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Apply Now for the Editor-in-Chief of Fafnir
Winter is coming! Or that is what it feels like here in the northern hemisphere after a delightful and relaxing summer. The coming of winter can also be felt from our issue, since there are two articles focusing on George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* series and a third article which discusses dragons in Martin’s novels (among others). Furthermore, we offer interesting texts on worldbuilding and different angles to fantasy. We are glad to offer you such a thrilling issue!

Stefan Ekman’s and Audrey Taylor’s article “Notes Toward a Critical Approach to Worlds and World-Building” aims to contribute to a greater clarity in the critical use of the term worldbuilding and, thus, introduces the concept of critical world-building, which is distinguished from other types of world-building, such as that performed by an author or reader. The article presents two possible approaches to critical world-building, based on the functions of a world’s building-blocks and how to interpret those functions.

In his article “Dragon-riding: Live and Let Fly”, Brendan Sheridan examines the dragon rider as a recurring trope within contemporary fantasy fiction and film. Through the analysis of narrative patterns and the theoretical lens of human-animal studies, he interrogates the relationship between dragon and rider, exploring the power dynamic between the participants.

Diana Marques’ article “The Haunted Forest of *A Song of Ice and Fire*: A Space of Otherness” discusses forests and those who dwell in them in George R. R. Martin’s novels in relation to Medieval conceptualisations of the forest. In her article, Marques argues that the forest is a space of otherness where the real and the symbolic meet, therefore unveiling the fantastic aspect of the narrative in *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

Finally, José Luis de Ramón Ruiz examines the relationship between power and religion in Westeros in his article “Religion and Fantasy: Reexamining the Question of Power in George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*”. He argues that the conflict of Westeros acquires a religious dimension, as the participants embrace religion as a source of legitimacy to gain power and to support their claims.

In addition to these articles we have an overview on Margaret Weis’ fiction by Will Slocombe. This interesting literary biography illuminates the career of “Dragonlance-writer” Weis, who undoubtedly is one the most successful contemporary fantasy writers despite being seldom critically discussed.

We are also proud to present our editor-in-chief Hanna-Riikka Roine’s *lectio praecursoria* “Imaginative, Immersive and Interactive Engagements. The Rhetoric of Worldbuilding in Contemporary Speculative Fiction” that discusses the practices of speculative worldbuilding from the perspectives of both narrative and userly engagements. It is based on Roine’s doctoral dissertation, which she defended on August 27, 2016, at the University of Tampere. We, her fellow editors, offer our heartfelt congratulations on behalf of Hanna-Riikka’s defense!

In addition to the articles, overview and *lectio praecursoria*, this issue includes a conference report and two literary reviews. Megen de Bruin-Molé’s conference report offers us a glimpse of the
topical field of monster studies, as it presents an overview of the conference “The Promises of Monsters” held at the University of Stavanger 28–29 April, 2016. The book review on Jamie Williamson *The Evolution of Modern Fantasy: From Antiquarianism to the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series* by Dennis Wilson Wise complements the fantasy-related themes of this issue, while Aino-Kaisa Koistinen and Tanja Välisalo plunge to the contemporary phenomena of transmediality in their review on Colin B. Harvey’s book *Fantastic Transmedia: Narrative, Play and Memory Across Science Fiction and Fantasy Storyworlds*.

In this issue, it is also revealed that *Fafnir* is looking for a new editor-in-chief to join Jyrki Korpua and Aino-Kaisa Koistinen in the beginning of 2017. We, the other editors, wish to thank Hanna-Riikka for her meticulous work as an editor during these past years. All the best for your future endeavours! So say we all.
Notes Toward a Critical Approach to Worlds and World-Building

Stefan Ekman and Audrey Isabel Taylor

Abstract: Imaginary worlds and how they are constructed are central to fiction. The term world-building, however, has been applied so broadly in scholarship that it has become ambiguous and difficult to use in critical discussions. Aiming to contribute to greater clarity in the critical use of the term, this article introduces the concept of critical world-building. This is distinguished from other types of world-building, such as that performed by an author or reader, mainly by the fact that a critic analyses a world through a combination of their sequential presentation, as complete world, and with critical interpretation and theoretical filters in place, applying all three perspectives simultaneously. Two possible approaches to critical world-building are presented, based on the functions of a world’s building-blocks and how to interpret those functions. The first approach focuses on a world’s “architecture” – its structural and aesthetic system of places – and the form, function, and meaning of those places. The second emphasises the dynamic interplay between building-blocks and their interconnections in a web of explicit, implied, and interpreted information about the world. The authors base their discussion on textual, secondary fantasy worlds but invite applications of critical world-building to other genres and media.

Keywords: imaginary worlds, world-building, secondary worlds, fantasy, topofocal analysis.

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Imaginary worlds are integral to fiction in general and fantastic fiction in particular. Yet, they have not been studied as extensively in whole as they have in part: critical focus is generally on characters or, occasionally, on setting. In scholarship on the imaginary worlds that are created in genre texts, the term “world-building” has a tendency to creep into the discussion. As common as that term is, it is also problematic, because it has been applied by a wide range of people – critics, fans, authors, and creative-writing teachers to name but a few – to a wide range of processes, describing anything from the craft of the creator (author, director, or game-designer) to the cognitive work carried out by the audience (reader, viewer, or player). Sometimes “world-building” is used with a very particular meaning, sometimes it is a vague catch-all. At the same time, the term is seductively transparent: we believe we know what someone is talking about when they talk about world-building. Often we don’t.
One thing remains clear, however: the close examination of worlds, no matter their use or purpose, is an essential part of reading, writing, and, indeed, critically analysing and interpreting a text.

This essay proposes an approach to how world-building can be understood in literary criticism. Our aim is to clarify the term as a tool for critical discussion, and to begin to examine how and what might be gained by doing so. We should emphasise that we are in no way attempting to discuss or describe the worlds or world-building of a particular genre’s worlds, or genre worlds in general; we only try to offer a somewhat more methodical approach to world-building for critical use.

We open by laying the groundwork for our discussion, then move on to contrast three major categories of world-building based on how the imaginary world is approached: through the author’s creative effort (authorial world-building); through the reader’s (re-)construction (readerly world-building); and through the critic’s analysis and interpretation (critical world-building). These are not the only possible categories, nor are they mutually exclusive, but they provide a way to go into critical world-building in some detail. In the second part of the essay we outline two approaches to world-building in fantasy that can provide useful ways to discuss imaginary worlds: a topofocal (place-focused; Ekman Here Be Dragons 2) approach that examines the “world-architecture”, that is, how its places can be analysed through their form and function, and interpreted in terms of their meaning; and an approach that takes into account how an imaginary world is constructed (critically) as a dynamic interplay of building-blocks and their web of implications and relations.

**Groundwork**

Imaginary worlds, as seen in this essay, are places for stories to happen. In fiction, the story and the world are often closely tied together, and secondary worlds in particular are generally tailor-made to fulfil the requirements of a particular story (Ekman “Platsen” 27; see also Wolf 29), at least until other stories are written into pre-existing worlds. But worlds do not have to provide the stage for a narrative; they are often built for their own sake, and media franchises such as Star Wars have worlds that can be – and are – expanded to suit the needs of additional stories (Wolf 2–3, 270).

That there is a difference between world and story is obvious from the many cases where world-details have no bearing on the story whatsoever but increase the pleasure of partaking in that story. It is, for example, possible to remove the Quenya language or its relation to Sindarin in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* without affecting the story, but the text would be the lesser for it: Middle-earth without its linguistic details would be less engaging. In other media, the ties between world and story are even looser than in narrative fiction. Role-playing games, for instance, provide worlds that simply offer “story-hooks”: situations, locations, and relations for gaming groups to adopt and adapt as basis for stories in their own campaigns, or to ignore, as they see fit.

World-building is not a new concept, nor is it one restricted to literature. It is beyond the scope of this essay to offer a complete background to the field. Instead, we refer interested readers to Mark J. P. Wolf’s comprehensive work *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (2012), which contains a thorough summation of previous perspectives on worlds and world-building. Addressing what he perceives to be a lack of scholarly attention to imaginary worlds (12), in particular in Media Studies, Wolf adopts a mixed author and audience perspective on “subcreation” (he borrows the term from Tolkien’s seminal “On Fairy-stories”), focusing on the worlds constructed in large – and often transmedial – franchises. His structural and taxonomical approach to imaginary worlds is no doubt useful to anyone who ventures into the field, but he largely leaves out the role of the critic in favour of authors and (fan) audiences. Although certainly a very intriguing type of audience, we have largely left fans out of our analysis. One reason for this is the emphasis that Wolf places on this group. More importantly, fans share traits with critics, readers,
even authors in their relation to worlds and world-building, and also have characteristics that are particularly fannish. This makes them a complex and challenging group to discuss in this context, and clearly deserving of a more thorough analysis than we can provide here. (Other texts have taken on world-building as part of a larger discussion in franchises; see for instance Heather Urbanski’s *The Science Fiction Reboot*, which does so with an eye to science fiction franchises and fandom.)

Something that has influenced the ideas on world-building in this essay, but which is not mentioned in Wolf’s work, is the narratological concept of “storyworld” introduced by David Herman. This concept provides a useful way of thinking on how a world can be built by others than the author, as Herman primarily adapts a reader’s perspective. Storyworlds are “mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which recipients relocate – or make a deictic shift as they work to comprehend a narrative” (5). Although interesting in their holistic approach to the imaginary world, storyworlds mix narrative and world (the who, what, where, when et cetera of the text), making them somewhat awkward to use in an analysis that separates the two.

Some terminology and choices need to be clarified. In this essay, we talk about “elements” of imaginary worlds. These are to be understood as the many varied building-blocks that constitute imaginary worlds, and comprise anything from geographical and topographical details, to flora, fauna, and ecologies, to social groupings and behaviour, political factions and ideologies, and cultural traditions and mores. World-building elements can thus be the shape of continents and the fashion of elf lords, seasonal weather patterns and childrearing among badgerkin, the properties of mithril and the anti-dwarf ideology of the Ardenhof clan. Regardless of how many elements are included in an imaginary world, they will only form part of a world. We do not suggest that the sum total of the elements that combine to build an imaginary world makes a complete world; imaginary worlds are by their very nature incomplete (Doležel 169). That said, readers may of course experience the world as somehow complete. While a taxonomy of elements (or “world infrastructure”) can be devised, including categories of space, time, and characters as well as a hierarchy of natural, cultural, linguistic, mythological, and philosophical elements (Wolf 154–55), it suffices for our discussion to refer to all these types of building-blocks simply as “elements”.

As we come from the field of literature, we will use the terms text, author, and reader. World-building, as discussed in this essay, is not necessarily limited to printed text, however, and these terms should be taken as shorthand for corresponding terms related to any medium that contains fantasy stories, such as movies and television shows as well as computer and role-playing games.

We will use the worlds of the fantasy genre as basis for our discussion simply because that is the genre that the authors of this essay specialise in and are most familiar with. Although a comprehensive discussion of world-building in literature or even just in speculative fiction is far beyond the scope of this essay, our argument concerns itself largely with any kind of world-building, and we would welcome work that extends it into other genres. It should also be pointed out that our focus in this essay is on secondary worlds, by which we mean fantasy worlds that are different from our own (Wolfe 115), as opposed to primary worlds, worlds that are in some sense fictional versions that emulate our own world at least on a macroscopic level (for this view on primary and secondary worlds, we draw on Ekman *Here Be Dragons* 9–10. Other approaches are possible, such as viewing “secondariness” as a matter of degree; see Wolf 27–28). We focus on secondary worlds here simply because these worlds provide the clearest examples for our discussion. In creating secondary worlds, authors are free to design and build worlds according to the requirements of their stories. Primary worlds already have a large number of world elements in place (including anything from natural laws and geography to cultural and historical events and people), and story must to some extent be fitted to world rather than world to story.
We should also mention that we have drawn largely on Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* for our examples, simply because we assume most readers to be familiar with and have easy access to that work. (References will include volume, book and chapter as well as page number to facilitate locating the passages in the various editions of the book.)

**Three Kinds of World-Building**

A major part of the confusion around “world-building” as a term revolves around the fact that it is used to represent at least three main processes: the construction of an imaginary world carried out by an author; the re-construction of this world that a reader performs; and the way in which a world is presented through a text. All three processes can combine to varying degrees in one person, reading, or interpretation. A second cause of confusion is that “world-building” as a term is used loosely, sometimes indicating just the world itself, rather than any process actually being employed to construct it.

We say at least three processes, because it can easily be argued that over all the possible media and types of audiences that make use of and enjoy imaginary worlds, other world-building processes exist. Examples include computer games, in which world-building is connected to game mechanics; roleplaying games, in which elements can be added after planning by players and game-master between sessions, but also as spur-of-the-moment ideas during session; and among fans of world franchises, as they combine and extrapolate from a multitude of sources. The scope of this essay does not permit us to explore all of these various processes, but we feel confident that critical discourse on world-building would benefit from terminology also in these areas, even though they may partially overlap.

**Authorial World-Building**

For authors, world-building is a sequential, iterative, and segmental process: the adding, changing, or developing of elements by various strategies. Such strategies may comprise mapmaking, extrapolation, and designing a world along certain ideological lines (such as creating a matriarchal society). While it is of course possible to discuss this kind of world-building process, it is difficult to subject it to critical analysis, because, ultimately, actual authorial world-building processes cannot be analysed by anyone but the author in question; no one else has access to their mind. It is possible to analyse oral or written comments that a writer makes regarding their world-building (interviews, public comments, private communication, published letters), but such analysis will always suffer from problems with imperfect recollection and veracity. Another possibility is to analyse guidelines and manuals for world-building, which would yield information about (presumably) ideal or desirable world-building processes, but not what those processes are actually like.

**Readerly World-Building**

For readers, world-building is a similarly sequential process but the elements of the world are encountered in an order determined by the author, by the reader’s execution of choices, or by a combination of both. In a typical novel, the author decides in which order, how, and in what context the elements of the world are revealed. In ergodic literature, in which “non-trivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text” (Aarseth 1), the reader influences that order. Examples of ergodic literature include experimental novels, gamebooks such as *Choose Your Own Adventure*, certain kinds of video games, even (arguably) role-playing games. Worlds that are used in several,
stand-alone works, by one or more authors, and transmedial worlds (used in several media in a franchise), combine a measure of authorial control with audience influence.

Regardless of who controls the order in which world elements are presented to the reader, bringing the world to life is largely a combination of two interrelated processes. The readers carry out a hermeneutical construction of a world by adding pieces (elements) to a structure already in place, evaluating the pieces in light of what is known about the world so far, and, conversely, evaluating the whole world in light of new pieces. They also create the world in their minds through a cognitive process, as pointed out by Norman Holland in Literature and the Brain, and to some extent explored by Wolf. Herman’s storyworlds suggest a bridging of these processes, as storyworlds encompass a wide range of things that influence the reader into creating the story as a full object in their minds (5–6, 13–14, 263, 301).

Critical World-Building

To critically examine a world and the world-building behind it requires a perspective that combines a number of approaches to the text, the first part of this composite being how the text presents the world. For a literary critic, there are tools and methods available to study both the author and audience side of world-building, but from our perspective, they tend to detract from the traditional object of criticism: the text itself. Our critical approach to world-building therefore focuses on what we have access to through the text: the way in which world elements are presented in a text, their context and various relations, their meaning from a theoretical viewpoint, and so on. World-building, in this sense, is the revealing of the world as the narrative moves along. Wolf points out that “how world information is doled out to the audience is an important part of world-building and design” (155) and that “doling out” of information, the order, context, and style of presentation of world elements, is a central factor in how a world is understood. It takes into account the hermeneutical building of a world that is performed by a reader, but the reader in question is generally not an actual person but a function in the text, an “implied” or “postulated” reader (Booth 137–38; devotees of narratology are free to substitute with any types of abstract audience functions they prefer), or simply an ideal reader who understands and reacts to information in the text as we, the critics, would have them do.

Another part of the composite perspective of critical world-building is a view of the world in its entirety. While a literary critic is certainly, from one point of view, a reader and as such part of a world’s audience, criticism – the structured, theoretically informed analysis and interpretation of a world – requires a holistic approach to a world as well as a sequential one. It requires viewing the world both as a whole structure, and as one that has been put together in a particular order; as its own system of interlocking elements and as a unit in relation to a wider literary and theoretical context. In other words, the critic analyses a world in terms of the final result of the author’s creative process and the reader’s progression through the novel, but also through the critic’s own contribution in terms of a broader perspective. Critics may generally look at worlds rather than world-building, but it is integral to our approach that both aspects be examined. Thus both the world and the world-building process are central to how a critic examines world-building as a whole within particular works.

An important part to the composite perspective is the layer of critical interpretation. The critic, as critic, also brings to the building of a world a familiarity with other worlds in terms of structures and tropes, clichés and traditions. They thus construct the world in a wider context, seeing parallels with other worlds within and outside of the genre. They may also bring to a world one or several theoretical filters that foreground certain aspects of a world and provide analytical and interpretative focus. The interpreted world is, in some qualitative way, a different world than the world in the text: it has had an extra layer of interpretation added to it. These (sometimes
multiple) layers of interpretation provide different readings of the world, and can often encourage a different focus than an author intended or a reader would see.

This composite perspective is central to how a critic works with the world and world-building. Analysing the world as a sequential, holistic, and interpretative construction allows the critic to understand aspects of the world that author and reader generally miss. It is the links, and the ways in which elements of the world interact or form by implication to build that world, that create fodder for the critic. The interrelations, whether by authorial intent or not, provide critical insights not only into the world and its structure, but into the stories that are told within the world.

Two Approaches to Critical World-Building

The composite perspective and world focus of critical world-building can be used as a route into a literary analysis of a text or can supplement traditional readings with a world-perspective. In order to offer ideas on how critical world-building can be used to understand secondary worlds, we present two possible ways of approaching worlds and world-building. We do not claim that there are no other ways – quite the contrary – but would like to suggest possible starting points for analytical explorations of the system of ideas underlying or encoded into imaginary worlds.

On its most fundamental level, a critical examination of a world is guided by three questions:

*What does a particular element do?* (What is its function?) Through the many interconnections between elements that make up the world, each element – or group of elements – can have multiple functions, depending on the particular context in which it is seen.

*How does it do it?* (How is this function achieved?) Each element can fulfil its functions through any number of means. The style with which an element is introduced, the context in which it is added to the world, its relation to other elements, whether it is used in allusions or as part of a trope, and the extent to which it requires a reader to be “genre literate” to fully comprehend it are all examples of how a particular function is fulfilled.

*What is the effect of this element?* (Going beyond analysis to interpretation.) What does it imply about the world, how does it interact with characters, in what way does it interplay with the plot, or drive or slow down the story?

With these questions as a basis, we offer two possible ways to take on imaginary worlds from a critical perspective.

World-Architecture

One way of reading an imaginary world is through the metaphor implied by the term “world-building”: that the world is a building. The critic, then, does not follow or examine the actual building process, but analyses and interprets the resulting edifice – the imaginary world – from a structural, functional, and aesthetic point of view. How the world is structured, how it functions in relation to stories set in it, and what its aesthetic properties are become critical avenues of exploration. What is being explored is not primarily the building of the world (neither as process nor as construct) but the world’s architecture.

Architecture is the art of designing buildings rather than the process of constructing them. It incorporates the building-process but also the finished result, combining a practical, constructive, functional side with an aesthetic, harmonious, symbolic side. “World-architecture”, as critical approach, allows the critic to examine the principles of design through their expression in the
finished work. Those principles, although the result of authorial world-building, are possible to identify and analyse through critical world-building alone: what the author actually did or did not intend with a particular element can be disregarded – what matters is that principle which the elements captures. Tolkien may have meant the village Scary only to be named after a rock (from “scar”, rocky cliff) but a reading of it as “causing fear” is equally if not more valid if it carries critical weight. (For a discussion of this example, see Ekman Here Be Dragons 52.)

