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## Magical Technology in Contemporary Fantasy

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*Abstract: In this essay I propose to illustrate how contemporary popular writers of fantasy employ magic as technology in their works to interrogate what it is to be “human”. I proceed from the assumption that magic is technology in its etymological sense of techne, meaning craft, and can involve technology as we commonly know it, but also something more. I use three very popular fantasy series, J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series, Jonathan Stroud’s Bartimaeus trilogy and Rick Riordan’s Percy Jackson series to demonstrate how magic works in these books as an interface between the “powerful” and the “marginalized”, the “natural” and the “cultural”, the “normal” and the “radical” – binaries that fracture these “fantastic” worlds as much as they do the “real” in terms of what we consider as constituting a “humane” social order. In each of these series, magic is not only a subject of knowledge that characters actively seek in their quest for power but also a frontier across which older notions of the “human” engage with newer ideas and manifestations of the same. In these texts, it is magic that differentiates characters from one another in terms of how integral it is to their being and of how they come to terms with the anxieties and tensions such differences generate. Thus, I argue that magic as craft or technology works as an interface through which notions of difference and change are negotiated in contemporary popular fantasy.*

*Keywords: magic, technology, interface.*

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Originating from the Greek roots *tekhne* (meaning art or craft) and *logia* (systematic treatment), “technology” refers to both the man-made means of bringing about changes in our ways of living and the skills involved in coming to terms with the same. Technology reflects, as well as influences social change, and is therefore considered a marker of the degree of “progress” human civilization has achieved. We now live in what can veritably be called the Age of Technology, an age in which access to technology translates into individual and social power. Though theoretically technology can act as an equalizing force of empowerment, in practice it has intensified preexistent social differences and discrimination, and has heightened the threats of war and genocide. While a good deal of contemporary “serious” literature seeks to confront these tensions directly, several popular fantasy series use magic as a trope to negotiate the uneasy relation between traditional ideals of democracy and humanism and the more recent threats posed by an emergent technocracy.

Within the domain of fantasy fiction, what is considered impossible in the real world is rendered normal and acceptable through a willing suspension of disbelief, just as any new technological innovation in the real world makes things that were earlier considered impossible possible. In fact, all new technology, in its capacity to achieve something unprecedented and extraordinary, has the semblance of magic until it is rendered “common” through scientific explanation and economic commodification. In this sense, magic in fantasy works just like technology does in real life – as a set of tools that makes ordinary, everyday activities possible, but also as a system of knowledge that establishes differential relations of power between its practitioners in terms of the nature and extent of their access to such knowledge.

In this essay, I examine how contemporary writers of fantasy fiction employ magical technology in their works as an interface between ideas of the human “self” and the non-human “other”. For the sake of illustration, I shall use three very popular fantasy-magic series of recent times – J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007)<sup>1</sup>, Jonathan Stroud’s *Bartimaeus* trilogy (2003–05)<sup>2</sup> and Rick Riordan’s *Percy Jackson* books (2005–09)<sup>3</sup>. I argue that these authors interrogate the fundamental human/non-human binary in terms of the narrative inscription of magic into the category of the “natural” body, as well as via its “cultural” articulations through institutionalized discourses of science, law and morality.

Within the narratives of each of these series, magic is an essential precondition for entry into the fictional world of their characters. Non-magical folk (suggestively called “Muggles” in the *Harry Potter* books and “commoners” in the *Bartimaeus* trilogy) are treated at best with condescension and at worst with cruelty. The basis of such social division is birth. The main characters are all innately magical: Harry Potter, Nathaniel and Percy Jackson inherit magic in their genes. But even within the magical communities that these books present, there are innumerable schisms based on the kind of magical body one is born with.

