of a hobbit who is trying to drop a magic ring into an imaginary volcano has very little to do with your social status, or material success, or income. Indeed, if there is any relationship, it is a negative one. There is an inverse correlation between fantasy and money. That is a law, known to economists as Le Guin’s Law” (*The Language of the Night* 43). While the commodification of fantasy as a market genre may seem to defy this, Le Guin’s ideas nonetheless resonate. While the markets for film and literature may have changed since 1974, the capacity of fantasy to serve as a site of departure—if not from the mundane and practical, as Le Guin then observed, but from any number of other entrenched ideas and beliefs—remains wholly intact. This is reflected in one of Brian Attebery’s attempts to define fantasy, when he wrote, “If we wished to define it linguistically, we might say that the fantastic is the use of verb forms of reporting for events that in ordinary discourse would require more conditional forms. Rather than saying, ‘If only I had wings,’ the fantastic asserts that I do” (*Strategies of Fantasy* 6). To slightly reframe Attebery’s claim, the fantastic transforms “If only X were possible” to “X is possible.” In fiction, this can be seen through the development of the fantasy genre throughout the twentieth century, when writing of epic heroes, magic, and elves went from being something unusual in a novel to being the backbone of an entire market genre, one that has also been tremendously successful well into the twenty-first century. Writers more oriented to the Primary World, such as bell hooks and
Paulo Freire, have demonstrated that these transformations need not remain rooted purely in fiction, that they can become powerful forces in material reality.

As I indicated early on, however, this project does not represent any kind of holistic discussion of fantasy and its rhetorical implications. One very vital and, given the sociopolitical climate at the time of this writing, perhaps pressing example of where these ideas bear further exploration is how the fantastic and its magic can operate as a force in the Primary World. How, for instance, does fantasy compare to falsehood, particularly in a time when media is so vulnerable to virally propagating misinformation, the very sorts of stories that Pratchett warned of? How can fantasy serve as a tool for activism, and how can its capacity for transformation be utilized for social change? This area presents many opportunities for further research and discussion. In the realm of fiction and narrative, it might be interesting to explore fantasy in a genre sense from the perspective of the fantastical pentad. What taxonomies of fantasy might be suggested by its rhetorical capacities, and how might these differ from other taxonomies of the fantasy genre? What might be revealed by more broadly considering fantasy, the genre, in terms of fantastical rhetoric? One other area that I would immediately like to explore is fantasy in games, particularly computer games, such as how fantastical magic can be observed in the ludic elements of such games. In other words, what is most transformative about the essential mechanics of games, themselves? There are certainly many directions that future research and theory of the fantastic might take.

To “do” the fantastic is to do magic, as discussed by William Covino. This magic can produce fantasy, instantiated as what Tolkien called Secondary Worlds, and these illustrate how the Primary World can be transformed. The familiar can be made strange, the strange can be made familiar, and the world can be explored in a different manifestation or from different
perspectives than might otherwise be possible. The process of experiencing these fantasies, which I call enchantment, is largely defined by how they relate to their audiences. Farah Mendelsohn set out an initial way to examine these relationships through her discussion of the fantasy genre, classifying fantasy as immersive, portal-based, intrusive, or liminal. Whatever the relationship between the fantasy and its audience, experiencing its enchantment is a way of addressing some perceived need, from the relatively simple lack of unicorns in one’s front garden to the much more complex and difficult issue of grappling with inequality and the exploitation of vulnerable people in the real world. For anyone interested in such forms of transformation, an examination of their rhetorics of fantasy can reveal just how such changes are enabled, empowered, and arrested.

In the end, fantasy offers an infinite capacity for disruption and departure. A fantastical project might undertake so daunting a quest as transforming social forces or understanding how education works, but at the same time, the fantasy’s purpose could be as simple as pausing during a mundane task that might, as T. R. Johnson has argued, support unhealthy, even masochistic systems. Encountering a blank page amidst the others, filled with conventional work, one always has the opportunity to instead do as Tolkien once famously did when he set aside the task of academic drudgery in order to write, “In a hole in the ground, there lived a hobbit.”
Works Cited


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