Architecture, as well as world-architecture, transforms space into place. The geographical concepts of space and place, for instance as expressed by geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, are useful in discussions of imaginary worlds. To Fuan, places have history and meaning, embodying experiences and aspirations of a people (213); they have a personality which is “a composite of natural endowments […] and the modifications wrought by successive generations of human beings” (234). An architectural place differs somewhat. It is designed for some activity (or activities) and contained, protected, or otherwise shaped to facilitate this. The architectural place then embodies its function through its form. Taken together, the notions of geographical and architectural place offer a critical route into the imaginary world. In a critical analysis of the places of an imaginary world in terms of their “personality” as expressed through their “natural endowments” and any cultural modifications (that is, as geographical places according to Tuan), the critic should remember that the world’s nature and culture are ultimately designed with an activity – story-telling – in mind. That analysis then makes it possible to bring together aspects of expression and function, and interpret the underlying meaning of these places. For example, the landscape outside the gates of Mordor can be read as more than only a dismal setting and a challenge for Tolkien’s hobbit characters to endure (see e.g. Tolkien TT, IV, ii, 617–21). Looking at it as a place, taking into account its history, relation to other areas nearby, and cultural modifications, it becomes clear what activity it is designed for, what its function is, not only as a narrative trope (“the landscape of evil”) but as a place within the diegetic world. Analysing its form in relation to its function, and arriving at its meaning through interpretation, the critic can understand more about the nature of evil in The Lord of the Rings. (For a discussion of this, see Ekman Here Be Dragons 199–204.)

An architectural approach to critical world-building goes further than the basic questions offered above: it encourages seeing the world as places designed with a certain form to fulfil a certain function and express a certain meaning. We have drawn the categories of Function, Form, and Meaning from David Smith Capon’s three “primary categories”, which he uses in his discussion of architectural theories, as we find them useful in thinking about how places in imaginary worlds are designed architecturally. More so, than the more commonly referenced Vitruvian Triad of Firmitatis (firmness), Utilitatis (usefulness), and Venustatis (beauty) introduced in De Architecturalibridecem (The Ten Books on Architecture), as aesthetics and craftsmanship are difficult to separate in literature whereas meaning is a very relevant category.

A place in an imaginary world is a combination of elements of various kinds, and each place is included for a reason. It has one or more functions in the world of which it is part, and often has a function in a story as well. Lothlorien, for example, is the final refuge of the High Elves in Middle-earth, and a place of rest, knowledge, and useful equipment in the story. Either or both functions of the Golden Wood can be analysed. A function is an expression of purpose, of the activity for which a place is designed and included in the world. This purpose is not necessarily governed by authorial intent; it is the result of a place’s relation to other places, to how and if it is used as a setting; ultimately, the function springs from the simple fact that the place is there, in the world, with all the other places in the world around it – a part of the wholeness that is the fictive world. Consequently, any place in an imaginary world can be analysed in terms of its function.

To analyse the function of a place requires analysis of the form through which it is expressed, portrayed, visualised, described, or narrated. Form, in world-architecture, is a question of
style and presentation, as well as of context and focus. In a text, careful readings of how elements are described can bring out their form. The way Lothlorien is described as dangerous by Boromir is telling, both of the Wood itself and of Gondor, demonstrating also how a world is one whole in which elements interact (FR, II, vi, 329). In illustrated texts or video, the form of a place can be both verbal and visual, described in words as well as images. (For an example, see the discussion of Stardust by Neil Gaiman and Charles Vess in Ekman Here Be Dragons 82–92.) The form of a place, or of separate elements, brings out the function of that place or those elements.

By looking at the form of a place along with its function it is possible to understand its meaning, the way in which a world communicates ideas about itself. Applied to imaginary worlds and their world-architecture, meaning captures what Tuan calls personality of places, the way in which memories and history are embodied in the imaginary places, and how these places convey experiences and ideals. Meaning is thus expressed through form and function but also governs their expression: through the three concepts it is possible to understand worlds as a combination of spatiality and “natural endowment”; identity and cultural impression; and ideas and ideology. These are all encoded in the landscape and places of an imaginary world, and can be examined through analysis and interpretation of critical world-building through an architectural approach.

At their simplest, form, function, and meaning offer a way of understanding how the space of the imaginary world is turned into a place suitable for one or more stories. They offer a means to look at the relations between the world and what meaning is encoded in its patterns of elements – whether social, spatial, temporal, or other.

World-architecture is a useful way to approach a world through material that largely concerns itself with that world as a place: most typically maps in fantasy novels, but also for example “gazetteers” or source books for role-playing games, and guides to imaginary worlds. It does not preclude analysis of worlds presented through narrative but it does focus on the world as a static, geographical construct, and as such may strike some critics as too topofocal. We therefore also offer a more dynamic approach to using critical world-building as basis for a critical analysis of imaginary worlds.

Dynamic Interplay

A more dynamic approach focuses on the interplay between elements and the world. It takes into account the entirety of the world constructed, including the interplay between all its elements and the possible interpretations available to the critic who analyses it.

Considering worlds and world-building in terms of how elements interrelate is not something new. Samuel R. Delany observes how Robert Heinlein’s oft-cited “the door dilated” (in Beyond the Horizon [1942]) “clearly, forcefully, and with tremendous verbal economy” portrayed a world which “contained a society in which the technology for constructing iris aperture doorways was available” (Delany 144). Although Delany’s point concerns science fiction, it is equally valid in fantasy: the smallest utterance can contribute to the world, and can be analysed for its contribution. In The Power of Tolkien’s Prose, Steve Walker explains how the many details that Tolkien inserts into his imaginary world tend towards expansion rather than reduction of that world. These details are, as Walker puts it, “the tip of an iceberg of implications” (10). Each detail enters the context of previous details, implying things about them and having things implied about it in turn, thus forming, by implication, the iceberg that is Middle-earth.

Such implications are key to critical world-building. The implications that both Delany and Walker point out as important in the building of a wider world arise not only from what elements are introduced and how, but from how these elements are connected to each other. In the passages cited above, Delany and Walker observe how details in the text can refer beyond that which is known about a world, thus extending it. Walker uses as example a passage in The Return of the
King, about King Théoden’s charge at enemy soldiers, in which the king is likened to someone who has not been previously introduced in the text:

The simile detailing Théoden on horseback “like a god of old, even as [Oromë] the Great in the battle of the Valar when the world was young,” seems almost epic in its amplitude. [Théoden’s] magnificence is magnified in the godlikeness of a cultural hero so renowned his name needs no gloss, glorious in a battle so significant it needs no explanation. Yet for all that obviousness, the appeal of the illusion is to unseen complexity. (10; reference to Tolkien RK, V, v, 820)

For someone reading about the world in sequence, that is, in terms of readerly world-building, the only previous reference to the Valar is towards the end of The Two Towers, when Frodo and Sam first encounter Faramir and his Rangers in Ithilien. The appearance of a Mûmak (war elephant) causes one of the Rangers to exclaim “May the Valar turn him aside!” (TT, IV, iv, 646). From the context, this appears to be an appeal to some kind of deities. The second occurrence, cited by Walker, confirms the impression of the first, explaining that the Valar are “god[s] of old”, and that Oromë is one of them. Walker does not discuss how the two mentions of the Valar interplay in extending the world with a religious dimension, just as he fails to include the fact that the magnificence of Théoden is not only magnified by the simile to the Vala Oromë but that Oromë is also described in turn. His focus is on the particular instance, which only captures a small part of how critical world-building works.

In critical world-building, not only the sequential presentation and implications of the details are relevant, but also the world as totality. Readers may, and fans generally do, know Middle-earth as a whole but Tolkien criticism requires it. The mention of the Valar and Oromë refers to other instances within The Lord of the Rings, both previously in the narrative and in the Appendices; but it also creates connections to The Silmarillion, playing off the world-building there. For someone engaged in critical world-building, Théoden’s charge against Sauron’s troops thus reflects the battles against the greater evil of Morgoth in Middle-earth’s deep past. This interplay between elements of a world used in several texts brings to the fore an interesting difference between critical and readerly world-building when analysing multi-text worlds: in readerly world-building, in which only a sequential presentation of the world is taken into account, it matters in which order a reader comes to the world. In which order have they read The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings, and The Silmarillion? To a person familiar with The Silmarillion, Walker’s example does little to extend the world; Oromë and the battles of the Valar are already well-known. In other words, it matters whether the texts are read in the order of publication or by internal chronology. (For an illuminating discussion on how publication order and internal chronology can affect the reading of a multi-text world, see Wolf 210–11.) In worlds built in only one text, this is not an issue, of course. In those cases, the critic only needs to maintain the composite perspective of the entire world and the sequence of presentation.

Through its composite perspective, critical world-building allows for a potentially limitless analysis of a world. Elements are interrelated in a complex structure of implications that extend the world and affect the understanding of other elements and their relations. George Slusser suggests that the “very idea of world implies a complex set of laws and relationships” (3); we would claim that these laws and relationships, or connections and interactions, determine how implications extend and change the world. Critics employ a perspective that combines a holistic view of the world with the sequential introduction of elements, a wide extra-textual context, and the possibility to add interpretative layers to the world. In doing so, they participate in building the world as system in which elements interact dynamically. There is a constant interplay in which the analytical and interpretative activity of the critic provides “impetus” for an exchange of information, feelings,
and meanings within the world. Following the “laws and relationships”, the critic uses implications to analyse and interpret, and by doing so, shapes the world, thus opening it up for new implications.

When even a tiny piece is dislodged from it, an iceberg may shift and turn over, changing its apparent shape and causing enormous waves. An imaginary world works in a similar way when under the critical lens: a different understanding of just one element, or a small change in relationships between elements, can change the interpretation of the world as a whole. That change in the world’s interpretative layer may, in turn, have implications for how the interplay between some elements is then understood. Meaning in a world is created much more through such changes than through any given element or relationship used to build it.

Conclusion

Analyses of texts set in secondary worlds that fail to take into account what those worlds are like and how they are constructed invariably tend towards the incomplete. Yet, any critical venture that suffers from imprecise and confusing terminology may end up resulting in interpretations that are ambiguous and confusing – even plain wrong. To assist in future critical work on secondary worlds, we have thus argued in favour of greater clarity in the use of the term “world-building” by suggesting that the perspective that is employed is added to the term.

This essay includes three examples of world-building types – authorial, readerly, and critical – with a focus on the latter. To approach a world critically is to go further than simply cataloguing its features but to discuss the world in relation to something beyond it. This something could be (and in fantasy, often is) the relationship between story and world, but any theoretical approach could be valid, depending on the text, the world, and one’s critical preference: ecocritical, Freudian, Marxist, postmodernist, postcolonial … Critical world-building differs from the two other types in its composite perspective on the imaginary world, looking at it holistically but with awareness of the meaning embedded in its sequential construction and in the layers of interpretation added to it. This composite perspective should not be taken to mean that world and world-building are one: separating world-building from the world itself is important though not always easily accomplished.

To provide some ideas about how critical world-building can be used as a tool in literary scholarship, two possible approaches are suggested: a topofocal analysis of the world-architecture and how meaning can be arrived at by analysis of the form and function of places in imaginary worlds; and an outline of how the entire web of implications that is an imaginary world can be approached as a dynamic system of interplaying elements and relationships.

We do not argue that critical world-building is the only proper way to approach world-building, nor that this essay has examined every aspect of it. The types we have described can overlap: they have some traits in common and one person can build worlds in more than one way. Nor are these the only types of world-building there are: other kinds of readers, like fans or gamers, could provide other types of world-building. Our aim is to introduce some clarity into an important, but often muddled, topic. Studies of particular texts and worlds will be necessary to develop the ideas presented in this essay, but hopefully it will inspire further explorations in the field of critical world-building in fantastic, imaginary worlds.
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Dragon-riding: Live and Let Fly

Brendan Sheridan

Abstract: This article examines the dragon rider as a recurring trope within contemporary fantasy fiction and film. While considerable scholarship has focused on dragons in literature, the subject of dragon riders has been neglected, an oversight this article seeks to redress. My research utilises Jonathan D. Evans’ application of Vladimir Propp’s Morphology of the Folktale to construct a formula reflecting this narrative pattern. It also draws on human-animal studies, particularly the work of Phillip Armstrong and J. M. Coetzee. Through these theoretical lenses I interrogate the relationship between dragon and rider, exploring how the relationship forms as well as the power dynamic between the participants.

Keywords: Dragons, Dragon-riding, Wildness, Human-animal.

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The tradition of dragon-slaying, despite being thousands of years old in story, is being supplanted in modern adaptations of the medieval fantasy by a different narrative, that of the dragon-rider. The exploits of dragon slayers such as Saint George, Beowulf, and Marduk have attracted the attention of both creative writers and scholars. Ernest Ingersoll’s Dragonlore, J. R. R. Tolkien’s Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics, and Jacqueline Simpson’s British Dragons are three prominent texts exploring dragons and dragon-slayers.

This research on dragon-slaying is complemented by scholarship focusing on dragons in children’s and young adult fiction. As early as the 1970s Bruno Bettelheim discussed the young dragon-slayer in The Uses of Enchantment. More recently, John C. Stott interrogates the use of the dragon in children’s fiction in his 1990 article “‘Will the Real Dragon Please Stand Up?’ Convention and Parody in Children’s Stories’ and Emily Midkiff focuses on the uncanny dragon in her 2014 Fafnir article “‘Dragons are Tricksy’: The Uncanny Dragons of Children’s Literature”. Despite the continued interest, however, there has been a paradigm shift in contemporary literature and film that requires a new lens of analysis. Warriors no longer do battle with dragons; they now do battle upon dragons.

A dragon-rider gains his or her title through a close association with dragons, but more specifically it is riding a dragon, in the same way that a knight would ride a horse, that confers this status. The idea of dragon riding has its origins in early Chinese myth with figures such as Yu and
his companion the *Ying Lung* who would adventure together performing great deeds (Palmer and Xiaomin 67). Outside of Oriental tradition there do not appear to be many direct models of this narrative, although in Classical mythology the Roman Goddess Ceres rode in a chariot pulled by winged snakes (Lippencott 13). From a Germanic/Nordic standpoint there is little that seems to indicate the same level of cooperation. This is understandable as in such traditions dragons are either guardian creatures of hoards—such as the dragon of *Beowulf* (Heaney 155) and this journal’s own mascot Fafnir (Morris 98)—or figures of antagonism, like the Midgard Serpent, Jormungand (Mills 245) and the great world destroying force Nidhogg (Taylor and Auden 153). In terms of contemporary English language literary models, the dragon riding tradition appears to have its origins in the 1960s with Anne McCaffrey’s novel *Dragonflight* (1968), the first of her *Dragonriders of Pern* series.

The idea of a hero fighting from a dragon’s back—popularised by McCaffrey—has become prevalent in modern fiction, both in text and film. This popularity can be seen in various media: Margaret Weis and Tracey Hickman’s *Dragonlance* series, particularly *Dragons of Spring Dawning* (1985); Raymond E. Feist’s *Riftwar Cycle*, including *Darkness at Sethanon* (1986); the videogames *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) and *Drakengard* (2003); and the children’s television series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (USA 2005-2008) and *Jane and the Dragon* (Canada and New Zealand, 2005-2006). The aerial nature of a dragon places the rider above mere mortals, setting him or her as a hero apart from the standard convention of a hero upon a horse. While men dominate the dragon-slaying tradition, when it comes to dragon-riders the gender gap is fairly negligible (particularly with protagonists). Bruno Bettelheim’s Freudian reading of the young dragon-slayer narrative provides a justification for this.

The story implies: it’s not the Father whose jealousy prevents you from having the Mother all to yourself, it’s an evil dragon—what you really have in mind is to slay an evil dragon (Bettelheim 111).

The counterpart narrative for girls, by contrast, typically involves a wicked stepmother or enchantress (Bettelheim 113). Therefore, the Oedipal nature of such dragon-slaying indicates that the traditional positioning limits male and female roles within such narratives, limitations which are removed in the dragon-riding narrative.

Dragon-riding can be indicative of the right to lead or reign, drawing from the associations of dragons and leadership in Imperial Chinese and post-Roman British tradition. In taming a dragon, a hero is acknowledged as having the right to rule. In certain circumstances, depending on the cultural context of the story, this particular right is also interpreted as divinely mandated. Within Chinese tradition the belief that the *long* is a divine animal and that some dragons, particularly *tien lung*, are emissaries of the gods, gives this perception merit. Additionally, since a dragon can be described as power made manifest, by riding a dragon a hero proves his or her strength by being seated above the dragon; rather than besting them in combat he has “broken it into saddle.”

In a more problematic interpretation, the dragon ridden in this way can be perceived solely as property or as an extension of the rider. This resonates with the ideas raised by author J. M. Coetzee in his parable *The Lives of Animals*, where humans regard captive animals with contempt, reducing them to slave populations (59). Coetzee’s narrative is often cited by human-animal studies theorists, such as Margo DeMello and Philip Armstrong, who critique the anthropocentric depiction of animals. Following this line of thought, the “taming” of a dragon can be read as the wild “other” being controlled and forced into following the rider’s cultural customs and norms. As a consequence, the dragon’s own beliefs, such as hoarding treasure and considering non-dragons to be
a free meal, are suppressed (which many humans would find a relief). While the hero’s status markedly increases through this relationship, the question is: does the dragon’s decrease? In such an occurrence does a dragon become little more than an exotic form of horse? The texts that depict a dragon and rider raise complicated issues about whether there is a hierarchy between dragon and rider, what the nature of the partnership is, and if dragons are to be glorified mounts or characters in their own right.

Perhaps because of the relatively recent emergence of the dragon-riding motif, there is little by way of critical material on the subject, a gap in scholarship that this article hopes to fill in relation to English language texts. I will begin by detailing an overall structure that these narratives follow based upon Proppian morphology, providing textual examples from McCaffrey’s foundational narrative Dragonflight and two more recent texts where the structure is completed in its entirety, Christopher Paolini’s novel Eragon (2003) and the film How to Train Your Dragon (USA 2010) directed by Chris Sanders and Dean DeBlois. I will then examine George R.R. Martin’s series A Song of Ice and Fire—which remains in-process at the time of writing this article—in order to explore how the narrative structure can provide insight into the story. Throughout, my analysis will seek to both construct a useful tool of analysis for this type of narrative and deconstruct the human-dragon relationship through the lens of human-animal studies.

The blending of human-animal studies with the ideas inherent in Proppian structures is not entirely radical; some ground has already been broken by Sandra Unerman. Unerman’s article “Dragons in Twentieth Century Fiction” provides a middle ground linking ideas of human-animal study to the Proppian understanding of stories having structures and motifs. She argues that the “changing role of dragons in modern fiction expresses deeper changes in society”. In particular is the recognition that animals are different rather than good or evil and that “fictional evil is more convincing and frightening when people, not dragons, are the true enemy.” (Unerman 100).

Dragons are now often perceived as animals who can be tamed rather than monsters to be slain. This builds on an increasing preference for depicting dragons in the Tolkienian fashion of intelligent, powerful creatures, with whom communication is possible.

How to Become a Dragon-rider in Five Easy Steps

In his article “Semiotics and Traditional Lore in the Medieval Dragonslaying Tradition”, semiologist Jonathan D. Evans categorises the components of the Germanic dragon slaying story using similar components laid down by Vladimir Propp in his Morphology of Folklore. The story begins with the preparation, where the dragon slayer must ready himself to travel out to do battle with his foe, be it gifting of a weapon or devising a strategy or receiving a blessing of some kind. The next component is travel, as dragons tend to live in isolated areas beyond civilisation. The next two components are closely intertwined they are the combat and the slaying. The final stage of the story is the reward, where the hero acquires his gold, bride or lands or whatever variation thereof. An optional component is known as the dismemberment, where, prior to the reward, the dragon-slayer will remove part of the dragon as a token of his victory.

Inspired by Evans’ process, I have devised a formula to which most of the dragon-rider narratives that I have researched conform, using the first major dragon-riding text, Anne McCaffrey’s Dragonflight as a model. This formula moves through five key stages. The first stage is always the encounter, where the prospective rider first meets the dragon, be it at the dragon’s...
hatching or in the wilds where the dragon is fully grown. In McCaffrey’s narrative the heroine Lessa’s encounter begins when she attends the hatching of her gold dragon, Ramoth.

The next stage is typically bonding, wherein the prospective rider builds a rapport with the dragon; sometimes this is a mundane friendship, while in other situations it can be a mystical bond that develops and ties the two together. In McCaffrey’s novel this bond occurs at the moment of hatching when Ramoth and Lessa are mentally joined.