In the *Harry Potter* series, we come across “pure-bloods”, “half-bloods”, “mudbloods”, “squibs”, “giants” and “half-giants”, “animagi”, “werewolves”, “centaurs”, “elves” and “goblins”; in the *Bartimaeus* trilogy, we find magical species like “afrits”, “imps”, “golems” and “djinn”; the *Percy Jackson* books feature “heroes” having greater or lesser Greek gods as one of their parents, besides “monsters”, “furies”, “cyclops” and “satyrs”. Such a taxonomical gradation of magical creatures does not merely function as a means of detailing the fantasy worlds of these texts; the varying degrees and kinds of power that such magical creatures embody must also be honed and practiced through very specific, rigorous and institutionalized means of learning, thereby turning magic into a system of knowledge that enables acquisition of social power. Since this system itself is differential, in terms of both its accessibility and its privileging of certain kinds of skills over others, magic functions in these books as an interface between the “natural” body and the “cultural” application and valuation of inherent physical qualities.

Though these creatures mostly belong to biologically different species, they can communicate freely with one another by virtue of being magical, and it is this possibility of *communication* that constitutes them as members of a *community*. In fact, in each of these series, magical characters who are not “human” in the strict biological sense are endowed with qualities which we generally recognize as being typically “humane”. Thus, in the *Harry Potter* series, Hagrid,

<sup>1</sup> The *Harry Potter* series traces the journey of the titular hero from age 11 to 17, as he and his two friends, Ron and Hermione, receive magical education at Hogwarts school and go through a series of increasingly dangerous adventures culminating in a final battle in which the evil wizard Voldemort is defeated and killed.

<sup>2</sup> The *Bartimaeus* trilogy is an alternate rendering of European history in which Nathaniel, an adolescent apprentice wizard, finds himself beset with the moral dilemma of pursuing a political career in a world sharply divided between those who possess magical power and those who don’t. The power struggle ends with two humans from these opposing groups, Nathaniel and Kitty, showing exceptional courage and trust towards the eponymous djinni in order to establish a more equitable world order.

<sup>3</sup> The *Percy Jackson* series employs characters and stories from ancient Greek mythology, set in contemporary New York, and traces the adventurous journey of the titular hero and his friends (mostly having part-divine lineage) through the eternal battle between the Olympians and the Titans.

the half-giant, Dobby, the house-elf and Griphook, the goblin, are all represented as creatures capable of acts of kindness, sacrifice and selflessness – signs of moral consciousness that we associate usually with humans. In the *Percy Jackson* books, Grover, the satyr can magically empathize with Percy and Tyson, the cyclops goes against his supposed “nature” to remain loyal to Percy. In the *Bartimaeus* trilogy, the eponymous djinni comments on the actions of his human master Nathaniel with such witty, ironical wisdom that it is his voice we recognize as the voice of reason and morality throughout the series. Thus, ways of thinking and feeling we traditionally consider as being “human” are presented in these books more as a continuum cutting across species than a set of distinctive features that supposedly establishes our superiority over other species. Such ascription of “humane” characteristics to outwardly “non-human” creatures reveals the fundamental paradox at the centre of the social organization of these fantasy worlds – the fact that while on the one hand magic acts as a *differential* factor to distinguish one character from another in terms of natural skills and social rights, on the other hand it also functions as a potentially *equalizing* force that could pose a challenge to the existing power structures. Magic is not merely a fantastic element added on to the anthropomorphic characterization of these creatures but also a frontier across which unorthodox yet humane negotiations between them are rendered possible.

Not surprisingly, therefore, in each of these series, magical species are organized according to a social hierarchy already in place, one that is regulated and maintained by a strict implementation of measures to prevent the breach of such social boundaries. Thus, for instance, in the *Harry Potter* series, magical creatures like house-elves are “owned”, as a symbol of their social status, wealth and heritage, by old wizarding families (like the Malfoys and the Blacks) or employed without equal opportunities and rights by mainstream educational and financial institutions such as Hogwarts and Gringotts. Likewise, in the *Bartimaeus* trilogy, apprentice wizards like Nathaniel are expected to be subservient to their adoptive families and resistive figures like Kitty are treated as dangerous outsiders who need to be eliminated. Similarly, in the *Percy Jackson* series, the inmates of Camp Half-Blood follow a rigid hierarchy in terms of their divine parentage. In each case, unequal distribution of power amongst these various magical groups and species causes social oppression and tension akin to racism. If obsessive concern with the “purity” of blood leads Voldemort to the ethnic cleansing mission in the *Harry Potter* books, magicians’ oppression of fellow humans as well as non-human magical creatures causes civil unrest in the *Bartimaeus* trilogy, and Percy and Tyson are looked upon with suspicion and ridicule because of their mixed parentage.