A feeling of joy suffused Lessa; a feeling of warmth, tenderness, unalloyed affection, and instant respect and admiration flooded mind and soul. Never again would Lessa lack an advocate, a defender, an intimate, aware instantly of the temper of her mind and heart, of her desires. (McCaffrey 86).

This particular bond is of the mystical variety and occurs before the observation; it differs from bonds based on mutual trust, as the connection is due to a psychic link between dragon and rider. This joining results in not only the rider and the dragon acquiring the ability to communicate telepathically, but also a sharing of emotions between the pair. Such a connection blurs the line between rider and dragon implying a symbiotic relationship. The positions of bond and observation are reversed which is when the bond is one of friendship and trust, as opposed to a psychic link. A question that arises from the dragon and rider partnership is: what is the nature of the relationship? Is the dragon a domesticated beast or an equal partner?

A crucial issue is whether this means that the rider has mastery over the dragon. The relationship cannot exclusively be seen as that between a knight and horse. The dragon is (usually) intelligent, larger and much more powerful than any other kind of mount. Part of how the relationship is defined depends upon the dragon’s depiction within the text. If the dragon is not properly characterised, then it can appear as little more than a glorified horse, or flying super weapon with wings serving a human master. Ideally when the dragon is properly characterised the partnership is one of equals.

Human-animal studies scholar Phillip Armstrong notes that attempts to control the “wildness” of the animal leads to it breaking loose, sometimes unpredictably (189). Applying this theory to dragon-riding, readers are forced to question whether dragons can ever be said to be truly tamed and domesticated, even when they permit a rider to mount them? These are not comparatively small horses that can be broken into saddle. The dragon is an ancient reptile with enormous amounts of power at their disposal; to tame such a thing is a daunting task. McCaffrey’s Dragonflight provides one such example during the dragon’s hatching. The babies, in search of their destined companion, pay no heed to anyone who gets in their way and maim or even kill out of ignorance and a desire to find their companion: “Before Lessa could blink, it shook the first girl with such violence that her head snapped audibly and she fell limply to the sand.” (McCaffrey 85).

It is the dangerous, wild, nature of the dragon which highlights the importance of this bond. Bettleheim argues that animals within stories are reflections of human instinctual nature and that the most dangerous of these animals symbolizing the “untamed id” (Bettelheim 76). In terms of dragon and rider, the need for the rider is to reign in and act as ego and superego to the dragon’s id. Together they form a whole and balanced psyche. While Emily Midkiff’s focus is predominantly grounded in the uncanny, rather than id-ego-superego, her argument that “dragons are doubles for humanity” supports this hypothesis (Midkiff 43). Therefore the Freudian nature of the dragon-rider’s bond is not terribly farfetched.

The third stage in my proposed dragon-rider formula is observation, where the rider learns about the dragon, and comes to an understanding of it and its physical capabilities. The observation occurs in McCaffrey’s novel during Lessa’s caring for a young Ramoth, feeding her and learning
about the young dragon as she grows to adulthood. At this stage in their relationship the power lies with the human as the dragon relies upon the rider to survive. The observation, in this instance, can be interpreted as a parent watching a child grow, as well as the human partner learning about rearing and care, due to their role in the dragon’s infancy.

The penultimate stage is the ride where the rider and his or her dragon first take flight and the rider often has a change of perspective from the back of the dragon. This can work tandem with the fifth stage—the reveal—where the dragon and rider are shown to be together in the wider world, which often responds to their appearance with awe. The power dynamic between the dragon and rider is not static. At times it appears as if the rider is controlling the dragon as a mount but, as I will highlight later in the article, this is not always the case. The ride and reveal occur simultaneously in McCaffrey’s narrative when Lessa rides above the Weyr upon Ramoth’s back in defiance of the patriarchal male riders who had previously informed her that gold dragons only fly to mate.

The spectacle of the queen aloft had quite an effect on all beholders. F’lar was aware of its impact on himself and saw it reflected in the faces of the incredulous Holders, knew it from the way the dragons hummed, heard it from Mnementh. (McCaffrey 147).

This act shows to Lessa, as well as the male dragon-riders, that she does not need to be constrained by their outdated traditions; nor will she be cowed into submission for disobeying their instructions. This type of story has changed the face of fantasy work, as now there can be warriors fighting upon dragons. The effect is to diminish the significance of the dragons as separate and “other”. If there are human characters that spend a significant amount of time alongside these creatures, they cannot be termed as creatures of mystery and faerie, particularly if they meekly allow a mortal to learn their secrets and utilise them like a glorified horse. Honegger writes that the overuse of the dragon “de-mythologizes” them, taking a powerful, mysterious figure and reducing it to merely an ‘exotic other’ with a consequent loss of “the power to ‘enchant’ the reader.” (Honegger 54).

The dragon-rider does, however, serve as a bridge between the worlds of dragon and human, erasing many of the distinctions and enabling a greater understanding between the two. In certain incarnations this does imply a level of domestication with the dragon. The vision of a person seated atop a creature, regardless of that creature’s intelligence, conveys an air of dominance. When viewed through the lens of human-animal studies these narratives can be troubling, as the wildness, difference and animal otherness of the dragon is progressively erased as the animal is tamed.

Boy meets dragon (and world)

The five-part structure outlined above repeats itself throughout other texts that I have researched, particularly Paolini’s Eragon and the film How to Train Your Dragon. These texts also show that the dragon and rider bond does not just alter the dragon. Just as the dragon can be reduced and domesticated through the relationship with the rider, so too can the rider be changed as he or she taps into the wild energy of the animal. A symbiosis is reached in which both dragon and rider are simultaneously less and more and anything that threatens this symbiosis can be deadly to both parties.

The encounter in Christopher Paolini’s Eragon, the first novel in his Inheritance Cycle, is much like Dragonflight. It occurs when the mysterious stone that Eragon finds hatches into a baby dragon. This encounter with the dragon at infancy can give a parental dynamic to the dragon-human relationship, where the human partner is the guiding figure in the creature’s life. “Standing in front of him, licking off the membrane that encased it, was a dragon.” (Paolini, Eragon 37). Being at the
hatching of his dragon, again, Eragon is in a position of power over the young dragon and is the
dominant figure in their relationship. Hatching is not the sole method of encounter in dragon-rider
narratives, as encounters do not have to occur at hatching; they can even take place when the dragon
is, arguably, fully grown. The film How to Train Your Dragon is one of the best examples of this
variation. The encounter occurs when Hiccup refuses to kill the dragon who will later be named
Toothless, and it shows that the two meet as equals rather than one asserting a place of dominance
over the ‘other’ at an early age.

Only by coming to understand the dragon is it possible for a character to actually bond with
them. This is why observation is a key stage in the dragon-rider narrative. It is especially important
for a bond that it is built upon trust and friendship as the duo do not have a psychic link to smooth
over any misconceptions. In How to Train Your Dragon the observation is presented through
Hiccup’s drawing and note taking about the dragon. In an attempt to understand it he also reads
through the fictive Viking “Book of Dragons” and asks the dragon-slaying mentor Gobber for
information on dragons. For Eragon, the observation, in contrast, takes place with his feeding of the
dragon Saphira and his attempts to know more about dragons, where he questions the storyteller
Brom: “How big were the dragons?” “When did they mature?” “Did dragons live very long?”
(Paolini, Eragon 52-53). Eragon’s questions show that even linked riders need to spend time
observing and understanding their dragons, particularly when they meet their dragons as hatchlings.
The observation does not need to be direct observation, but can also include research and fact
finding to aid the rider in understanding their dragon.

For a human and a dragon to work together requires an explicit bond between the two. This
bond will occur at the beginning of the relationship between the two characters and involves the
pair becoming linked in a manner that will allow them to operate as a cohesive unit. This bond
manifests differently in texts from the magical to the mundane, and while generally a positive thing
can have significant ramifications.

McCaffrey and Paolini both show this connection through creating a deliberate telepathic
link between the rider and dragon. Through their link, the pair can share their thoughts and
emotions, as well as to simply communicate. McCaffrey, as discussed earlier, reveals this bond as a
type of telepathy that enables communication between the dragon and rider. Paolini adds a more
mystical dimension to this bond. The bond between dragon and rider also transforms the rider, as he
or she becomes affected by the dragon as a magical entity. Eragon first notices this ability when his
dragon is a hatchling: “Something brushed against his consciousness, like a finger trailing over his
skin.” (Paolini, Eragon 39). This involves a change, with the rider gaining the ability to use magic
and speak telepathically, as well as possess magically enhanced strength, speed and grace. This link
shows that the consequences of the bond with a dragon is that while a rider has power, they can
changed so much that their humanity can potentially be called into question. In Paolini’s second
book such an event transpires for Eragon: “Please excuse my impertinence, sir, for I am ignorant of
the ways of Riders, but are you not human? I was told you were.” (Paolini, Eldest 578).

While the link is a great asset to the dragon and rider, when it is as intimate as a psychic
connection, it is also hazardous. When severed by the death of either rider or dragon, the trauma of
the split can cause depression and even the death of the surviving partner. In Eragon, the character
Brom is one of the few dragon-riders to survive the shock of his dragon’s death. ‘The pain is shock
enough – although it isn’t always a factor – but what really causes the damage is feeling part of
your mind, part of your identity, die.’ (Paolini, Eldest 281). Even though Brom remains a skilled
warrior and magician, he is still bitterly affected by the loss of his dragon, driven by a need for
vengeance against those responsible for her death.
affected by the loss of his dragon is Lytol. The man is routinely depicted as gloomy and miserable, unable to stand living among the dragon-riders anymore, dedicating himself to being a weaver and later the Warder to a Lord Holder instead. “Occasionally a dragonless man remained living, such as Lytol, Ruatha’s Warder, but he was half shadow and that indistinct self-lived in torment.” (McCaffrey 97).

For the dragon, however, this link, once severed, almost always results in death, either by shock or suicide. The dragons of Pern take their own lives following the death of their riders. Inheritance Cycle dragons, without fail, die from the shock of their rider’s death, except in situations where their soul enters and is permanently confined to an eldunari (a magical stone that holds a dragon’s consciousness).

How to Train Your Dragon exhibits a subtler and arguably safer bond than telepathy. The bonding takes place when Hiccup shares food, and earns the dragon’s trust through his attempts to get the crippled dragon to fly again. Instead, the connection is one built upon domestication, training, and a mutual trust. The dragons are trained to work with their riders and operate as friends, rather than as extensions of each other’s consciousness. The bond between Hiccup and Toothless is an especially good example of this cooperation. In How to Train Your Dragon 2 (Dean DeBlois, USA 2014), in an attempt to better understand his dragon, Hiccup constructs a flight suit so the pair can glide together. By operating on trust, the two are not explicitly linked, but they are so close that, in the sequel film, Hiccup can break the mind control of an Alpha Dragon over Toothless: “This is what it is to earn a dragon’s loyalty.” (How to Train Your Dragon 2). Regardless of how the bond manifests in dragon and rider, it is crucial for the pair to operate as without a legitimate bond the hero cannot be called a dragon-rider, they are instead just a person who rides a dragon.

Taking flight from a dragon’s back is the ultimate expression of the bond between the dragon and the rider. Their first flight or ride is treated as an important and defining moment for the characters. As mentioned previously, the ride causes a change in perspective for characters and can be treated as a rite of passage; they journey into a different world, arguably (considering the age of most riders in these narratives) that of adulthood. The ride occurs in How to Train Your Dragon when the artificial tail fin crafted by Hiccup allows him to work together with Toothless to fly. This ride also shows that the pair can only fly together, affirming the closeness of their bond. This connection is further deepened by the end of the first film; in the course of their battle against the Red Death, Hiccup loses his leg. At the end of the film Hiccup and Toothless share the symmetry of two disabled characters who, working together, can fly.

The ride for Eragon occurs when he has to flee his home after creatures hunting for him burn down his house. Saphira makes him climb atop her back and they fly as far as she can carry him. “Eragon yelled as the ground dropped away and they rose above the trees. Turbulence buffeted him, snatching the breath out of his mouth.” (Paolini, Eragon 71). This flight is not the epiphany of wonder that is seen with Hiccup and Lessa, but a harsh and brutal awakening to the dangerous realities of the world in which Eragon now lives. Saphira’s protective nature in this flight also reveals the degree of the bond between rider and dragon, showing a shift in the relationship from Eragon as Saphira’s carer to the two becoming equals. “You would not have been alive if we had stayed.” (Paolini, Eragon 78). Saphira shows that she is no longer dependent upon Eragon for food or shelter. Now both dragon and rider contribute to their relationship.

The reveal is perhaps the least necessary component of the dragon-rider narrative. It is, however, the component that shows the dragon-rider’s status compared to regular society and shows how he or she has become set apart. The reveal within How to Train Your Dragon occurs when Hiccup, upon the back of Toothless, shows to the Vikings what a dragon and human in cooperation
are truly capable of by slaying the monstrous Red Death. This reveal not only provides a solution to the long-standing conflict that has gripped the humans and dragons, but also demonstrates Hiccup’s worthiness as a ruler and future chief of his tribe. As Midkiff states in regards to Cressida Cowell’s novel on which the film is based “The protagonist boy and dragon both learn to define themselves individually rather than purely through antagonism and fear of each other as doubles.” (Midkiff 50). For Eragon, the reveal does not truly occur until he arrives at the rebel stronghold of Tronjheim and is seen and acknowledged as a dragon-rider by the resistance to the Empire. For the majority of the book, Eragon has had to hide the fact that he is a rider and slowly learn what this means. By making his identity and status public, he discovers his new-found place within the world as a powerful figure who ostensibly holds a position beyond even lords, kings, and emperors. He is now a key member of war councils and a person who is respected and even revered by the common folk: “despite your protests, the people here have certain expectations of you. They are going to bring you their problems, no matter how petty, and demand that you solve them.” (Paolini, Eragon 415). This is especially apparent after his defeat of the Shade, Durzha, wherein Eragon gains the title of Shadeslayer after he and Saphira work together to destroy the evil sorcerer.

The structure in progress (sex, lies, and dragons)

George R.R. Martin’s currently incomplete series A Song of Ice and Fire provides an example of the dragon-rider narrative structure in progress but not yet fully realised. Within the universe of A Song of Ice and Fire dragon-riders existed in the past, and over the course of the first four books a dragon-rider narrative is emerging focused around one of the many protagonists, Daenerys Targaryen. Martin’s series is also significant as it follows a similar trajectory of the heroine growing up, yet removes the dragon-riding trope from the young adult narrative and places it within the framework of an adult fantasy novel.

The encounter occurs at the end of A Game of Thrones (1996) with the hatching of Daenerys’ dragon eggs:

As Daenerys Targaryen rose to her feet, her black [dragon] hissed, pale smoke venting from its mouth and nostrils. The other two pulled away from her breasts and added their voices to the call, translucent wings unfolding and stirring the air, and for the first time in hundreds of years, the night came alive with the music of dragons. (Martin, A Game of Thrones 780).

The connection between Daenerys and the dragons at her breasts gives the impression of her as a maternal figure towards her dragons; their encounter is the act of her now possessing three children, in the aftermath of her miscarriage. The particular phrasing “music of dragons” also brings to mind that this is a momentous occasion which may have some spiritual significance, foreshadowing the later revelation that Daenerys is a figure of prophecy, the fabled “Prince that was Promised”. (Martin, A Feast for Crows 588). Of all of the encounters with dragon-riders that I have analysed, this is the most compelling and memorable.

The observation and bonding are somewhat tame compared to the encounter and take place over the course of A Clash of Kings (1998), with Daenerys noting the colours and temperaments of her dragons, particularly her closeness to the black dragon Drogon, which comes to a peak when they must escape the Warlocks of Qarth. In terms of their bond, however, Drogon, despite being raised by a human, is still a dragon and, in this setting, has the mind and muteness of an animal. This leads to him being unable to distinguish between people and other animals. With the exception of his adopted mother Daenerys, to Drogon they are all food. This is particularly apparent in the events leading up to the ride when he kills and eats a young child, and later attacks a gladiatorial
arena and devours both the gladiator and the wild boar she was fighting (Martin, *A Dance with Dragons* 881).

The power of a dragon has its appeal, but as noted in *Game of Thrones* (USA 2011-), the television adaptation of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, “They are dragons . . . they cannot be tamed.” (“The Ghost of Harrenhall”). Although the narratives featuring dragon-riding may thus appear to create a paradigm of domesticated dragon and controlling rider, this is perpetually undercut and complicated. Even in these texts the dragons remain a symbol of what Armstrong terms “the wildness” (189).

The ride finally occurs in *A Dance with Dragons* (2011), when Daenerys flies on Drogon’s back out of the gladiator pits that he has just destroyed: “The air was thick with sand. Dany could not see, she could not breathe, she could not think. The black wings cracked like thunder, and suddenly scarlet sands were beneath her.” (Martin, *A Dance with Dragons* 884). This freeing from the dust and sand also liberates Daenerys from a stagnating place in her life, where she had halted her march towards the land of Westeros and her rightful throne to try to bring peace to Slaver’s Bay. Her ride is a moment of clarity, enabling her to realise her position as a descendant of the dragon-riders, House Targaryen, providing insight to her heritage and quest.

*A Song of Ice and Fire* does not yet have an example of the *reveal*. However, judging from the course of the narrative, this series will follow the pattern that I have noted. This *reveal* will undoubtedly show Daenerys’ arrival in a populated area and will cause many to submit to her as a figure who is not only “The Mother of Dragons,” but also the rider of a dragon and true heir to her dynasty. This is also a clue that Daenerys may emerge as the ultimate victor in the “game of thrones”. Understandably, as Martin has yet to complete the series proper and, indeed is struggling to achieve this, the *reveal* is currently speculation. Within the television adaptation of Martin’s series, however, this situation has already occurred, as the show has since outpaced its source material. The reveal can be considered to have occurred in the episode “Battle of the Bastards” where Daenerys rides Drogon into battle and reduces several enemy ships to burning wrecks, effectively ending her conflict with the Slave Masters (Sapochnik). That the show writers also engaged with a dramatic *reveal*, despite Martin not yet having written this particular part of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, shows the resiliency and embeddedness of what I have identified as the key structure of the dragon-rider narrative.

**Conclusion**

Since the 1960s there has been considerable creative expansion and adaptation of the once, quite static, form of story-telling that is dragon-slaying. This is necessary for the type of narrative to survive in a changing literary landscape, particularly given recent shifts in perspective towards dragons. The dragon-slaying trope is likely to continue to have a place in literature, as it has shown over the millennia to be a durable archetype. However, perceptions of dragons are not as fixed as they once were. The dragon-riding phenomenon emerges from the current climate of changing views towards dragons, reflecting the human-animal studies’ trend of downplaying the monstrous “other” and highlighting the points of connection between people and other animals. This sentiment is reinforced by Sandra Unerman’s comments about morphing attitudes towards dangerous animals, which are no longer viewed as reflections of morality, but instead as creatures that live in a different fashion; for true evil humans must look at themselves.

Dragons are now often perceived on a spectrum, from animals that can be tamed, to the Tolkienian model of intelligent, powerful creatures, with whom communication is possible. While
the dragon-riding story reflects current thinking about the relationship between human and animal, examining the narrative through the lens of human-animal studies reveals the problematic way in which this trope works to deconstruct the dragon’s wildness. The dragon-riding narrative, particularly when incorporating Emily Midkiff’s idea of dragons as “doubles for humanity”(43), diminishes the significance of the dragon as separate and “other”.

Dragons arguably cannot be termed as creatures of mystery and faerie if they will so meekly allow a mortal to learn their secrets and utilise them like a glorified horse. The dragon is a paradoxical creature; it is both completely animal in appearance and yet frequently features as a human double in terms of intelligence. The dragon-rider narrative exists in an equally paradoxical state, on the one hand representing the confining and weakening of the animal, and on the other emphasising the connection and understanding that can eventuate from cooperation with the ‘other’.

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The Haunted Forest of *A Song of Ice and Fire*: a space of otherness

*Diana Marques*

Abstract: George R. R. Martin’s world of Westeros is inspired by the European medieval period, as stated several times by the author. In using history to confer authenticity to his world, Martin shapes certain elements not only of medieval history but also of its imagination. One of those elements is the forest. The medieval forest was considered a land legally set aside for specific purposes such as royal hunting. This notion of the forest as a separated space also influenced its portraying in medieval imagination as a counterpoint to the civilized world and as a space of chaos, danger and the supernatural, connected with pagan religions and cultures. These characteristics are also present in *A Song of Ice and Fire* particularly in the Haunted Forest.

The Haunted Forest is located in the North, beyond the Wall and is inhabited by the free folk or wildlings. It is a separated space and it carries much of the symbolic charge of the medieval forest. It is connected to the supernatural, to danger and to a culture regarded as barbarian. It is also associated with the mysterious creatures known as the Others – their identities established by the fact that they are different from the supposedly civilized world south of the Wall and are, therefore, dangerous. The aim of this article is to show how the forest is as a space of alterity, of otherness, where the real and the symbolic mix together, unveiling the fantastic aspect of the narrative in *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

Keywords: Forests, Fantasy, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Medieval Imagination, Otherness.

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Beyond the Wall the haunted forest stands as it stood in the Dawn Age, long before the Andals brought the Seven across the narrow sea.

(George R. R. Martin, *A Game of Thrones* 517)

Otherness is a characteristic of the other. It is a state of being different, alien to the social identity of someone and to the identity of the self. An example of otherness is when a group of individuals who relate to each other see others outside their group as dissimilar and, consequently, problematic. This
leads to exclusion and alienation of those who stand outside that group, because they are different from the collective social norm. However, the other only exists when there is a sense of self, and in order to achieve a complete sense of self the other is a necessary element, according to Bakhtin: “I become myself only by revealing myself to another, through another and with another’s help” (Bakhtin, qtd. in Todorov 96). In this sense, in the *A Song of Ice and Fire* books, it is in the Haunted Forest that otherness comes into question, because it is a place connected with the supernatural, from where strange and disruptive creatures are from, and from their difference arises the distrust and fear from those in the territory of Westeros.

Thus, the Haunted Forest contaminates with otherness those who come in contact with it, making them other: the wildlings, the Others and the men from the Night's Watch. The question of otherness in Martin’s work has also been approached by Anna Marynowska in her essay “The Cities and Aliens in George R. R. Martin’s ‘A Song of Ice and Fire’”, in which the focus is the relationship between cities and certain characters, and how otherness is expressed in those places as well as inside each character. A similar approach is intended here: this essay aims at exploring the space of the Haunted Forest in the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series as a construction influenced by the medieval forests, whether real or imaginary, as a space of otherness, and how the characters who are in contact with it are also regarded as other. However, before proceeding to the analysis, it is important to take into account fantasy’s relationship with the Middle Ages, since it influences the construction of the whole world of Westeros, as stated several times by the author, but also of the forest as a dangerous place of savage creatures that, eventually, are regarded as other.

The world of *A Song of Ice and Fire* is inspired by the medieval period, its history, geography, literature and imagination. In the basis of its plot are historical facts and figures which help to establish a bridge between the world of the reader, the Primary world, and the fantastic world, the Secondary world, created by the author. This gives the author a certain freedom to play with historical elements because accuracy is not the main goal. In fact, when confronted with what is historically unknown, the fantasy author has the liberty to build his own world even if it is inspired by historical elements, a point also made by Veronica Schanoes: “. . . [F]antasy represents the ways of knowing and making sense of the world that are excluded by the dominant discourse of history” (237). This allows the author to interpret the medieval period but also to reflect upon his own society and culture.

This connection between history, and particularly medieval history, and fantasy is clarified by John Clute when he states:

> Fantasy as a genre is almost inextricably bound up with history and ideas of history, reflected and reworked more or less thoroughly according to the needs, ambitions and intentions of individual authors. . . . To many writers and readers, a fantasy novel should be set against a quasi-historical (very often quasi-medieval) background, and the boundaries between historical novels and fantasy can be thin. (Clute 468)

Therefore, it is possible to understand that the Middle Ages has a profound influence in fantasy works and, specifically, in the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series providing the narrative with a realistic feel where fantastic elements are introduced. In the words of Martin himself: “That's the general process for doing fantasy, is you have to root it in reality. Then you play with it a little; then you add the imaginative element, then you make it largely bigger” (Hodgman). But it is also important to note that the world created by Martin is not a faithful representation of the Middle Ages itself, it is rather a narrative with a medieval setting where contemporary characters and dilemmas are introduced. This links Martin’s work to the concept of neomedievalism, proving that the Middle Ages have continually been reimagined in contemporary culture, and that popular culture is the main vehicle for the renewed interest in this period. Nevertheless, this is an imagined past, a frequently idealized and romanticized construction of the medieval era. In the words of Umberto Eco, “We are dreaming the Middle Ages” (64).
The interest in the Middle Ages started in the Victorian period, showing a certain nostalgia for a period of which much is imagined and little is known, perpetuating certain misconstrued notions about an idealized past that still linger to this day. This is called medievalism and, to Eco, in medievalism “the Middle Ages are taken as a sort of mythological stage on which to place contemporary characters” (68), an aspect previously noted about A Song of Ice and Fire. Eco is also the first one to use the word “neomedievalism”, writing that, “. . . we are witnessing . . . a period of renewed interest in the Middle Ages, with a curious oscillation between fantastic neomedievalism and responsible philological examination” (63). Although a stable definition of the term is difficult, neomedievalism may be considered as a reimagining of the medieval period with no concern for accuracy, reconstructing it instead of deconstructing it (Marshall 23).

In addition, despite Martin’s allegation of authenticity through a realistic attempt to portray the Middle Ages, dismissing other fantasy works as “Disneyland Middle Ages” (Hodgman). Martin does build a neomedieval setting where he depicts his own notion of the medieval period. This shows the author’s necessity to distance himself from previous depictions of the Middle Ages in fantasy works, offering a more realistic, violent, and dark portrayal of the period displaying, according to Shiloh Carroll, an attempt “. . . to create a hierarchy of fantasy texts in which gritty realism is privileged over traditional romantic neomedieval fantasy” (Carroll 60). The Haunted Forest, for example, becomes a much somber, darker, and dangerous territory than the forests of medieval romance with all their perils. David Marshall also adds that neomedievalism is, “. . . a self-conscious, ahistorical, non-nostalgic imagining or reuse of the historical Middle Ages that selectively appropriates iconic images . . . to construct a presentist space that disrupts traditional depictions of the medieval” (22). This disruptive nature also adheres perfectly to the A Song of Ice and Fire series because Martin breaks some of the medievalism clichés that have been perpetuated since the Victorian period, presenting a cruder reality with no sense of nostalgia whatsoever.

The Haunted Forest

The Haunted Forest bears some resemblances with the forests of the Middle Ages, whether real or imaginary, these concepts are important for a better understanding of the presence of the medieval aspects in the A Song of Ice and Fire series, and how they are mixed with the fantastic elements, particularly in the forest. The forests of Westeros are inspired by the forests of the Middle Ages as they were also separated territories with specific functions that influenced the social life of those who depended upon them. But the fact that they were spaces accessible only to some people, such as the king and his court, perpetuated the feeling of the forest as a strange and foreign place, sometimes dangerous, but also appealing. In this way it is also central to acknowledge the importance of the medieval imagination in the construction of the forest as a perilous and alien place, a place of the unknown. Jacques Le Goff regarded the imagination as a dimension of history, central for a full understanding of the Middle Ages and of the mental structures of those who lived in that period present in its literary and visual culture (1). The forest is a key element in the medieval imagination, especially in chivalric romances, as the scenario of the knight's adventures, where he proves his courage and his valor against monsters and enchantments. It is a space of possibilities and of the supernatural, where civilization, represented by the knight, proves its superiority over the wilderness. It is also possible to assert that in the space of the forest converges the real and the marvelous, in the sense that reality was transformed to create the imaginary aspect, something that is transported to the Haunted Forest in Martin’s world.

These elements of the medieval life and imagination are mixed together in the world created by Martin, and the forests of Westeros, especially those south of the Wall, bear more similarities with the real forests of the Middle Ages, whereas the forest known as the Haunted Forest, beyond the Wall, is more connected with the forests of the medieval imagination. The latter is a natural frontier between the known world and the unknown, it is the space of the supernatural, of monstrous
creatures, and those who inhabit it are considered barbarian, dangerous, and their identities are established because of their contrast with the supposedly civilized world in the South – they are other, whether one refers to the wildlings, the supernatural beings known as the Others, or even the members of the Night’s Watch. Based on the representation of the forest in medieval imagination and having in mind the idea of otherness, the following analysis intends to demonstrate how the Haunted Forest in the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series is a place of otherness and how it affects the characters who come in contact with it.

The territory of Westeros is limited by a giant man-made wall in the North which marks the border of the known territory governed by the king who sits on the Iron Throne. The Wall is reminiscent of Hadrian’s Wall in Scotland that marked the borders of the Roman Empire in Britannia, and protected it from the “barbaric” tribes in the North, such as the Picts. In Martin’s world, the Wall also protects Westeros from the unknown and dangerous ground far North known as the Lands of Always Winter, where the Haunted Forest is located. In direct relation to this forest are three groups of characters: the wildlings, the creatures known as the Others, and the Night’s Watch. All of them are regarded as other because they are in close contact with the forest, a space of otherness. It is this construction of the Haunted Forest as a space of otherness and its relationship with those who come in contact with it that will be the object of the ensuing analysis.

### The Wildlings

The Haunted Forest is inhabited by the wildlings or free folk, who refuse to bow before a king and are regarded as barbarians to those who live in the South:

> The largest and most numerous of the various peoples beyond the Wall named themselves the free folk, in their belief that their savage customs allow them lives of greater freedom than the kneelers of the south. And it is true that they live with neither lords nor kings and need bow to neither man nor priest, regardless of their birth or blood or station. (Martin, *The World of Ice and Fire* 147)

In this way, it is already possible to assert that the forest is a place outside civilization because those who inhabit it do not live according to any social contracts. The forest is, therefore, the space of the outsider, of those who do not abide by the laws – the outlaws.

In fact, that was also a reality in the Middle Ages as forests were also regarded as spaces of alterity in the sense that they stood apart from the social order, “. . . the forests were *foris*, ‘outside’”, the laws applied there were different, and its access was restricted to an elite (Harrison 61). Eventually, the forest also became associated with those who were in the margins, outside social order, such as the star-crossed lovers, the pariahs, outlaws, the persecuted, the wild and mad men. But by seeking refuge in the forest, these people were also violating the Forest Law, a concept created in England by King William, the Conqueror in order to protect the King’s Forest which, as the name suggests, was a forest used solely by the king where he could hunt. From then on the forest became a legal and administrative concept with special laws that protected the animals and that restricted its access to the rest of the population (Postan 22). The King's forest was, according to the exchequer of King Henry II, “. . . a safe abode for wild animals, not all of them but only the woodland ones, and not everywhere, but in particular places suitable for the purpose”, and “. . . has its own laws, based, it is said, not on the Common Law of the realm, but on the arbitrary legislation of the King . . .” (Johnson 60).

The King, then, became the legislator of the forest and the one in charge of ordering the proper punishments. The forest was, therefore, a restricted area with specific laws, and a dangerous space for those who tried to access it illegally. Nevertheless, criminals sought refuge in the forest and, in this way, entered the “. . . *shadow of the law* . . . The shadow of the law is not opposed to law but follows it around like its other self, or its guilty conscience” (Harrison 63). Thus, those who
inhabit or come from the forest are regarded as different and alien to society, contrasting with those living in the civilized world. Civilization, then, gave men a sense of belonging and safety, while the forest gave a sense of unrest, exclusion and isolation. The same dynamic applies to the Haunted Forest in Martin’s fantasy series, as those who inhabit it or have any contact with it are regarded with distrust and are considered alien to society. In this way, the wildlings become other because they live in the forest, an isolated territory, they do not abide any laws nor subject before any king, being socially excluded.

It is also noted that the wildlings particularly celebrated the gods of the forest: “The countless tribes and clans of the free folk remain worshippers of the old gods of the First Men and children of the forest, the gods of the weirwood trees...” (Martin, The World of Ice and Fire 147). It is possible to acknowledge, then, that the wildlings worshipped gods connected to nature, an aspect that is reminiscent of pagan cultures, such as the Celts, which also revered nature and its elements, and regarded the forest as a sacred space. Because of its connection to these ancient cultures, in the Middle Ages the forest was the last stance of pagan beliefs and rituals, and it was considered a space of chaos, disorder, the unknown, and evil, in conflict with Christian values. In the words of Corinne Saunders, forests were “... landscapes of the unknown” (3) and, therefore, dangerous.

Being connected with paganism, the forest was a hostile place because it was a remembrance of, for example, the druids in Celtic forests, of sorcerers and of their obscure rituals. In fact, in De Bello Civili, a 1st century poem by the roman poet Lucan, several forests in Gaul are described as being the place of barbarian acts and strange cults. It also mentions a forest near Marseille that was destroyed by Caesar where the trunks of the trees were carved with the faces of the gods. There were barbaric acts practiced in honour of the gods with many terrible offerings, and the trees were splattered with human blood (Lucan, 447–453). The same dynamic can be recognized in A Song of Ice and Fire, in the importance attributed to the weirwood trees in the north of Westeros, which have faces carved in their trunks, “... perhaps to give eyes to their gods so that they might watch their worshippers at their devotions” (Martin, The World of Ice and Fire 6).

Furthermore, Tacitus, in the Annales, also mentions an attack to the island of Mona, in Wales, in the 1st century, a place associated with the druids, in order to weaken the Celtic tribes and society, where forests are described as sacred and dedicated to barbarious superstitions (XIV 30). It is a possibility that the Church was influenced by these and other descriptions of classical authors and ended up regarding the forest as a space with values opposite to the Christian ones, where demons and spirits of nature lived, where the pagan gods still dwelled, and where barbarian and wild men lived – it was the space of a pre-Christian cultural memory that needed to be destroyed: “... when forests are destroyed, it is not only an accumulated history of natural growth that vanishes. A preserve of cultural memory also disappears” (Harrison 62).

As the space of the supernatural where demons and gods lived, the forest in Celtic myth was also the space of the Otherworld, a place where the borders between the real, human world and the Otherworld blurred. It was a natural and supernatural place and the possibility to walk between both worlds was real (Chadwick 183). This is noticeable in some Celtic literature, such as the Welsh Celtic tale “Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed”, in the Mabinogion, where the character Pwyll comes in contact with Arawn, sovereign of the Otherworld, by means of entering the forest. With this in mind, the Haunted Forest in Martin’s work is also regarded as a heathen place with no order, contrasting with the main religion of Westeros, the Faith of the Seven. Whereas members of the Faith of the Seven worship several aspects of the same god, something very similar to Christian faith, the people in the North, including the wildlings, believe in a more animistic view of the world, similar to Celtic beliefs. In this way, otherness is also established by having a different religion, a different system of belief, connected to that same place that is feared: the forest and nature in general.

The wildlings may also be interpreted as representative of Norse and Germanic tribes in contrast with the civilization of southern Europe. This supposed division between North and South
is visible in the classical period where the Celtic, Norse and Germanic tribes were considered barbarian and non-civilized, with strange customs and rituals. This thought was perpetuated long after, when the Roman Empire was considered the height of civilization and knowledge only to decline and collapse at the hands of invading "barbarians" from north of Europe in the 5th century, and later with the Viking invasions of the 8th century that devastated Continental Europe and the British Isles. The North was, therefore, associated with danger and death. In fact, in medieval imagination, the North of Europe was a symbolic space connected to violence and destruction, and Northmen were considered enemies of the Christian civilization, as well as "... looters of property, destroyers of human life..." (Rix 1). They were considered barbarian because they lived outside the Roman Empire and were not familiar, leading to misleading stereotypes (Rix 2). The same happens when it comes to the wildlings in the world of Westeros: they are regarded as barbarian and dangerous because they live beyond the Wall, and are strangers to everyone in Westeros.

In the world of George R. R. Martin, the belief that those who live in the Haunted Forest are wild men is several times mentioned, as when Bowen Marsh says to Jon Snow: “These are wildlings. Savages, raiders, rapers, more beast than man” (Martin, A Dance with Dragons 572). This mention to bestiality is also important because the forest is also a space of transformation and transfiguration. In a symbolic way, those who lived or who were in constant contact with the forest were regarded as non-human, contaminated by the supernatural aura of the forest: “One could not remain human in the forest; one could only rise above or sink below the human level” (Harrison 61). That is the reason why the free folk are also known as wildlings, because those who entered an alien space could not preserve their humanity and would turn into wild beings. Thus, here is another form of otherness: the wild as opposed to the human and the civilized.

The Others

From the Haunted Forest also come the strange creatures known as the Others. Not much has been written about them but they are non-human beings described as: “Tall... and gaunt and hard as old bones, with flesh pale as milk” (Martin, A Game of Thrones 8), with “Blue [eyes]. As bright as blue stars, and as cold” (Martin, A Clash of Kings 370). The identity of these creatures is established by contrast with what it is known. In fact, notions of self-identity have always been equated with Good, while Evil is associated with otherness, consequently relating otherness to exteriority and danger. These ideas reinforce the notion that the other is someone to be feared, an opponent, guilty of all things, usually connected to the devil: “It is this proclivity to demonize alterity as a menace to our collective identity which so easily issues in hysterical stories about invading enemies...” (Kearney 65). Therefore, these creatures in the world of Westeros are the Others because not much is known about them, they are different, dangerous, and it was believed that they were nothing more than legends, since they have not been seen for thousands of years. They are also associated with death, since they are able to raise dead people upon touching them, creating those known as wights, who can be easily identified because of their bright blue eyes. They are the Others because “... otherness is other-than-the-same”, and no creature can match them (Treanor 4).

The Others come from beyond the Wall and throughout the novels they always appear in the Haunted Forest, whether when they kill Ser Wayman Royce (Martin, A Game of Thrones 10–11) or when Samwell Tarly kills an Other using a dragonglass dagger (Martin, A Storm of Swords 252–253). This makes the forest a space connected with monstrous and evil creatures, an aspect influenced by the medieval imagination that placed such creatures in the space of the forest. It placed, for instance, a mysterious Green Knight in the forest of Wirral, in the medieval English work Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (ca. 1340–1400), as well as giants and a creature known as the Questing Beast in the forest of the Le Morte D’Arthur (1485), of Sir Thomas Malory. Hence, in Martin’s world, the Others are one of the fantastic elements in a work that offers a narrative more
focused on realistic aspects: they are unknown creatures, inhuman and no character can relate to them.

The Others are also in opposition to Daenerys and her dragons, the former representing the forces of Ice and the latter representing the forces of Fire, the two conflicting forces that give name to this fantasy series. Thus, the Fire symbolizes the human heart and passion against the coldness of the inhuman creatures, because the Others bring death and chaos, a counterpoint to human life and social order.

**The Night’s Watch**

It is also interesting to note that the Haunted Forest acts as a natural border between civilization and barbarism, that civilization defended by the Wall of ice and by the Night's Watch, a brotherhood with several symbolic associations. The existence of this order is deeply connected with the Others, since its foundation dates back to the end of an event known as the Long Night. The Long Night is how people in Westeros refer to a period when winter lasted a generation, leading to famine and terror. It is also said that during that time the Others came to Westeros “... bringing the cold and darkness with them as they sought to extinguish all light and warmth” (Martin, *The World of Ice and Fire* 11). The first men of the Night's Watch were the ones able to defeat the Others, winning the Battle for the Dawn, ending the long winter, and sending the Others to the far North. That was the time when the Wall was made, and from then on the men of the Night's Watch vowed to defend Westeros from the menacing and dangerous forces that lie beyond the Wall (Martin, *The World of Ice and Fire* 12). The building of the Wall, then, becomes a geographical border but also a cultural one, making a distinction between those who live outside and inside it: “... [T]he national We is defined over and against the foreign Them. Borders are policed to keep nationals in and aliens out” (Kearney 65). In this sense, the Wall also symbolizes the limits of what is other and what is not.