In these books, notions of tradition and purity, which form the cornerstone of social organization, are constructed around the inheritance of magic, which not only functions as a key marker of an individual’s birth and status but also serves as a determinant of the legitimacy of the particular ways in which they use magic. Magic becomes the site of struggle for power, as marginalized, hybrid characters seek to destabilize and infiltrate the established social practices and institutions. Hermione’s passionate defense of the rights of house elves in the *Harry Potter* books, Nathaniel and Kitty’s unlikely collaboration in the *Bartimaeus* trilogy, and the comradely bond between Percy, Grover and Annabeth in the *Percy Jackson* series, represent strategic alliances between disenfranchised individuals and groups targeted at the reclamation of power from the social and governmental institutions that dominate their worlds. These characters essentially pose a challenge to the traditional laws of magical inheritance by transgressing the norms that limit their use of magic, in terms of both their individual genetic identities and of their conscious social collaborations with “othered” creatures. Thus, by using magic as an interface between traditional power structures and radical forces of resistance, the writers of these books challenge biological essentialism and determinism of the kind that is so frequently used to justify racist and speciesist ideologies in the real world outside the books.

If magic becomes an instrument of social oppression as well as resistance in these books, it is also employed to test the limits of the “human” body and thereby question the very basis of distinguishing between “nature” and “technology”. Being magical automatically endows characters with physical powers beyond the “normal” human body: magic in these books is shown to extend and accentuate the ordinary physical capacities of the human body just as technology enhances ours in the real world.

Characters in the *Harry Potter* books can “apparate” and “disapparate” at will, get their wounds healed instantaneously, transform into someone else’s shape by drinking a magical potion or resist gravity on a broomstick for sport; magicians in the *Bartimaeus* trilogy can literally look into different “planes” simultaneously using magical glasses or allow spirits from the “Other Place” to enter their bodies; and Percy can take on just about anyone if he is in his father Poseidon’s element, water or see demons whose presence is obscured to non-magical eyes by the Mist. In fact, magic turns the body itself into an immensely powerful technological device capable of “superhuman” feats. Harry’s scar acts as a radar whenever Voldemort is around or is plotting some new evil, a connection as powerful as it is dangerous in its ability to transmit information both ways. Harry’s mere touch is enough to incinerate Quirrel’s body when it is possessed by Voldemort. Nathaniel works in tandem with Bartimaeus as a single body capable of resisting the giant Noruda, and finally as a trigger that sets off Gladstone’s Staff; Percy bears the weight of Zeus’ stolen lightning bolt and later of the sky itself, and Thalia offers protection to Camp Half-Blood as a magically transformed tree. Thus, magic blurs the distinction between the human subject and the technological object and acts as an interface between the individual’s body and its external environment.

In fact, magic acts as a means through which the “human” body can transcend barriers of space and physicality and thereby acts an interface between the bodily “self” and the disembodied “other”. If the Iris message that characters in the *Percy Jackson* books frequently use is the magical equivalent of the webcam chat, the pentacle that magicians use in the *Bartimaeus* trilogy to summon spirits from the Other Place is literally a frontier between the “human” body and the “non-human” spirit. In the *Bartimaeus* trilogy, inviting spirits into one’s own (“human”) body involves tremendous risk to the individual’s mind, as Nathaniel’s adversaries fail to realize at their own expense, and in the *Percy Jackson* books, Kronos’ visits to Percy’s dreams are a potential threat to the latter’s better judgement. Thus, magic can act as an instrument of super-effective communication, but built into it is also has the danger of the invasion and disruption of the integrity of the individual’s “self”.