Thus, the Night’s Watch represents the opposing forces of men versus monstrous or supernatural creatures. They are vigilantes, protectors of civilization against the danger of the unknown. They live near the Wall, a threshold between human society and the forces of nature which are uncontrollable. They are knights that show their prowess and courage when confronted with powers greater than them. In fact, in medieval imagination, and specifically in chivalric romance, the forest plays a central role in the journey of the knight, assuming itself as a space of potential adventure and escape (Saunders 44). In medieval romance the knight is the hero of civilization that fights against disorder and chaos, a representative of the Christian faith in a pagan or godless space, as is the case of the knight Gawain in* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. He also acts as a counterpoint to the wild man because the only thing that distinguishes one from the other is the social contract. For Robert Pogue Harrison, the knights of medieval romance are wild men that became heroes of the social order, “... yet who must periodically return to the forest in order to rediscover within themselves the alienated source of their prowess, the wild man’s prowess” (66). In this way, the knight is introduced in the world of the forest, a world where logic laws are suspended, to re-establish and reaffirm the social order (Harrison 68). This dynamic is similar when it comes to the Night’s Watch. They are protectors of the social order against otherness beyond the Wall – the wildlings and the Others. They also prove their bravery when they are in the forest, and their courage is confirmed when they have to fight those living in the forest, confirming the superiority of the civilized against the wild.

But although the knights of the Night’s Watch are on the side of civilization they are set apart of it as well, because the brotherhood is constituted by outlaws, criminals, illegitimate sons and noble men who lost their honour. They also have a more somber and sullen aura than the knights of medieval romance, where they represented specific ideals and had particular values. These Westerosi men wear austere and black clothing, and when the recruits are ready to enter the brotherhood they pledge to never marry nor have children, to not inherit any lands and to sever their
family bonds. They also bow to no king, dedicating their lives exclusively to defending Westeros and the Wall against the perils that lie beyond it. These knights belong to a military order and they defend civilization from everything that endangers it, but at the same time they are marginalized men, outlaws, men that live in the shadows of society. In this way, it is possible to state that those who are outcasts are the ones who fight those who are outside society as well.

Hence, the fact that the Night's Watch is the military order that protects the civilized world of men against the dangerous and strange creatures from the Haunted Forest, alludes to the medieval idea that the knight is the one destined to protect society’s values, and to the idea that it is necessary a special type of men to do it. These men from the Night's Watch are, therefore, symbolically similar to the forest itself and to those who inhabit or come from it: they are viewed as a threat to society, since they are outlaws and criminals, and they do not conform to imposed moral standards. They also do not obey any king, they have their own rules, they are in constant contact with the same supernatural world of the forest and, thus, are the ones fit to protect the civilized world.

The otherness from the men in the Night’s Watch arises because they live in a frontier where they are always in contact with other elements of alterity. In this way, one’s identity depends on the contact with the other, as stated by Mikhail Bakhtin:

> It turns out that every internal experience occurs on the border, it comes across another, and this essence resides in this intense encounter. . . . Man has no internal sovereign territory; he is all and always on the boundary; looking within himself, he looks in the eyes of the other or through the eyes of the other. . . . I cannot do without the other; I cannot become myself without the other; I must find myself in the other, finding the other in me (in mutual reflection and perception). (Bakthin, qtd. in Todorov 96)

This applies to the men in the Night’s Watch who are other to society due to their backgrounds, but who also live in the border between two different worlds. This is also particularly evident in the case of Jon Snow, one of the point of view characters who live in the Wall, because he always feels out of place and sees himself as other. Firstly, because he is an illegitimate son of Eddard Stark, never fully accepted in the Stark family and in society; but also in the Night’s Watch because he is regarded as someone who thinks himself better than the other men, due to his education in a noble family. His internal experience as other is similar to that of the other men of the Night’s Watch who, in the eyes of society, are also other. But their identities and presence are recognized and legitimated because they belong to Westeros and they fight against those who represent a threat to society: the wildlings and the Others.

**Conclusion**

In the Middle Ages, the forest was considered as a separated space. Those who lived there were regarded with distrust and contaminated by the mysterious aura of the forest. It was also a microcosm, a place of pre-Christian cults and rites in a period where Christianity was trying to impose itself, rejecting everything that went against its doctrines. Consequently, the forest became the place of the unknown, of the supernatural, where strange and pagan creatures lived, of wild men, standing opposite to life in the civilized world. The forest ended up being the place of the natural and of the supernatural, where relationships between man and space are established, both in his daily life and in his imagination, where both are influenced by each other. These aspects seem to merge in the Haunted Forest created by George R. R. Martin, where the supernatural effect is created and a sense of wonder is always present.

In this forest lie the spirits of the First Men, the first humans to set foot on Westeros, as Jon Snow states in his thoughts: "This is the haunted forest, he told himself. Maybe there are ghosts here, the spirits of the First Men. This was their place, once” (Martin, *A Clash of Kings* 509). Thus,
it carries an old heritage and stands as a space of cultural memory. But the Haunted Forest stands more prominently as a space of danger and of strangeness. It contains the souls of those who have departed, but also the life of those who live outside social norms and are considered savage: the wildlings. They live outside civilization, in the wilderness of the forest, and they also do not live according to social contracts, although there is a structure in the wildlings’ way of life. The forest is, therefore, representative of otherness because it shelters those who stand outside society, who question it, and are regarded as different.

The Haunted Forest is also a space connected with creatures whose identity is established by the fact that they are different, frightening and regarded as evil: the Others. These creatures are truly other, they are one of the main threats to the world of Westeros, they represent the unknown and the monstrous, the legends that come to life to reclaim their past and overshadow the present. These Others metaphorically embody the fear of death and of the destruction of civilization by an alien race.

Finally, in direct relationship with the Haunted Forest is the Night’s Watch, the men who protect Westeros from the dangerous creatures that lie north of the Wall. But although they are men from Westeros, they are not a part of society. They are not the knights of the medieval romance, they are ostracized knights who live in the margins of society, in the border between the known world, Westeros, and the unknown, north of the Wall. In this way, they are also “others”, because they do not fit in with social norms, they fight wild men and stand up to supernatural and alien creatures that endanger the world as it is known. Being in constant contact with the Haunted Forest, they become outlandish men as well, who stand apart but also stand out from society.

Thus, Martin is trying to show that everyone has some kind of otherness inside themselves. In A Song of Ice and Fire, otherness is embodied in a particular space, the Haunted Forest, but it is also inside each character, their identities truly revealed when confronted with an other. Martin creates certain expectations in the reader just to destroy and subvert them. In this case, he builds what apparently seems a dualist tension between the forces of Ice and Fire, light and dark, Good and Evil, just to show that Man is not made of only one thing; people are multifaceted beings and have these dualities inside themselves, making them more complex.

Hence, the forest stands as a strange land of strange creatures and of strange events. It presents the reader with aspects of threat to and disruption from society: the forest as a space of chaos and disorder, of the unknown, of wild men and supernatural creatures, but also of outcast knights in charge of containing the threat of the supernatural hanging over civilization and order. And because these knights represent danger and are apart from the social order, they are also other. The wildlings, the Others, the Night’s Watch and the Haunted Forest are all constructions of otherness because they are in contrast with civilization, the known world and social order. The Haunted Forest marks, then, the border between the known and the unknown world, the danger of forgotten myths and legends, of barbarian men with their bizarre and wild beliefs, and of a night that represents ignorance and all the fears of Man.

Works Cited


The Favor of the Gods: Religion and Power in George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*

José Luis De Ramón Ruiz

Abstract: This article examines the relationship between power and religion in Westeros, the continent created by George R. R. Martin in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Participants in the conflict of Westeros, I argue, embrace religion as a source of legitimacy to gain power and to support their claims. By doing so, the conflict acquires a religious dimension. They are not only fighting a civil war, but also a religious war.

Keywords: George R. R. Martin, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, power, religion.

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George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* tells a story about power. The death of King Robert Baratheon leads to a power struggle known as the War of the Five Kings. His death – and the discovery that his sons were born of incest between Queen Cersei Lannister and her brother Jaime – leaves a power vacuum that rival factions try to fill. Stannis and Renly Baratheon, King Robert’s brothers, rise up in arms to claim the Iron Throne for themselves. Balon Greyjoy restarts his rebellion to become independent from the Seven Kingdoms. Robb Stark is proclaimed King in the North and marches south to attack the Lannisters in retaliation for killing Eddard Stark, Robb’s father. The Lannisters, on their part, support Robert’s false sons’ claim to the Iron Throne. It would be easy to view these events solely as a complex series of military actions, but the power struggle has far more interesting dimensions.

Of particular interest to me is the nature of power in Martin’s books – where it comes from, how it is justified, and how it is maintained. In this article, I explore how both hard and soft power are obtained and used by various characters in Westeros, and how claims to the Iron Throne are validated. Religion, I argue, becomes an important source of power and legitimacy. In Martin’s world, religion is not a mere set of practices and beliefs; it is an ideological territory in which several characters ground (or attempt to ground) their political claims. Religion, of course, is not the only source of legitimacy in Westeros. Scholars (e.g., Martínez) have identified other forms of legitimacy, such as human or genealogical, in the early stages of the war. This article demonstrates how religion also becomes a foundation of power and legitimacy that kings and queens in Westeros employ to pursue their political interests.

As we will see, all the characters discussed in this article align themselves with a faith to obtain power and legitimacy, and all of them go about doing so in different ways. Stannis Baratheon resorts to the divine right that the red priestess Melisandre confers on him in his quest to win the
Iron Throne. Similarly, Queen Mother Cersei attempts to use the Faith of the Seven to obtain power and legitimize the Lannisters’ sovereignty. She creates a religious army and seeks the support of the Faith for her son’s claim. The Greyjoys use religion as a quality that differentiates them from the other kingdoms and validates their claim for independence. Finally, Arya Stark finds in religion her last hope to obtain power and avenge her family. Actual belief is not necessary to enable one to use a religion to gain power in Westeros; as I will show, the appearance of faith will suffice.

I will begin with a discussion of power in Martin’s work and then offer examples of how characters in the novels attempt to gain power through religious legitimacy. As a consequence, I will argue, the conflict acquires a religious dimension. It is not only a civil war, but also a religious one; religion becomes part of the war rhetoric of Westeros that justifies the conflict.

**Power in *A Song of Ice and Fire***

The characters’ desire for power is the main driving force in Martin’s narrative. The notion of power presented in the novels is in line with Robert Dahl’s “bedrock idea of power” (202). For this political theorist and Yale University professor, “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (202–203). Basic as this definition may seem, it encapsulates the “notion that seems to lie behind [power, influence, control, and authority]” (202). That is, power ultimately aims to get others to do what you want. In this way, Martin portrays power as the capacity to control others in Westeros.

But what constitutes power for those fighting in the war? Pablo Iglesias, a politician and a professor at Complutense University of Madrid, identifies and defines two main sources of power in Westeros, the sword and the shadow. Iglesias equates the sword with hard power and the shadow with soft power (96). The sword (or hard power) is the strength of your army, which coerces your enemies. The shadow (or soft power) is your ability to influence others without threats (97). Indeed, for Joseph Nye, a political scientist and professor at Harvard University, soft power is the ability to “obtain the outcomes [that a country] wants in world politics because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it…. This soft power – getting others to want the outcomes that you want – co-opts people rather than coerces them” (5). In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, power manifests itself both as coercion and as the ability to inspire and attract others in a non-violent way.

The dialogue between Renly and Stannis Baratheon in *A Clash of Kings* (hereafter *ACOK*), the second book of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, illustrates the importance of both hard and soft power in Martin’s work. The brothers, two contenders in the War of the Five Kings, meet to discuss a possible alliance:

[Renly:] “The Iron Throne is mine by rights. All those who deny that are my foes.”
[Stannis:] “The whole of the realm denies it, brother…. Old men deny it with their death rattle, and unborn children deny it in their mothers’ wombs. They deny it in Dorne and they deny it on the Wall. No one wants you for their king. Sorry.”
[Renly:] “Look across the fields, brother. Can you see all those banners?”
[Stannis:] “Do you think a few bolts of cloth will make you king?”
[Renly:] “Tyrell swords will make me king. Rowan and Tarly and Caron will make me king, with axe and mace and warhammer.” (Martin, *ACOK* 356–59)

As Renly’s elder brother, Stannis is the rightful heir and has the best claim to the Iron Throne, yet he is the underdog at the moment of this conversation. Renly has attracted an enormous army to his cause, while hardly anyone acknowledges Stannis as their king. Why? Renly cleverly uses soft
power to create a narrative around himself that supports his claim to the Iron Throne. He presents himself as a “great king, strong yet generous, clever, just, diligent, loyal to my friends and terrible to my enemies, yet capable of forgiveness, patient” (Martin, ACOK 360). Stannis, however, appears ill-tempered, anti-social, and rigid. Even if Renly is not the rightful heir, the other lords perceive his claim as more appealing and more just than his brother’s. Renly is undoubtedly more powerful than his brother; he has a much larger army (hard power) as a consequence of the love of his soldiers and the other lords who believe in his cause (soft power). Stannis’ failure to acknowledge the importance of soft power proves detrimental to his claim.

Both soft and hard power are necessary to rule in Westeros. As several political experts point out, “all true contenders to the throne will have to embody a principle of legitimacy; power by itself, force by itself, however terrible it might be, will never be strong enough to guarantee a stable legality” (Iraberri, Alegre, & Iglesias 41). An army by itself is not enough to rule. It must be accompanied by legitimacy (a form of soft power) – that is, the narrative that supports and gives validity to one’s claim beyond physical might, as in the case of Renly.

But what legitimizes a cause in Martin’s story? Rubén Martínez, a law professor at the University of Valencia, identifies three types of legitimacy: genealogical, divine, and human legitimacy. All three elements contribute to the creation of a narrative that legitimizes a ruler. First, genealogical legitimacy refers to the inherited right of kings and queens to rule. Second, divine legitimacy relies on god’s will and presents the ruler as god’s chosen. Finally, human legitimacy relates to Machiavelli’s notion of being simultaneously loved and feared (Martínez 60–63). Martínez suggests that the two main types of legitimacy in Westeros are genealogical and human. According to him, “[religious legitimacy] is weaker because the fantastic construction of the world in the show manages without the existence of Christianity” (62). However, as we will see, religious legitimacy does, in fact, come to occupy the central position in the war.

The theory proposed by Martínez is a useful lens through which to analyze legitimacy in the early stages of the war. The Lannisters base their legitimacy on the assumption that Joffrey is King Robert’s son (genealogical legitimacy). However, as soon as the incest scandal comes to light and Joffrey is revealed as the bastard son of Jaime Lannister, his claim to the Iron Throne weakens considerably, and the War of the Five Kings breaks out. Lacking legitimacy, the Lannisters maintain power only because they have the biggest army once Renly is killed by his brother. Robb Stark, another contestant in the war, is legitimized as King in the North by his people (human legitimacy). He embodies the values of the North as opposed to those of the South, and his people prefer to be ruled by someone who holds their values. As he loses the love and respect of his people, his army grows progressively weaker. Stannis, as we have seen, justifies his claim on genealogical grounds.

Genealogical and human legitimacy become increasingly irrelevant as the books progress. After the murder of Robb Stark and the defeat of Stannis in King’s Landing, the political and social

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1 All translations from Spanish are mine.
2 Martínez’s article examines the question of power in the first four seasons of the TV adaptation of A Song of Ice and Fire. Those four seasons cover the events narrated in the first three books of Martin’s saga, where religion did not play as key a role in King’s Landing as it does in the following books. Yet Christianity is present from the beginning in both the show and the books. As Ryan Mitchell Wittingslow, a professor at the University of Groningen, points out, “the Faith [of the Seven] functions in much the same way as the Roman Catholic Church did during the High Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as an indelible and unavoidable part of the lifeworlds of Westerosi, whether by virtue of its undeniable influence upon social and cultural mores, its political clout or its metaphysical content” (114). The role that the Faith of the Seven plays in the politics of the capital becomes evident in book four with the arrival of the sparrows.
3 This article analyzes the treatment of power in Westeros. Because Daenerys Targaryen is not yet part of the political scenario, she is omitted from this analysis. However, she does not use religion as a source of power during her quest for dominance in the continent of Essos. Her three dragons – the most powerful army in the world created by Martin – and the Unsullied constitute her hard power, while her soft power derives solely from human and genealogical legitimacy. If she manages to control her dragons and assert her genealogical legitimacy as a Targaryen in Westeros, she would have the best chance to win the Iron Throne.

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situation in Westeros grows so chaotic that the traditional order based on genealogical and human legitimacy crumbles. There are no known rightful heirs to the Iron Throne. In addition, treason and conspiracy are everywhere, eroding the trust on which human legitimacy depends. In this new situation, contestants need a different type of legitimacy to gain and maintain power, and they resort to religious legitimacy.

Religion, then, becomes a foundation of power in Westeros. For Arthur Greil, a professor of sociology at Alfred University, religion is “a cultural resource over which competing interest groups may vie. From this perspective, religion is not an entity but a claim made by certain groups and – in some cases – contested by others to the right of privileges associated in a given society with the religious label” (qtd. in Introvigne 109). In Martin’s story, the different factions taking part in the war use (or attempt to use) a religious label to ground their political claims and legitimize their privilege to rule over the other houses of Westeros.

Stannis Baratheon and R’hllor

Stannis embraces religion as a source of both soft and hard power during the war. Importantly, his dependence on religion to maintain his claim becomes increasingly necessary as the books advance. Eventually, as we will see, religion will become his last hope to win the Iron Throne. Stannis adopts the foreign faith of R’hllor, the Lord of Light. This religion is based on the existence of two opposing gods: “On one side is R’hllor, the Lord of Light, the Heart of Fire, the God of Flame and Shadow. Against him stands the Great Other whose name may not be spoken, the Lord of Darkness, the Soul of Ice, the God of Night and Terror” (Martin, Storm 288). Yet Stannis is not a godly man: “I stopped believing in gods the day I saw the Windproud break up across the bay. Any gods so monstrous as to drown my mother and father would never have my worship” (Martin, ACOK 123).

Why, then, does he embrace this exotic religion and take part in the conflict between these two gods? The answer is power. As Stannis himself declares, “I know little and care less of gods, but the red priestess has power” (Martin, ACOK 123). He hopes that this power will help him gain the Iron Throne.

However, adopting this new religion and having Melisandre, the red priestess, by his side harms his claim as well. In order to comply with the dictates of his new religion, Stannis must make unpopular decisions such as burning alive those “infidels” who refuse to accept the new religion. Likewise, statues of the Seven, the traditional gods of Westeros, are also burned, greatly offending many of his people. Yet Stannis knows that if he is to win the throne, he needs to do something out of the ordinary to overcome his adversaries. Despite being the rightful king, his claim has always been the weakest; as his brother points out, nobody wants him to be the king. Stannis perceives religion (and the power of the supernatural that derives from it) as a powerful ally to beat his enemies regardless of the aversion it causes among some of his people. Stannis uses religion to increase his army (hard power) and to justify his claim according to god’s will (soft power).

Regarding hard power, Stannis is interested in the power of the supernatural that his newly adopted religion can offer to coerce his enemies. Through Melisandre, he uses this power to kill Renly and seize his army. The sacrifices Melisandre demands raise moral issues for him, yet as his army grows smaller, he needs to rely ever more heavily on those sacrifices. In the TV adaptation of A Song of Ice and Fire, Stannis even burns his own daughter to gain the favor of the Lord of Light while he is in a dire situation before a battle. This is what Neil Price, a professor of anthropology at Uppsala University, calls “supernatural empowerment of violence” – essentially the way in which the physical prosecution of warfare was supported by a structure of rituals intended to produce
success in battle” (abstract). In the same way, the religious sacrifices of Melisandre are meant to help Stannis win battles and destroy his enemies.

The faith of the Lord of Light also gives Stannis a new justification for his cause (soft power); he needs to become king, not only because he is Robert’s rightful heir, but also because he is the reincarnation of Azor Ahai, a legendary hero who is meant to save the world from the Lord of Darkness. Stannis is R’hllor’s chosen one, as the red priestess Melisandre reminds us throughout the books. Clearly, this confers on Stannis the divine right in his quest to win the throne. After the terrible defeat that he suffers at the Battle of the Blackwater, his quest seems finished; his fleet is destroyed, and most of his men have died or bent their knee to the Lannisters. It is the religious dimension of his task that keeps his claim alive: “After the battle, when I [Stannis] was lost to despair, the Lady Melisandre bid me gaze into the hearthfire” (Martin, Storm 414). In the flames, Melisandre shows him that “the battle is begun [the battle between the Lord of Light and the Great Other]. . . . Westeros must unite beneath her one true king, the prince that was promised, Lord of Dragonstone and chosen of R’hllor” (Martin, Storm 414). It does not matter if Stannis has lost the war against the Lannisters; he still has to fulfill his destiny as Azor Ahai and fight the religious war, which, according to Melisandre, will eventually gain him the Iron Throne.

As we see, the war acquires a new dimension for Stannis, for he is no longer fighting a civil war, but a religious war. We do not know whether Stannis truly believes in this religious prophecy, yet it assures that he will rule Westeros one day, and that is all that matters to him. After the Lannisters destroy his whole army, religion is his only hope to win the throne; his claim to the Iron Throne is still legitimized by his divine right as Azor Ahai.

Cersei Lannister and the Faith of the Seven

In a similar manner, Queen Mother Cersei Lannister attempts to use the Faith of the Seven as a tool to obtain power and to achieve her political goals. The religion of the Seven believes in the existence of one god that manifests itself in seven different forms: the father, the mother, the maiden, the warrior, the smith, the crone, and the stranger. Each of these manifestations grants a different gift; worshippers pray to the warrior for strength or to the mother for mercy, for example. The most widespread religion in Westeros, the Seven is also the faith of the royal family in King’s Landing, the capital of the Seven Kingdoms.

Initially, this religion is completely irrelevant to the political life of the kingdom. As Carolyne Larrington, a professor of English literature at St. John’s College, notes, “the Faith [of the Seven] has been deliberately excluded from the political processes of the realm; there’s no place for the High Septon on the Small Council . . . . no regular attendance at the equivalent of mass for the nobility or the knightly classes” (134). Religion is a mere formality. People at court are expected to be religious, but nobody truly takes it into account. Even the High Septons, the heads of the Faith of the Seven, are sometimes portrayed as corrupt and lavish.

After the War of the Five Kings, the seemingly politically irrelevant Faith of the Seven becomes central in the political life of King’s Landing with the arrival of “the sparrows.” The sparrows are a social religious movement that “invades” the capital out of necessity; they are poor men and women who have nowhere else to go once their lives are destroyed by the war. Having seen the atrocities of the war against their faith, they demand the protection of the Iron Throne. Every day great numbers of sparrows arrive at the capital, and their leader ultimately becomes High

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4 The support of the Iron Bank is also important for Stannis’ claim. In A Dance with Dragons, Tycho Nestoris from the Iron Bank searches for Stannis and plans to back his claim with gold if Stannis agrees to take on the crown's debt. As it does in the TV adaptation, this gold may allow Stannis to further enlarge his army—hard power is still quite necessary.
Septon. Unlike his predecessors, this new “High Sparrow” is a deeply religious man who aims to protect the Faith of the Seven and enforce its dogma.

Cersei sees an opportunity to use this new religious group to increase her hard and soft power. To that end, she offers to arm the sparrows so that they can protect themselves and their faith. The Queen Mother decides to restore the ancient “Faith Militant,” the religious military orders of the Seven. She hopes that this new religious army will help her fight the “infidel” Stannis Baratheon and the northmen. According to her, “[the killing of septons and septas] is the work of Stannis and his red witch, and the savage northmen who worship trees and wolves” (Martin, Feast 416). She conveniently blames her enemies for killing the faithful and claims revenge for the victims, thereby helping to turn the conflict from a civil war into a religious war.

The Queen Mother also uses religion as a source of soft power to legitimize her son’s reign. Among the things that she demands in exchange for restoring the Faith Militant, she wants the High Sparrow to give King Tommen his blessing: “The blessing was an empty ritual, she knew, but rituals and ceremonies had power in the eyes of the ignorant” (Martin, Feast 414).

Adherents to this renovated faith, however, do not see legitimizing other people’s power as their primary end. Instead, they aim to become a power in their own right to enforce the law of the Seven in the kingdom. To that end, they create their own religious tribunal where they utilize “the practices of the Inquisition: isolation, threats, torture and public confession” (Larrington 136). Their power grows so strong that they even imprison the Queen Mother Cersei and Margaery Tyrell, Tommen’s queen. When they release Cersei, the sparrows make her walk naked on the streets of King’s Landing as a punishment for her sins. Religion clearly subverts traditional forms of power and legitimacy in King’s Landing. Traditional legitimacy, such as birthright, is now overshadowed by religious legitimacy; the law of the gods stands above kings and queens. The once powerful Queen Cersei is humiliated by a religious group that, paradoxically, she hoped would help her obtain more power. Because the saga of A Song of Ice and Fire is not yet finished, we cannot predict how events will unfold in King’s Landing. However, it is clear that the once irrelevant Faith of the Seven now occupies the central position in the politics of the capital.

**House Greyjoy and the Drowned God**

Religion is also used as a political tool to distinguish territories in Martin’s story. The Greyjoys want to break away from the Seven Kingdoms, and they embrace religion as an element that differentiates them from the other Houses and, especially, from the Iron Throne. The motto of the Dominican Republic would perfectly encapsulate the Greyjoys’ cause: “God, Homeland, Liberty.” Like many countries throughout history, the Dominican Republic used religion to distinguish themselves from other territories and to reinforce the idea of being an independent nation. Edward Paulino, a professor of history at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, points out how Dominican politicians crafted a national identity around being Catholic, being Spanish descendants, and having western culture in their part of the island. All these elements differentiated the Dominican Republic from Haiti, where people, according to Dominican politicians, practice voodoo, come from African descent, and speak Creole (3). In this context, Paulino highlights how “[the church] played a major role in the anti-Haitian rhetoric that used Catholicism and Christianity as a defining marker of difference between Dominicans and Haitians” (105).

House Greyjoy uses religion in a similar way – to distinguish a country and build a national identity. The Greyjoys and the ironmen, the residents of the Iron Islands, worship the Drowned God. This god mandates what the ironmen know as the “Old Way,” an ancient culture of raiding coastal villages that includes pillage, rape, and vandalism: “War was an ironman’s proper trade. The
Drowned God had made them to reave and rape, to carve out kingdoms and write their names in fire and blood and song” (Martin, *ACOK* 129). Aegon Targaryen abolished the Drowned God’s culture when he conquered Westeros and unified the Seven Kingdoms. Yet the ironmen never renounced the Old Way. After Robert took the Iron Throne, the Greyjoys tried to gain independence with Balon’s rebellion, but failed. They perceive the death of King Robert as a new opportunity to break away from the Seven Kingdoms and to restore their old traditions.

In the context of the War of the Five Kings, the religion of the Drowned God distinguishes the Iron Islands from the other kingdoms and legitimizes the Greyjoys’ claim for freedom and, later on, for expansion. Their religion precludes remaining in the Seven Kingdoms; they need to become independent in order to restore their old traditions and honor their god’s will. Michael Sigrist, a professor of philosophy at George Washington University, discusses fate and freedom in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Following the philosopher Martin Heidegger, Sigrist suggests that freedom in Martin’s books is achieved through the principle of authenticity, which is “defined in terms of ownership and singularity: freedom as ‘owning’ oneself and being one’s own” (232). As we have seen, one of House Greyjoy’s main goals in the war is freedom, and religion is an essential part of “being one’s own” for them. They use religion to legitimize their contention that they do not belong in the Seven Kingdoms, and as such, religion becomes their main source of soft power that justifies and validates their claim for independence.

### Arya Stark and the Many-Faced God

In addition to being a source of power and legitimacy for those fighting in the war, religion also plays an important role in gaining power at the individual level. Most of the surviving members of House Stark find in religion their last hope to obtain power. Arya Stark, for instance, joins a religious sect in order to carry out her revenge. After her father’s execution, Arya escapes from King’s Landing with the help of Yoren, a brother of the Night’s Watch, but the Mountain and his party eventually capture her and take her to Harrenhal. During her journey from the capital to Harrenhal, she witnesses torture, killing, and all sorts of atrocities. All the violence that she sees both in King’s Landing and on her way to Harrenhal awakens in her a strong sense of revenge. Like a prayer, she recites the names of all the people who have wronged her or other innocent people in hopes of being able to get revenge one day. “‘Ser Gregor,’ she’d whisper to her stone pillow. . . . ‘Ser Amory, Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn, King Joffrey, Queen Cersei.’ Back in Winterfell, Arya had prayed with her mother in the sept and with her father in the godswood, but there were no gods on the road to Harrenhal, and her names were the only prayer she cared to remember” (Martin, *ACOK* 314).

Arya rejects her parents’ gods, complaining that they have never helped her family. Revenge becomes the only thing she believes in.

How can a ten-year-old girl alone in the world fulfill her strong vengeful spirit? Arya finds the answer when she meets the Faceless Man Jaqen H’ghar, a servant of the Many-Faced God. Jaqen offers to kill three people of Arya’s choice to pay off a debt with his god. Before meeting Jaqen, she was powerless in Harrenhal and mistreated by almost everybody, but with Jaqen’s offer, she finally finds a means to carry out her revenge. By whispering in Jaqen’s ear, she can kill anybody she wishes: “She had killed Chiswyck with a whisper, and she would kill two more before

Some members of House Greyjoy also attribute a religious dimension to their mission to conquer other parts of Westeros. According to Aeron Greyjoy, “the waters of wrath will rise high, and the Drowned God will spread his dominion across the green lands!” (Martin, *ACOK* 298). While this example supports my argument that a religious war is occurring in Westeros, the religious dimension of the conquest is not shared by all the members of House Greyjoy. When Euron Greyjoy takes over the Iron Islands, religion as a reason to legitimize conquest seems to shift to the background. Because Martin’s saga is unfinished, we have yet to see how the political importance of religion will evolve in the case of the Greyjoys.
she was through. I’m the ghost in Harrenhal, she thought. And that night, there was one less name to hate” (Martin, *ACOK* 351). Jaqen and the Many-Faced God empower Arya in a time when she feels completely helpless. She expresses this empowerment, saying, “Jaqen made me brave again. He made me a ghost instead of a mouse” (Martin, *ACOK* 512). It is never made clear how Jaqen kills his victims, but his power fascinates Arya.

In the end, Arya herself decides to serve the Many-Faced God to learn Jaqen’s deadly power. After her brother Robb and her mother are killed, she has neither home nor family, and the religion of the Many-Faced God offers her one last hope to avenge her family. Arya rejected her parents’ religion, but now, like Stannis, she embraces a foreign faith to keep alive her hopes of revenge. Yet Arya is forbidden to use the power that she hopes to acquire for personal reasons. In order to serve her new god and learn the secrets of the Faceless Men, she must become “no one” and forget all about her past and who she is. Nevertheless, Arya maintains several ties to her past (her prayer, her wolf dreams, and Needle) that indicate that she is not willing to forget who she is and the true reason why she has joined the religion of Him of Many Faces: to gain the power that would help her carry out her revenge.

In addition to demonstrating how religion can be used to obtain power at a personal level, the Starks also contribute to the creation of a religious war. Brandon Stark’s quest to become a greenseer allies him with the Old Gods and the Children of the Forest. We have yet to see how powerful he will become and what part he will play in the development of the story. Nevertheless, Arya and Brandon Stark stand for two different religions that will surely join the Seven, R’hllor, and the Drowned God in the conflict in Westeros and in the coming struggle against the White Walkers.

**Conclusion**

Religion, as we have seen, constitutes an important source of power and legitimacy in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. While it empowers some characters at a personal level, such as Arya, more importantly, religion is used as a tool to obtain hard and soft power for those taking part in the conflict in Westeros. The Greyjoys use religion to distinguish their kingdom and legitimize their claim of independence from the Iron Throne. They try to build their identity as an independent country around the religion of the Drowned God and its “Old Way.” In addition, Stannis’ quest to win the Iron Throne is legitimized by his messianic role as Azor Ahai, which is a form of divine right. Stannis often reminds his enemies that “the Iron Throne is mine by rights” (Martin, *ACOK* 356). After his defeat by the Lannisters, his rights are not legitimized by genealogical reasons, but by religion. The need to fulfill his destiny as Azor Ahai keeps Stannis’ claim alive. Likewise, Queen Mother Cersei tries to gain both soft and hard power through the Faith of the Seven. In doing so, she reestablishes the Faith Militant, a religious military order, and a religious tribunal that very much resembles the Inquisition.

Consequently, the struggle to win the Iron Throne acquires a religious dimension. Religion becomes an important part of the war rhetoric in Westeros that fuels the rivalry between the different warring houses. Stannis burns the statues of the Seven and those who refuse to accept the religion of R’hllor. Cersei reestablishes the religious armies of the Seven to fight the “infidel” Stannis and the northmen. And the Greyjoys gather around the religion of the Drowned God to defend their distinctive identity. As such, the war in Westeros is motivated not only by competing temporal interests, but by religious differences. The claimants are no longer fighting solely to win the Iron Throne, but also to defend their religion or destroy the others.
Martin’s epic cycle is not yet finished, and the ongoing construction of the world of *A Song of Ice and Fire* opens up new avenues for further research on religion. Future studies on this topic should account for the evolution of religion in the conflict of Westeros in the upcoming books, *The Winds of Winter* and *A Dream of Spring*. In addition, the books and the TV adaptation are taking different paths. As Martin himself declares in his personal blog, “some of the ‘spoilers’ you may encounter in season six may not be spoilers at all… because the show and the books have diverged, and will continue to do so” (1). Scholars should also examine whether the TV adaptation picks up on the religious themes of the books, and how religion contributes to the differing plot developments between the TV adaptation and the printed saga.

**Works Cited**


Margaret Weis: A Literary-Biography

Will Slocombe

Biography and contact info: Will Slocombe (w.slocombe@liverpool.ac.uk) is a lecturer in the Department of English, University of Liverpool, and teaches American literature, and science fiction, amongst author things. He is the author of Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern (Routledge, 2006), and articles on various aspects of c20th and c21st literature and theory. His current work focuses primarily on sf, particularly depictions of Artificial Intelligence.

Margaret Weis (b. 1948) is one of the popular fantasy authors of recent years in the USA. She has produced numerous works, both science fiction and fantasy, with a host of co-writers and by herself, and is also responsible for a role-playing game company. Throughout her career, which spans over thirty years, she has produced a significant proportion of bestsellers. Yet, despite this, she is possibly one of the least critically discussed authors of fantasy, in part because of a perception that her works are too populist, lacking literary merit, but perhaps because – in today’s post-Game of Thrones world – they are not actually popular enough. That said, the aim of this piece is not to critically analyze her works in any great detail, nor is it to seek to persuade readers of that amorphous quality of “literary merit”; rather, it is intended as an overview of her fiction to identify the scope and dominant themes of her writing. This is a “literary biography” in the sense that it works through her oeuvre and shows broad links between her works, in the hopes of prompting further research and explorations of her contribution to, and influence upon, the fantasy genre.

Born in Independence, Missouri, Weis graduated from the University of Missouri in 1970 with majors in Creative Writing and Literature. She spent the years after her graduation in the publishing world, first as a proofreader, then as advertising director for Herald Publishing (from 1972–1983) and division director for one of its trade divisions, Independence Press (from 1981–1983). During this period, she wrote her first book, a biography of Frank and Jesse James, as well as juvenile literature and non-fiction. The majority of her works in this period were published as Margaret Baldwin, although there is one significant exception. Riddle of the Griffon (1985), written with Roger E. Moore (editor of the fantasy magazine, Dragon) was, according to Weis, written in 48 hours and neither Weis nor Moore wanted their name on it: the book was published under the pseudonym of Susan Lawson.

The true origin of Weis’ success is when she joined TSR – the founders of the Dungeons and Dragons game – in 1983, as an editor in its book division. This move, from the traditional sphere of publishing into the role-playing games market, marks the point at which Weis’s writing shifts focus. Aside from editing the Endless Quest game books, Weis began writing game books based upon the Dungeons and Dragons television series, such as Tower of Endless Dreams. However, the major impact of joining TSR was her partnership with Tracy Hickman, the creator of the role-playing game world of Dragonlance. This partnership was to become one of the most prolific in the history of the high fantasy genre, with over 50 books either written or edited by the pair and translation rights held across the world.
The first books written by Weis and Hickman were two trilogies, *Dragonlance Chronicles* in the period 1984–1985 (*Dragons of Autumn Twilight*, *Dragons of Winter Night*, and *Dragons of Spring Dawning*) and *Dragonlance Legends* in 1986 (*Time of the Twins*, *War of the Twins*, and *Test of the Twins*). Both the *Chronicles* and the *Legends* were defining moments in the history of the high-fantasy genre, not only bridging the divide between role-playing games and fantasy literature, but also demonstrating that such a genre could be a mainstream literary phenomenon. Although works such as J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–55) had been instrumental in the creation of the role-playing games, gaming itself was still a marginal activity. Weis and Hickman created a franchise in which role-playing game and book markets could support each other, and the first books in the series achieved bestseller status in the *New York Times*, *Locus*, and *Publishers Weekly*, as well as the Walden and B. Dalton lists.

Both trilogies follow a band of adventurers around the imaginary world of Krynn, the world in which *Dragonlance* is set. This return to an almost medieval definition of romance, in which the quest narrative is fore-grounded, is a core aspect of both *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Dragonlance* novels, although Weis and Hickman moved away from the academic world of Tolkien towards something more naturalistic, despite retaining the loose “adventuring band” of protagonists. They did not present the reader with historical data, but inserted such information in the narrative as it progressed. Thus, rather than focus upon a world and its history, Weis and Hickman presented the reader with the characters that were to become the “Heroes of the Lance” and traveled with them through the world; in these novels, the narrative trajectory is not fore-grounded, but seemingly develops as a result of the characters’ actions.

Although both Weis and Hickman agree that “a game isn’t necessarily a good story” (Sawyer 49), there is nevertheless a game-driven orientation within these novels. Firstly, the conclusion of the quest is not the conclusion of the book, and vice versa. There is not a goal to achieve, but a world to explore and a quest around every corner. Secondly, the characters seem to react to, rather than act in, their environment. This is the result of the internalized, rather than externalized, drive in the writing style – rather than force characters down pre-determined routes, there is a feeling that each character acts on their own impulses. Although some readers may find the resulting style too simplistic or episodic for “adult fantasy,” the complexities to which these techniques can lead, especially in terms of the moral of the stories, make such stories a noteworthy addition to the often puerile genre of games and novels of men with implausibly large swords and women with implausibly scanty “armor.”

If the moral element is central to these texts, then it is significant that the central tenet of the book is not that good triumphs over evil, but that a balance is achieved. As Weis herself says: “It is important to note that as the end of the book, good does not triumph over evil. Rather, the balance between the two is restored so that the pendulum of change can swing freely and keep the world in motion” (Weis and Hickman, *Dragonlance Chronicles: Collector’s Edition* Introduction). This reinforces the “adventure” (or perhaps D&D “module”) structure within the *Dragonlance* novels: there is never a “happily ever after” because there is always something else happening. Unlike *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, in which the evil wizard is “defeated” at the end, the evil wizard of the *Legends* and the *Chronicles*, Raistlin Majere, is the lynchpin of narrative completion in both. In the *Chronicles*, he has the power to either save the world or damn it; in the *Legends*, he again has this choice but with even more at stake (at least in Weis’s terms, for she frequently admits that he is her favorite character) – his soul. She writes that “Raistlin does win in the end, though not in the way many readers hoped. He finally wins over himself” (Weis and Hickman, *Dragonlance Legends: Collector’s Edition* Introduction). This narrative is not therefore a traditional quest narrative, but a form of *bildungsroman* involving both Raistlin and his brother. The moralistic message of the books is not that good will win, but that, as Weis and Hickman frequently reiterate in the series, “good redeems its own and evil turns upon itself.”

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In 1987, Weis and Hickman edited the first of the hugely successful *Dragonlance Tales* anthologies (*The Magic of Krynn; Kender; Gully Dwarves and Gnomes; and Love and War*). In short stories such as “The Legacy,” “Wanna Bet?,” and “Raistlin’s Daughter,” they focus on the relationships around Raistlin, his twin brother Caramon, and Caramon’s sons. This focus upon the central “family” of the *Dragonlance* saga is perhaps the result of the environment in which the *Dragonlance* books were written. Weis has often commented upon the nature of the *Dragonlance* group as an extended family, evident from the way in which particular authors recur throughout the *Dragonlance* books, particularly Richard A. Knaak and Michael Williams.