In fact, in Rowling’s world, even memory and consciousness, which we consider as belonging to the domain of personal or individual experience, can be shared or invaded by means of magic. A Pensieve allows a person to revisit selected memories and even share them with another person, while Legilimancy and Occlumency can effectively be used to break into someone else’s mind or to resist such intrusion. Especially in the case of the Pensieve, magic acts as an interface between an individual’s own past and present, his own body and mind, by enabling him to store and access disembodied memories at will. Additionally, it also functions as an interface between two individuals, sometimes even after one of them has died (like when Harry revisits Dumbledore and Snape’s memories), allowing one to travel through the memories of another (as Harry does) and thereby blurring the lines between the living and the dead, the self and the other. Thus, magical technology functions as an interface for inter-personal communication and transforms individual experience and memory into something akin to an information archive. The translatability of the human body and mind into data is a recurrent theme in posthumanist theory and popular culture (for instance, in films like *Inception*), and is used here to suggest the potential of magical technology to interrogate the old Cartesian Mind/Body binary.

While a lot of the magic we witness in these books is merely an augmentation of basic sensory functions (sight, touch, movement) that characterize us as humans in our daily encounters with the real world, there are also striking parallels between the ways in which magic operates in these narratives and the means through which technology governs our ordinary, everyday lives. Thus, characters in the *Harry Potter* books can store memories in a Pensieve just as we store information in computers, those in the *Bartimaeus* trilogy can see creatures at different levels using magical glasses just as we use 3D glasses to see things more “clearly”, and those in the *Percy Jackson* books can hear a divine message by offering a silver coin to the enchanted pool much like we can make a phone call from a public booth. What is significant here is that the difference between “ordinary” and “extraordinary” magic in these books is determined not in terms of technological complexity of the magical artefact itself but the skill and frequency of its use.

In other words, it is the characters’ ability to employ magic for specific purposes rather than the nature of magical knowledge itself that makes certain elements in these narratives more fantastic than others. Thus, when Voldemort splits up his own soul to create Horcruxes in his attempt to gain immortality, or when Kitty repeats Ptolemy’s singular feat by trusting Bartimaeus and going with him to the Other Place, their magical performances come across as remarkable not because they are impossible but because they are unlikely. In these cases, magic acts as an interface between the theory and practice of technology, wherein only the exceptional individual is able to go beyond what is considered “normal” in their fantastic worlds and into the realm of the “miraculous” promise of those worlds.

While the protagonists of each of these series display extraordinary and heroic magical capacity, they are also rendered identifiably “human” in one crucial way: their vulnerability to suffering and death. Percy, who is half-god, is subject to both divine and mortal wounds, the magical effects of nectar and ambrosia notwithstanding; Harry, as “The Boy Who Lived” stands exposed to less powerful spells than the one he so famously survived in his infancy; Nathaniel ultimately dies at the end of the series in spite of his formidable defensive powers. Both Percy and Harry face the temptation of immortality at the end of their respective stories, and both choose a mortal life, thereby choosing to remain recognizably human. It is this element of choice that defines these characters’ moral engagement with the technology of magic. In fact, immunity to or defiance of death is what these books characterize as distinctly “non-human”. Thus, the Greek gods remain powerful but distant players in the *Percy Jackson* books, and Bartimaeus a delightfully self-reflexive but ultimately invincible commentator. Interestingly, though Bartimaeus is essentially a disembodied spirit, he is subject to pain when he assumes a form in the physical world of humans and must recover by going back to the formless Other Place. Bound to her human body, Kitty, on the other hand, must suffer terrible pain and physical damage for going to the Other Place. Bodily pain, damage and destruction are thus matters that are subject to magical modification but also ultimately parameters within which magic itself defines the “human” in these books. Thus, in spite of its capacity to render the body “superhuman” in many ways, magic in these books remains embedded in the traditional equation between mortality and humanity.