With such a large body of work on such a small number of characters, it is unsurprising that the *Dragonlance* stories began to seem repetitious. This had been an implicit problem since the publication of the *Chronicles* and *Legends* trilogies, primarily because TSR wanted readers to be able to enter the narrative at any point. Whilst this approach is partially vindicated within the original trilogies, the decision to capitalize on the popularity of these books led the *Dragonlance* stories into a narrative cul-de-sac: it is rare to find a book that does not make use of familiar themes from the original texts. Although Weis continued to explore the themes of evil and family, the images began to feel tired, and the style and tone were generally pitched at the same level. Whilst Weis and Hickman continued editing the collections, they did not write any further *Dragonlance* novels until 1995, the year in which TSR was bought by Wizards of the Coast. Instead, they moved into other territories, with the *Darksword* trilogy in 1988, and the *Rose of the Prophet* trilogy in 1989.

The *Darksword* trilogy (Forging the Darksword, Doom of the Darksword, and Triumph of the Darksword, all 1988) continues the exploration of humanity’s darker side, albeit in a manner more reminiscent of Michael Moorcock than Weis’s earlier fiction. This trilogy focuses upon Joram, a young man born without magic in a world where magic is Life. Pronounced Dead, and fleeing from society after murdering a man, Joram creates the Darksword, a mystical artifact that drains magic – and hence Life – from the world. Whilst not evil per se, Joram is forced into actions that often appear evil, not least because they cause destruction. As the trilogy continues, there is also a defined shift in setting, away from the traditional fantasy setting of a magical world towards science fiction, as Triumph of the Darksword incorporates an image of a futuristic earth that invades the realm where Joram was born.

In contrast to the *Darksword* trilogy, Weis describes the *Rose of the Prophet* trilogy (*The Will of the Wanderer, The Paladin of the Night, and The Prophet of Akhran*, all 1989) as an “Arabian fantasy.” These novels follow the adventure of three humans, the warrior nomad Khardan, his wife Zohra, and a foreign wizard Mathew, and their respective immortal guardian spirits, drawn from a variety of religious traditions. *The Will of the Wanderer* describes the universe as a “twenty-faceted jewel that revolves around Sul, Truth, the center” (9). Each point of the jewel represents a different philosophy and each god encompasses, as part of the facet he represents, three of these philosophies. Within the *Rose of the Prophet* trilogy, we are thus presented with gods such as Akhran (Faith, Chaos, and Impatience), the nomadic god; Promenthas (Goodness, Charity and Faith), akin to the Judeo-Christian god; and Benario (Faith, Chaos, and Greed), god of thieves. Set in an alternate Arabian desert, the story concerns the attempt by Quar (Reality, Greed and Law) to eradicate all other gods by declaring jihad. This belief in plural truths and religious openness recurs throughout much of Weis and Hickman’s later works, although the jihad is in many ways problematic given the fact that the potentially destructive missionary work of the quasi-Christian believers of Promenthas is brushed aside.

although the narrative ran throughout all seven volumes. These seven realms originate from the “Sundering” of Earth by the Sartan (benevolent but patronizing magicians), who sought to imprison the Patryn (malevolent and tyrannical magicians). The first four novels explore the elemental worlds inhabited by the “mensch” (a derogatory term for elves, humans, and dwarves): the air world of Ariannus, the fire world of Pryan, the earth world of Aberrach, and the water world of Chelestra. The final three novels continue the story from the first four, exploring the Nexus, the Labyrinth (the realm in which the Patryns were imprisoned by the Sartan), and the “Seventh Gate”.

Although each of the first four novels presents a different set of mensch characters, the overarching narrative follows Haplo, a Patryn who seeks to foment discord amongst the mensch and discover if the Sartan still exist. The second major character is Alfred, a Sartan who believes he is the last surviving member of his race. As the Cycle progresses, these two form an unlikely alliance as they are both incomplete: Haplo is separated from his soul and Alfred has rejected his Sartan identity, choosing instead to faint when confronted with a decision rather than take responsibility for wielding his power. These two characters must become complete individuals and overcome their xenophobia in order to work together to defeat an ancient enemy. This enemy is a manifestation of fear and hate that can only be defeated if the Sartan and the Patryn abnegate responsibility for the mensch, allowing them to develop on their own, and work together.

If the seven volumes of the Cycle can be reduced to a single statement, then it is found in Dragon Wing: “Truth wasn’t something you went out and found. It was wide and vast and deep and unending, and all you could hope to see was a tiny part of it. And to see that part and to mistake it for the whole was to make of Truth a lie” (Weis and Hickman, Dragon Wing 293). Reminiscent of the themes presented in the Rose of the Prophet series (and foreshadowing those of Weis’s later works), the separate realms and the artificial nature of reality in the Cycle reinforce the idea that we can only see part of the picture, only some of the probabilities (the mechanism by which Sartan and Patryn magic works) at any given time. At the close of the Cycle, the repeated hints concerning a higher power do not mean divinity but natural occurrence, and the narrative development of the Cycle is a dramatization of the “Wave” of the Universe correcting itself after the excesses of the Sundering.

One of the more interesting asides worthy of note is the Cycle’s intertextual allusions. Aside from Gandalf and Merlin, an allusion to Raistlin is made by Zifnab, a mad old Sartan who is obviously a reworked Fizban from the Dragonlance Chronicles trilogy (see, for example, Weis and Hickman, Elven Star 114 and an excellent example of bathos on 333). This is significant because the writing of the Cycle corresponds to the development and morals of the Age of Mortals in the Dragonlance series: powerful beings must not interfere with the development of lesser races, but allow them to progress on their own.

Between 1990 and 1993, Weis once again shifted genres, producing one of her three solo-authored series of novels, a science fiction series called Star of the Guardians (The Lost King 1990, King’s Test 1991, King’s Sacrifice 1991, and Ghost Legion 1993). These books revolve around a young man called Dion who is heir to the throne of a great galactic empire. Seventeen years prior to the action of the text, all members of the Blood Royal (those genetically engineered to be superior leaders) were exterminated in a coup d’état and Dion is still in danger from those who want a republican government. Following the discovery of Dion’s identity in The Lost King, the stories focus upon his attempts to become king, dealing with the search for a weapon that can destroy the fabric of reality (King’s Test), his first solitary trials against alien invasion (King’s Sacrifice), and defending his rule from civil war (Ghost Legion).

With Don Perrin (her husband from 1996–2003), Weis continued to work in the Star of the Guardians setting with her next novels, the Mag Force 7 series (Knights of the Black Earth 1995, Robot Blues 1996, Hung Out 1998). These novels concentrate on a mercenary force led by Xris Tampambulos, a cyborg who seeks revenge for the attempt on his life that led to him becoming a
cyborg. Whilst the overarching thread is concerned with bringing the Hung Syndicate, a galactic crime network, each novel is a self-contained episode. Knights of the Black Earth deals with an assassination attempt on King Dion that is perpetrated by a radical sect who desires all galactic life to be human. Robot Blues charts Mag Force 7’s attempt to recover an ancient robot that can lay and destroy Star Lanes, the basis for all intergalactic commerce. Finally, Hung Out deals with Xris’s need to bring the Hung Syndicate to justice, although he must go to prison for a crime he did not commit in order to do so. Weis’ usual themes are present in this series: a distaste of totalitarian control and inhumane actions, along with complex characterization where individuals must learn to accept other’s differences.

Whilst working with Perrin on the Mag Force 7 series, Weis was also working on a number of other projects. With David Baldwin (her son), she co-authored a new series of novels called the Dragon’s Disciple, beginning with the graphic novel Testament of the Dragon (1997), and continuing with Dark Heart (1998). With Hickman, she concluded the Dragonlance Dragons anthologies and added a fourth volume to the Dragonlance Chronicles, Dragon of Summer Flame. This text deals with the release of the Highgod and the loss of magic from the world, the beginning of the Age of Mortals. Still reluctant to return wholeheartedly to Dragonlance, however, Weis and Hickman’s focus at this point was the abortive 1996–1998 Starshield trilogy.

Each book in the Starshield trilogy was intended to focus upon one of three legendary artifacts in the Sharshield science-fiction universe: the Mantle of Kendis-Dai, the Nightsword, and the Starshield itself. The Starshield novels explore the universe divided by quantum fronts, which modify reality to such an extent that different zones exhibit different rules. Some allow mechanistic science whereas some allow magic; the trick is to know the properties of the zone. The story follows a group of explorers from Earth lost in the wider universe and their struggle to find their way home, although they are the key to understanding the location of these artifacts. The first volume, Sentinels (1996, published in the UK as The Mantle of Kendis-Dai), deals with the history behind the artifacts and the discovery of a computer (the Mantle) that can predict the future by calculating probabilities. The second volume, Nightsword (1998), follows the quest to discover a weapon that can affect reality itself. However, the quest to discover the Starshield, alluded to at the end of Nightsword, never materialized.

Sentinels focuses on a civil war brought about by robots told that they have free will. This faction, led by the mysterious Sentinels, opposes the Omnet, who believe that artificial intelligences have no free will. The Mantle eventually resolves this conflict, as the Mantle itself, whilst being an advanced artificial intelligence, needs a human to be complete. This human-centered truism is presented in a different light in Nightsword, when it is revealed that Lokan, the master of the Nightsword, used the reality-bending powers of the sword to stunt the growth of non-human civilizations: “Each civilization he came upon he judged by his own standard – the standard of humanity! As though humans were the perfect form! As though no other form was equal or better!” (238). The recurring themes of tolerance and openness pervade the Starshield novels as much as other works by Weis and Hickman. It is also worth noting that, as with the Death Gate Cycle, Fizban also makes a brief appearance in this series as Vestis Zanfib (see Weis and Hickman, Sentinels 156 and Weis and Hickman, Nightsword 295).

Despite this flirtation with science-fiction, or “Galactic Fantasy” as Hickman describes it in his introduction to The Lost King, because it is a “romance of our future” (Weis, The Lost King Introduction), Weis obviously found it difficult to completely abandon her earlier works. In 1997, she returned to her Darksword trilogy, adding a fourth novel, Legacy of the Darksword, co-authored with Hickman. In this novel, many of Joram’s earlier actions become justified as it is only the creation of the Darksword that can save mankind from eradication by the alien Hcy’nyv. In 1998, Weis and her husband, Don Perrin, published Doom Brigade, a novel again set in the Dragonlance world and which deals with “draconians”, the enemies from the first set of Dragonlance novels.
Finally, she returned to her favorite character, Raistlin, adding two more novels to his life: *The Soul Forge* (1998) and *Brothers in Arms* (1999, with Perrin).

Such a return to her roots indicates the extent to which Weis subscribes to the philosophy that no story is ever finished. With Hickman, she continued to edit collections of *Dragonlance* stories and they also produced another *Dragonlance* trilogy, *War of Souls* (*Dragons of a Fallen Sun* 2000, *Dragons of a Lost Star* 2001, *Dragons of a Vanished Moon* 2002). These novels explore the world that has been left by the gods, and which is now ruled by dragons more powerful than any seen previously. The central character of the trilogy Mina, a priestess of the “One God” (who is really one of the evil older gods). Originally conceived as a “dark” or “anti-” Joan of Arc (see Weis and Hickman, *Dragons in the Archives* 371), Mina is, like Raistlin and Joram before her, a character who, whilst in many ways evil, can also accomplish great good deeds.

In 2000–2003, Weis and Hickman also dealt with the theme of evil in the *Sovereign Stone* trilogy (*Well of Darkness* 2000, *Guardians of the Lost* 2001, and *Journey into the Void* 2003). Unusually for fantasy literature, these texts do not revolve around a band of heroes, but around the social problems raised by an artifact of immense power, the Sovereign Stone. Based on an idea by fantasy artist Larry Elmore (who illustrated Weis and Hickman’s *Dragonlance* and *Darksword* series), the Sovereign Stone is a tetrahedron that has the power to transform people into demi-gods, drawing out their inner power in external form. Each face of the tetrahedron represents a different element and thus different race: earth for humans, air for elves, fire for dwarves and, water for orks (this treatment of orks is itself distinctive in a field usually noted for “ork-bashing”). This indicates, at least partially, the fundamental social differences between the races that are explored throughout the novels.

What is most significant for Weis and Hickman is what is *within* this hollow tetrahedron: the Void. When the Sovereign Stone is opened and the elemental pieces divided amongst the races, the Void is released into the world, initiating a cataclysmic series of events. When the Sovereign Stone is gifted to the world, a warning is issued by the gods: “There is a reason it has been placed out of your reach. It may be too rich for you to digest just now. With work, you could reach it yourself” (Weis and Hickman, *Well of Darkness* 167) – in a bid to solve social problems quickly, the opening of the Stone creates more serious ones. As with their *Dragonlance* novels, Weis and Hickman’s concern here is for balance, and whilst the *Sovereign Stone* novels explore the evil of the Void, they explore the tensions between this divine absence and the elements, and between the elements themselves. The main protagonist, Dagnarus, is unusual inasmuch as he is the Lord of the Void who brings destruction to the world (thus harkening back to the character of Joram in the *Darksword* novels) by unleashing the Void. Although evil in this sense, both his and his followers’ actions are explored in psychological terms, and Dagnarus’s desire for power is based upon sibling rivalry and a desire to be accepted by his father.

Again, the moral is not that good will win, but that a balance must be achieved. At the conclusion of *Journey into the Void*, it is Dagnarus himself who reunifies the pieces of the Sovereign Stone, once more curtailing both the power of the gods and the Void: the world is once more in human hands. Weis and Hickman write: “The truth is that most of Loerem’s people were so intent upon living their lives that that they soon forgot the Lord of the Void and those heroes who had sacrificed so much to stop him. Which, as the Captain, in her wisdom, pointed out, is as it should be, for returning life to the living is the goal of the hero” (*Journey into the Void* 566). Life goes on – a victory in itself – and is lived. The purpose of life is not to achieve, but to constantly strive for something better.

Between 2003–2006, Weis wrote her second solo-authored series, *Dragonvarld*. *Mistress of Dragons* (2003) and *The Dragon’s Son* (2004) focus upon a world in which humans and dragons co-exist, although humans go about their daily routines unaware of the influence that dragons exert over their lives. Centering mainly on Draconas (a dragon in disguise as a human), the novels follow
his quest to undo the damage caused by a renegade dragon, Maristara. Maristara has abandoned the law of non-interference laid down by the Parliament of Dragons and exerts her control in the human realm of Seth, teaching humans the secrets of dragon magic to protect herself from reprisals. In *Mistress of Dragons*, the narrative focuses upon Melissande, the eponymous mistress of dragons, and her discovery of the truth behind her role; in *The Dragon’s Son*, the action is based on the relationship between Melisande’s two sons, the human Marcus and the half-dragon Ven (short for “Vengeance”). This series was brought to a close in 2005 with the publication of *Master of Dragons*, a book that ties together the threads from the previous novels by uniting the two brothers and Draconus against the evil dragons.

In 2004, Weis began the third of her solo-authored series, *Dark Disciple*, set in the *Dragonlance* universe. This began with *Amber and Ashes* (2004), which focuses upon Mina’s life after the close of *Dragons of a Vanished Moon*, as she begins to assert her own identity. *Amber and Iron* (2006) and *Amber and Blood* (2008) followed soon after. Echoing Raistlin’s journey to divinity in the earlier series, Mina’s narrative arc examines not only the world without gods, but also the issues for those without such power, and the need to maintain balance. Around this time, however, Wizards of the Coast did not renew the *Dragonlance* license with Sovereign Press / Margaret Weis Productions. This resulted, effectively, in the death of the game world in terms of campaign settings, and produced what is, to date, the last in the co-authored Weis and Hickman *Dragonlance* novel series, the *Lost Chronicles* (2006-2009; *Dragons of the Dwarven Depths* 2006, *Dragons of the Highlord Skies* 2007, *Dragons of the Hourglass Mage* 2009). In what is perhaps the campaign world coming full circle, this series “fills in the blanks” of the *Chronicles* series with which Weis and Hickman began their *Dragonlance* careers.¹ As such, these novels flesh out the details of the other series, revealing what happened in the intervening period between those initial novels.

Since this point, Weis’ career has departed significantly from the *Dragonlance* universe, developing three new worlds, although remaining within the fantasy genre. In 2007, Weis began work on a series of “paranormal romances” with her daughter, Lizz Weis. The first, *Warrior Angel* (2007), is concerned with a reincarnated Knight Templar set in modern-day Chicago, and the second, *Fallen Angel* (2008), is about a reincarnated martyr and a rock musician. Both examine the interplay between angels and devils, but the series failed to appeal to a broad audience, and is now defunct. Following these novels, Weis worked on two other series, the *Dragonships of Vindras* (with Tracy Hickman) and *Dragon Brigade* (with Robert Krammes). The *Dragonships of Vindras* series is set in a world in which the younger gods are at war with the older gods, and the Vindrasi set out on a quest for mythical artefacts. The *Dragon Brigade* series is set in a world with technological advancements and magic (airships and dragons), and involves two rival kingdoms vying for supremacy until a forgotten enemy, the Bottom-Dwellers, unleash “contramagic” attacks on those who they perceive have wronged them.

Both the *Dragonships* series and the *Dragon Brigade* series revel in various tropes that are evident across Weis’ oeuvre, alongside her dominant theme: the search for power, and the problems it causes for both those who gain it and those who suffer under it. Over the course of numerous novels and settings, Weis – primarily with Tracy Hickman but also a host of other co-writers – has demonstrated this concern. Whilst many writers and critics might disparage Weis’ writing as being overly formulaic, Weis has made a significant impact in the field of fantasy literature, both for younger readers and established fans, and is with Hickman responsible for the creation, development, and expansion of the *Dragonlance* universe, whilst series such as the *Rose of the Prophet* and the *Death Gate* cycle stand as excellent examples of standalone worlds.

Overall, there is much thinking still required on Weis’ work, such as the significance of the female characterization she has brought to bear in a field often casually misogynistic throughout her

¹ For more on the history of the Dragonlance campaign setting, from Wizards of the Coast’s perspective, see Appelcline.
oeuvre, and in terms of her non-normative depictions of sexuality (*Rose of the Prophet*, *Mag Force 7*) or drug addiction (*Mag Force 7*). Influence and thematic links are other areas necessitating more research, such as in the relationship between her writing and Tolkien, Moorcock (*Stormbringer* linking to the *Darksword* universe), or Terry Brooks or R. Scott Bakker (the *Word and the Void* or *Prince of Nothing* series, respectively, in relation to *Sovereign Stone* and contemporary depictions of “the void”). Moreover, and perhaps most importantly given the historical significance of the *Dragonlance* series, more is required on Weis’s influence on more recent fantasy writers, alongside the ways in which she moves between SF and fantasy.\(^2\) Overall, Weis’ contribution to the field of fantasy literature has too often and too easily dismissed, and necessitates far more research to really do it justice.

**Bibliography (Chronological)**

- Stories, novellas, and novels listed by first publication (no reprints, collector’s editions, or omnibus editions are included)
- Items listed in bold are solo-authored by Weis
- List includes fiction items only, and does not include the numerous game adventures and supplements, articles, or non-fiction works
- Series are included, where relevant, even if the series has not continued
- Note that Weis and Hickman have edited many of the *Dragonlance* anthologies, not all of which are listed, and that not all *Dragonlance* volumes list editors, providing only authors’ names. Lists of cover authors have been provided as “ed.”
- Compiled from various sources, including archives of *Dragon Magazine*, Internet Speculative Fiction Database, *Locus* Index to Science Fiction, WorldCat, and relevant publication details in anthologies. Any errors are my own, with apologies.

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<td><strong>1984</strong>&lt;br&gt;<em>The Endless Catacombs</em> [Endless Quest 22]</td>
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\(^2\) See, for example, authors Richelle Mead (*Vampire Academy* author), Peter Tieryas, and Ben Peek acknowledging the influence of Weis and Hickman in various ways (see Mead; “Patrick”; Tieryas; and Peek).
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Speculation. It is a process of contemplating and considering a subject or an idea. Although it is often seen as an endeavour directed towards the future or the unknown frontiers, it is also a matter of exposing something from the present, of adopting a different perspective to something familiar, of making things appear by introducing a new context. It can be about anything, say cats or gender.

As a form of bringing ideas up for discussion, speculation has everything to do with the relevance and appeal of fiction. It is usually thought to follow the model of a situation where someone asks someone else for a purpose to engage in a thought experiment, beginning with structures like “imagine if”, “what if” and so forth. Imagine if gender was defined in non-binary terms, as it is in Ursula K. Le Guin’s classic *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). What if cats spoke in a language like ours – as they do to one of the characters in Haruki Murakami’s *Kafka on the Shore* (2005). Such speculations are deemed central to the genres of science fiction and fantasy and connected with their ability to challenge us with abstract ideas and questions. However, they have not always been connected with worldbuilding.