Magic is both the means of overcoming ordinary limitations of the human body and the ultimate moral frontier that tests the magician’s humanity. This is especially evident in the *Harry Potter* series, where Voldemort’s obsession with constructing an immortal body is represented as being distinctly non-, even anti-human. Voldemort’s recreation of his own body at the end of *Goblet of Fire* is a diabolical reversal of the Christian resurrection myth – it is magical cryogenesis turned evil. In fact, his Horcruxes challenge every traditional notion of the “human” body: he lives in several bodies simultaneously – part of his soul inhabits a diary as a memory, another resides in a snake and a third inside a locket, and another within Harry himself (breaking down traditional binaries of spirit/body, animate/inanimate, human/animal). His identity is dispersed across space and time, consciousness and memory. His magical achievement is at odds with his “humanness” –

the greater the extent to which he carries his magic, the more he mutilates his soul, and therefore he becomes less recognizable as “human”, so that when Harry finally kills him, only the last remaining “living” part of him dies.

In direct contrast to this, the source of Harry’s magic is his willing, self-sacrificing transcendence of his own body. It is, according to the rules of the books, the “old” magic of sacrificial love that really makes Harry infinitely more “human” than Voldemort. Voldemort’s weapons are all instruments of bodily harm (the Unforgivable Curses, the Elder Wand), while Harry’s defense is the magic of love that protects his soul from all harm. Thus, magic essentially acts here as an interface between the technology of the body and the technology of the soul, between science and morality. Harry’s victory over Voldemort is effectively a reinforcement of the Cartesian paradigm super imposed on a traditional moral framework.

The power of magical technology, Rowling suggests, must be understood in terms of not merely the craft of magic but also the “natural” human values that underlie its usage. Ultimately, it is this ethical spin to the individual use and social impact of magical technology that sets apart Harry from Voldemort and frames their battle as a quintessential Good vs. Evil narrative. As Noel Chevalier observes: Rowling is not interested in critiquing technology itself; rather, she wishes to bring scientific discourse back to its Enlightenment roots, to explore the connection between science and ethics (Chevalier 408).

It is this concern with the ethics of magic that provides a social and moral context for the use of magical technology in each of these series. The protagonist of each of these series is in a sense an exception to the usual rules of magic that govern their world. Harry Potter is the only wizard to have ever survived the Killing Curse; Percy Jackson is a living embodiment of the breach of the contract between Zeus, Hades and Poseidon that forbids siring any half-blood children after the Second World War; Nathaniel, though he is the usual power-seeking magician in a dog-eat-dog world, is the only magician since Ptolemy to have inspired trust in a djinni.

These “frontier” characters have extraordinary magical powers at their disposal, but they must exercise their powers within the context of their respective communities’ greater interest. They must all go through initiation into and rigorous formal training at the institutions of academic knowledge – Hogwarts, Camp Half-Blood or the household of the adult magician tutor. Such formal training in the craft of magic serves as a rite of passage for these adolescent protagonists into the community of adult magicians. More significantly, each one has to prove himself worthy of the extraordinary powers he possesses. Harry must be willing to sacrifice his own life for the rest of the magical community in a re-enactment of his mother’s sacrifice for him; Percy must prove his allegiance to Camp Half-Blood, and by extension to the gods, by doing their deadly errands; and Nathaniel must first trust Bartimaeus before they can work in perfect harmony to save London from complete destruction. The pursuit of the Horcruxes instead of the Deathly Hallows, the use of Gladstone’s Staff, a nuclear weapon of sorts, and the retrieval of Zeus’ stolen lightning bolt, all involve not only the actual craft of magic but also questions of loyalty and ethics.

The magic of the Philosopher’s Stone in the first *Harry Potter* book is inseparable from the notion of selflessness that governs its possession; similarly, Kitty’s moral dilemma after her group’s abortive attempt to plunder Gladstone’s tomb in the *Bartimaeus* trilogy and Percy’s moral stance with respect to the lightning bolt and the Golden Fleece also raise questions about the principles that govern the “proper” acquisition and use of magic. Thus, magic not only functions as the license for these young characters’ entry into their respective adult worlds but also stands as an interface between power and morality, personal integrity and social responsibility. Voldemort, Kronos and Makepeace stand on the “wrong” side of this magical-moral axis, as their methods of using the technology of magic are at odds with the principles of love and sharing that underlie traditional notions of a “humane” society. On the other hand, characters like Harry, Percy and Nathaniel embody the discerning ability and the unselfish willingness to perceive the social costs of certain

kinds of powerful magic vis-à-vis their utility. Thus, when at the end of the series, Harry Potter decides to leave the Resurrection Stone behind in an undisclosed location in the Forbidden Forest and breaks the Elder Wand, he exemplifies the morally responsible use of magic that lies at the core of the social message of these books. As Nicholas Sheltroun observes:

Harry's success as the hero of the story is contingent on his critical disposition towards technology, making Harry Potter a morality tale of technology. It was not that Harry mastered technology (such as a special spell) to defeat Lord Voldemort; rather, he mastered human use of technology by recognizing its problems and limits (Sheltroun 60).

It is this essential *human* significance of technology that these books seem to highlight through their moral politics.

Yet, these books are not without their own internal contradictions in so far as they seek to define the “human” in terms of the ways and the contexts in which the technology of magic is employed. For all its advocacy of selfless love for others, the *Harry Potter* series places a premium on individual (if altruistic) agency and offers a reading of magical technology wherein it serves only as a touchstone of personal merit rather than an instrument of social reform. The vision of the Harry Potter series remains till the end essentially *statusquo*-ist, where an oppressive leader is replaced by a more benign hero without any significant change in the prevalent ideologies of magic that cause oppression. In these books, magic derives its power by dominating forces of nature. The gods and their mortal offspring are essentially controllers of natural forces. It is obvious that technology of any sort must involve the modification of what is simply “given” to us in nature, but the complete self-assurance with which characters, both mortal and divine, use their power over nature to settle personal scores is symptomatic of a ruthless anthropocentrism of a kind not alien to us.

In the *Percy Jackson* series, the protagonist's final appeal to the gods for granting open and equal acceptance to their earth-born children in lieu of the gift of immortality also points to a more socially inclusive vision of magic. Yet, like in the *Harry Potter* series, the realization of this inclusive social vision ultimately hinges on the emergence of a heroic but humane figure rather than a complete overturning of the existing power structures. It is significant, therefore, that the *Percy Jackson* series ends with another imminent prophecy hinting at the repetition of the battle for power.

The *Bartimaeus* trilogy does, however, explore the transformative possibilities of magical technology to a greater extent than the other two series. The power of magic is more widely and precariously distributed across species here than in the other books: it is the creatures of the Other Place that are responsible for carrying out the actual business of magic for their human masters. These creatures have the power to interpret even the slightest ambiguity in their masters' commands to their own advantage and their masters' peril. Magic is therefore an interface between the theory and the practice of power here, a site of possible resistance to existing structures of power. This possibility of resistance is further explored through the figure of Kitty, who is one of an increasing number of commoners who are born with “resilience” to magic.

The books present a state of evolution in which artificially created oppressive conditions seem to induce a natural resistance to the same. This presents an interesting case where the “nature” of the magical body turns into a function of the cultural conditions of its existence. Magic is, therefore, an interface between the body as an individual biological unit or entity and its cultural currency in terms of the position it occupies in the social order. The technology of magic here has obsolescence built into it. Magic is empowering, but unlike the other series, here it is subject to revision and change in terms of its accessibility and distribution across various social groups, which makes it a potentially destabilizing and revolutionary force. Thus, though the climax of the series does not offer the kind of certitude the *Harry Potter* books do, it hints at the distinct possibility of a mass uprising against the magical technocracy in power.

Thus, the technology of magic in these series is implicated in both conservative ideologies of individual “human” nature and social power, and radical readings of the potential of such technology in bringing about changes in our conceptions of what it is to be “human” and “humane”. Magic ultimately represents an interface between technology and morality through its probing of the fundamental binary of the “self” and the “other” within structures of power. By reflecting the cultural anxieties and aspirations that technological advancements generate in the popular consciousness, these fantasy series serve as an index of and an impulse to changes in our collective perceptions of the individual’s position and role in society.

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