Speculative fiction has been described to “translate ideas into worlds” (Philip K. Dick, qtd. in Ryan 24). The true power of speculative fiction therefore does not simply lie in the invention of a speculative premise or beings, but in the way they are worked through. I introduce speculative worldbuilding as a rhetorical and communicative practice, where the abstract and remote ideas are brought to the domain of the concrete and possible.
By and large, the relevance of any good work of fiction can be summarised as expanding our capacity for understanding ourselves, each other, and the world. However, in treatises of speculative fiction, the experiences of worldness or imagined places are rightly seen central to the genre. An ontologically oriented analysis might suggest that the appeal of speculative fiction lies in “creating” and exploring an imagined world. This is a feature captured by J.R.R. Tolkien in his seminal essay “On Fairy-Stories”: the desire of fantasy to both make and glimpse Other-worlds (135). The more cognitively informed theory might emphasise “making sense” of the strange worlds and see the relocation inside them as a necessary by-product of the sense-making process.

In my point of view, speculative, fictional worldbuilding is a double-layered process. This approach resembles science fiction scholar Darko Suvin’s classic theory on the co-presence of cognition and estrangement, which allows science fiction “both relevance to our world and the position to challenge the ordinary, the taken-for-granted” (8–9). What I would like to emphasise is that fictional domains, which are often taken to be distant from our experience of mundane reality, are actually in a deep dialogue with the userly engagement taking place in the here and now.

Speculative fiction invites its users to engage with the worlds imaginatively, but also enables them to recognise the artificiality of these worlds, to reflect on the fact that they are real-world constructions made for a purpose. Consider the summer television hit, Stranger Things (2016): its homage to the works of Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, Stephen King and the like makes its constructed nature obvious, but at the same time, it enables and guides our imaginative engagement in a meaningful way.

II

In my doctoral dissertation, which engages with multiple media from literary fiction to digital games, audio-visual media and fanfiction writing, I tie together our mundane actions and interactions and the speculative experiments. The users both imagine the world along with its particulars and possibilities and reflect on their engagement with an artistic object (cf. Polvinen). Speculative fiction, which engages the users with a model of reality that is in some sense systematically different from our own (see McHale 26), often makes us pay attention to its constructed nature. This is illustrated in the ease by which role-playing games like Dungeons & Dragons “liberated” classic elements (such as orcs) of Tolkien’s works for a larger use, or the way in which elements like the Starship Enterprise can “evolve” within transmedial franchises.

The analysis of speculative fiction must, therefore, consider the paradox of both/and: the worlds both exist and do not exist at the same time. The abstract and remote meet the domain of concrete and mundane, both in the sense of a work in its materiality and in the sense of a particular way a general idea is worked through. This way, the omnitemporal theory of quantum mechanics can be harnessed to form the principles of specific societies (like in Hannu Rajaniemi’s novel The Causal Angel), or the boundaries between human and non-human be captured in the actual performance of ambivalent characters (like in the digital role-playing game Deus Ex: Human Revolution).

From the viewpoint of rhetoric, another relevant relationship lies between representations of “what is” in a world and imagining “what might be” – or “what can never be” – in a world. Such considerations enable us to discuss the relationship between the shared, material nature of fiction and our imaginations. They can also alert us to various cultural, social and otherwise created boundaries along with the ways they are both reasserted and transgressed. My take on rhetoric is an amalgam of two approaches: my concern is with communication, and with ways of emphasising ideas and engaging the users in working them out.

Although I use the single term – users – to refer to readers, players, viewers and fans, I do not mean to imply that our experiences of various media are similar in all different cases. When it
comes to fanfiction, for example, the shared experience of being a fan while both reading and writing is crucial (see Roine, “What is it that Fanfiction Opposes”). For their part, games can effectively make use of the rhetoric of failure, which basically means the ability to make claims about how things do not work: no matter how hard the player tries to make things right, the attempts are either doomed to fail or the player has to give up some of her ideals, for example. Jesper Juul (113) has further suggested that failure in games is connected with the experience of complicity, a type of experience unique to games, stronger and more personal than simply witnessing a fictional character performing the same actions. For example, in Mass Effect 3, the final instalment of the digital role-playing trilogy, the player has to make various thorny decisions despite acting in the heroic role of the playable character, Commander Shepard (see Roine, “How You Emerge from This Game”).

As a term, user is designed to focus on the agency of readers, players, viewers and fans of speculative fiction. In the field of science fiction, in particular, users often take part in the discussion about the aesthetics and the poetics of the genre. Farah Mendlesohn (1) has noted that science fictional texts are often written by people who are active critics, and that the texts can also be produced by the same fan base that supports the market. The approach emphasising the userly engagement is especially important in the frame of digital media, where we are positioned as the users of various resources. We explore, navigate, and concretely use those resources.

Taking such features into account is still relatively strange for the research on fiction. However, they point out that the recognition of elements used in world-construction and the experience of imaginatively immersing into the worlds are not incompatible. Furthermore, they bring out the fact that the roles of user and author, or critic and fan, are becoming more and more intertwined in contemporary culture. The rise of digital media has also considerably changed these roles. For example, this autumn’s novelty, No Man’s Sky (2016) is based on a practically infinite, procedurally created galaxy which gets generated in front of the player’s eyes.

III
Theoretically, my dissertation attests to the benefits of creating a dialogue between speculative fiction and narratology. Worldbuilding has been neglected as a communicative and rhetorical practice partly because the preferences of critics ultimately turn the concepts from neutral tools into instruments of aesthetic judgements. In general, the objects of study inevitably refine the theory. The concept of world, for example, usually instantiates a very specific kind of worldness found in literary mainstream. Worldbuilding is a transmedially available and realisable part of the aesthetics of the speculative fiction genre. Through the analysis of the forms and uses of speculative worldbuilding, it is therefore possible to widen our understanding of what fiction in general is about and what its appeal may be.

Speculative worldbuilding is unique in the way that it enables the different uses or aspects of imagination to come together. Worldbuilding in speculative fiction not only engages the user in imagining fictional characters, events and such, but also in a more “rational” process of making comparisons between actual outcomes and possible events. However, in its distinctly fictional form, it enables the usage of double perspective, where a rather different sense of familiar and strange are employed.

The dynamics between concrete and abstract and between what is and what could be are once again highlighted. The contemporary logic of using ready-made, shared elements and pieces in order to engage us with imagining new installments is embodied both in transmedia franchises and fanfiction writing. Imagining something as otherwise is important for speculative fiction in general: consider my two first examples, cats and gender. However, fanfiction makes use of the shared understanding of what there is in a world along with the shared strategy of imagining what there
could or might be. The ruling question is rather “why not?” than “what if?” An illustrative example is Eliezer Yudkowsky’s (under the pen name Less Wrong) popular fic “Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality”, which modifies the original story in order to explain Harry’s wizardry through the scientific method.

The rhetorical potential of speculative worldbuilding lies in this doubled nature which both engages the users to imagine alternatives and possibilities and hands them tools to consciously reflect on the ways they do this. This potential is dismissed in the approaches which discuss worlds simply as models of physical places, or paint the picture of fiction as a dry run of real-life skills and actions. The interplay that we should pay attention to is not the one that is between “real world” and “imagined world”, but between “what is” and “why that is” or “how it might be otherwise”.

Speculative worldbuilding can, therefore, engage us with imaginings of what is not, but also discuss the ways we maintain our understanding of what is. As a practice, it is capable of seizing both the readily mutable aspects of “what is” – such as characters, events, actions and consequences – and the more general model our understanding of “what is” is based on. In this, speculative fiction does not so much estrange us from the mundane world or from our actual experience of it, but from the ways we build sense into it.

The possibility to recognise and reflect on the ways the alternatives are imagined contributes to the emergence of critical and active users. The understanding of what there is and what there could be can actively be taken into the users’ own hands. Various fan theories on the possible future developments of their favourite franchises provide a popular example: such as the rather well-known theory on A Song of Ice and Fire character Jon Snow’s true parentage along with the fanfiction and art based on the theory (see Pallotta). Fans can, therefore, use worldbuilding as a communicative and rhetorical practice too, but typically they use it for rather different purposes than authors or designers have done.

IV

One of the contemporary phenomena that concerns speculative worldbuilding across media is that of franchised entertainment. The rapid proliferation of the large environments which have been called, among other things, transmedial worlds (see Klastrup and Tosca), is often seen as economically motivated. At the moment, the Walt Disney Company more or less dominates the entertainment industry. It has chosen to put films such as Star Wars: The Force Awakens (2015) back at the heart of its business. From this standpoint, the decision of making a female character Rey the protagonist in The Force Awakens is basically a strategy to target girls as well as boys with the advertising (see The Economist 27). Judging by the numbers of little girls dressing up as their favourite character, Rey, (see Flaherty and Rackman), this has proven a very successful strategy indeed.

Although the understanding of the economic logic of franchised worlds is valuable, they should also be recognised to be among the new contexts in which the paradox of both/and has appeared during the past decade. They are also part of the progression where digital media has significantly changed the ways the audiences engage with works of fiction. Rather than explicitly promoting the realms of fiction and mundane as something separate, the process of change in the conventions of storytelling illustrate the way these realms have begun to intermingle even further, despite the fact that they have never been strictly separate.

Augmented reality games like extremely popular Pokémon GO (2016) have once again intensified the discussions of whether our “own reality” is not enough and whether the players of games like these lose their touch with the “real world”. Such concerns are not new for anyone interested in speculative fiction: why would you escape from reality, are you afraid of it? Why don’t you concern yourselves with the real problems?
My dissertation suggests that speculative fiction is not about turning away from reality, but a way of engaging with it and discussing it. The stereotype of a reclusive fan does not correspond to reality: the rise of digital media has made the active invocation of worldbuilding and the use of its rhetorical affordances more available than ever before. The contemporary transmedial environment is based on conversation, and as a practice of communicating ideas by means of representational artefacts, worldbuilding provides us with an analytical tool to discuss this environment.

Speculative fiction is fundamentally about ideas, and engaging ourselves in the working through of a variety of such ideas can be both an enjoyable and a revolutionary practice. Speculative fiction not only makes it possible to entertain different ideas and to get our minds around something intangible, but also to share our experiences of our encounters with both the familiar and the strange. It does not simply carry us away from reality, but allows us to discuss and wonder about it as it is.

Speculative fiction may, therefore, affect our understanding of what is, but this is only one side of the coin. On the other side lies that which we cannot understand, and speculative fiction is constantly reminding us that the other side is actually much larger than the fraction of reality we know.

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*No Man’s Sky*. Hello Games, 2016. PlayStation 4. Video game.


One cold April, in a clean, quiet town in Norway, a monster was born.

Though it sounds like the beginning of a fairy tale or a horror novel, it is actually the story of an academic conference: “Promises of Monsters”, at the University of Stavanger. The conference ran from 28–29 April, 2016, and marked the official launch of the Monster Network. The network connects people with an interest in monsters at the concept of the monstrous, and encourages creative and critical engagements and collaborations among its members. Though it was originally founded by Ingvil Hellstrand (University of Stavanger), Line Henriksen (Linköping University), Aino-Kaisa Koistinen (University of Jyväskylä), Donna McCormack (University of Surrey / University of Bergen), Sara Orning (University of Oslo), the conference opened the floor to input from scholars, artists, and enthusiasts from all quarters.

1 https://promisesofmonsters.wordpress.com/
The first day of the conference opened with a keynote lecture from Margrit Shildrick, Professor of Gender and Knowledge Production at Linköping University, and Adjunct Professor of Critical Disability Studies at York University, Toronto. Shildrick challenged the delegates, particularly those presenting at the event, to think about “Visual Rhetorics and the Seductions of the Monstrous”. Essentially, she questioned the ethics of looking at the monstrous, even – or perhaps especially – to study it. Drawing on Jacques Derrida’s *Right of Inspection* (1999), a collaboration with Belgian photographer Marie-Françoise Plissart, Shildrick interrogated the scholar’s right to critique the monster, especially through visual media.

What’s at stake in visualisation? For one thing, a visual image fixes things. It holds them in time and place, and makes them real. Is this not a patronising instinct, or even a colonising one? Though the ethics of looking is already an important consideration when we are talking about fantastical monsters, it becomes absolutely vital when we turn to studies of disability or medical abnormality. How do we manage the unease we may feel in studying such images? Should we even try? In coming to terms with the monster ethically, Shildrick argued, we must do three things: 1) question our own parameters of identity, 2) accept the decentring of the human itself, 3) strive neither for recognition, nor absolute difference. Ethics requires us to stay with the monstrous, but stray from the visual. It is important that we not confine the monster to one form of expression, but that we let it speak and overflow.

And speak and overflow it did. The conference included a full schedule of presentations from numerous disciplines and backgrounds, by delegates from around the world. There were papers on art and science, cannibals and cuteness, plagiarism and performativity, archaeology and reality television – and of course on zombies, vampires, aliens, and Lovecraftian horrors. One special session, featuring organisers Ingvil Hellstrand, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, and Sara Orning, introduced the conference’s non-Nordic delegates to the Swedish science-fiction show *Äkta människor* (*Real Humans*), which is gaining international recognition for its engagement with themes of the monstrous and the posthuman. Though interdisciplinary, these varied presentations were generally brought together by a shared framework in critical theory, with work by Derrida, Donna Haraway, and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen forming some of the most regularly cited cornerstones of the conference.

The form of the event was as monstrous as its focus. Breaking up the traditional keynotes and three-paper panels were roundtables, audio and visual art installations, a closing Q&A session with the conference organisers, and a public screening of Tove Kjellmark’s short film “Naked”, in which a qualified surgeon strips all the “fur” from a stuffed, animatronic panda. As Kjellmark explained in the discussion that followed the screening, the doctor who performed the “surgery” was incredibly unsettled by the experience, and the film², is extremely uncanny. In this and her other work, which includes film, sculpture, and mixed media installations, Kjellmark explores the boundaries between the human and the inhuman, and between the living and the artificial.

“Promises of Monsters” was also visited by The Blob, a conference-disrupting creature (and piece of collaborative performance art) created by Tove Salmgren and Anna Efraimsson. Presenters

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² which you can watch at https://vimeo.com/12251595
could choose to have their panels visited by the The Blob in various manifestations, ranging from very subtle – The Blob announces its presence at the beginning of a session – to very disruptive – The Blob rearranges the seminar room or transforms the presenters and listeners into monsters themselves. The Blob also mediated in the final Q&A session, where it accepted anonymous questions from the delegates and spit them back out again in random order to be answered by the group.

Surekha Davies, Assistant Professor of European History at Western Connecticut State University, delivered the conference’s second keynote, which complemented Shildrick’s argument about the power (and pitfalls) of visual media. Davies shared the results of her recently completed research into “Monstrous Geography, Environmental History, and the Invention of Race”, which can be consulted in more detail in her monograph *Renaissance Ethnography and the Invention of the Human: New Worlds, Maps and Monsters*. “How does geography reflect epistemology?” she asked.

Renaissance maps functioned as visualisation tools that shared European perceptions of the peoples of the Americas. There were different maps for mariners, laypeople, and scholars, but all included depictions of “monstrous” creatures or peoples, for the purpose of both ornamentation and instruction. The hotter, non-Western climates in particular were where these monsters could be located. Maps made the classical concept of “monstrous peoples”, deformed by nature, central to the fluid category of “the human”, and they did so by making the connections between geography, climate, and human variety explicit and visual.

An overarching theme that emerged over the course of the event involved establishing an ethics of the monstrous, and of its various representations in popular media. This is something the Monster Network will continue to work on in the coming years. Above all, the participants were thrilled to discover such a diverse network of kindred spirits, thinkers, artists, and monster enthusiasts. Delegates went away at the end of the conference with a great deal to think about, and as their posts on Twitter demonstrated, they found many ways to take the monstrous home with them.

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3 https://storify.com/monsters_roar/getting-started
A Book Review: Jamie Williamson – The Evolution of Modern Fantasy: From Antiquarianism to the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series

Dennis Wilson Wise


In archaeology, archaeologists like to distinguish between “lumpers” and “splitters” – that is, those who perceive great similarities between pieces of evidence in the historical record versus those who see vast differences. In an admirable new work on the literary history of fantasy, Jamie Williamson might be the “splitter” in a field full of lumpers, breaking up the relatively cohesive narrative often told about fantasy’s literary history. The centerpiece of Williamson’s story is Lin Carter and the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series (BAFS), which ran from 1969 to 1974 in the wake of the Tolkien and sword & sorcery booms of the 1960s. The BAFS, basically, had created a respectable literary prehistory for the new publishing genre of fantasy fiction. Although Williamson does not say so specifically, Lin Carter did for the fantasy canon what Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer Adler did for the “Great Books,” codifying a list of canonical “great” works that, perhaps inadvertently, tended to homogenize those works under one unified rubric. Carter and the BAFS posited “a sort of timeless Platonic Form, involving magic and invented preindustrial worlds” (ix) that has shaped our views on fantasy ever since, even causing misreadings of great past fantasy works because “of the tendency to view pregenre fantasy through a postgenre lens” (176). Williamson’s project, then, is a sort of historical recovery: he wishes to examine the pregenre fantasy writers canonized by Carter in order to recover their original literary and aesthetic intentions.

Pregenre fantasy writers, largely, had no interest in the “BAFS template”: a wholly invented secondary world with an abiding interest in magic. Indeed, Williamson usefully distinguishes between the “literary” branch of pre-BAFS fantasists (including Tolkien, Dunsany, William Morris, E. R. Eddison, Hope Mirrlees) and the “popular” branch of pre-BAFS fantasists – Howard, Leiber, Jack Vance, Clark Ashton Smith, plus others. Unlike the literary writers, the popular writers almost never attempted to engage older forms of literature or aesthetics. They chose instead to write
modern adventure stories with surface archaic elements. The literary writers, however, deliberately engaged older literary forms, spurred by antiquarian interest as well as inspired by scholarly new editions and translations of obscure and forgotten literature. Thus, as Williamson says, whereas “the popular writers largely adapted traditional elements of content to the conventions of modern narrative forms, the literary writers would be more aptly described as writing modern works actively engaging the conventions of traditional ‘faery, or romance literature’” (36). Such antiquarianism, however, is peculiar to European writers, Williamson argues – it requires being cut-off from a tradition of thought and writing. The fantasy aesthetic developed by the antiquarians largely does not apply to non-European literature. Thus, in Williamson’s view, a writer such as Leslie Marmon Silko should not be considered a fantasist, since the “impossible” elements in Ceremony stem from Silko’s inheritance of a living Native American tradition.

The story of antiquarianism begins in the eighteenth century, where antiquarians (and pseudo-antiquarians like James Macpherson) employed methods – such as an elegiac, archaic style or appended essays on historical context – that anticipated methods to increase verisimilitude used by literary fantasists such as Morris or Tolkien. Next come the Romantics, who often turned to the ancient Greeks as a source of inspiration for the imagination. From there Williamson turns to the Victorians and one of his great themes: the neglect of narrative fantasy poetry in the BAFS canon. Except for an increased length and a more sanitized morality, Victorian verse fantasies largely followed Romantic verse fantasies. No “clear-cut reason” exists for why prose gradually displaced narrative poetry as the primary locus of fantasy, although Williamson suspects it has to do with the “retreat from the revolutionary intentions of many of the Romantics” (104). Nonetheless, he argues, the prose romances of William Morris (dubbed by Lin Carter as the “founder” of fantasy) advance rather than break with earlier Romantic writing and Morris’s own prior work (123).

Williamson’s next two chapters on twentieth-century fantasy—one for literary writers, another for popular ones—continue to complicate the easy ascriptions of “influence” that generally mark other histories of fantasy. The literary fantasy writers never saw themselves as forming a new genre or literary movement, and they resembled each other not because of mutual influence but through sharing a “common inheritance from the preceding century and a half” (163). Tolkien, for example, could have easily composed his mythology without the mediating example of Lord Dunsany (162). The popular fantasy writers, for their part, borrowed from sources only tangentially influential on the literary writers – the adventure-cum-romances of Sir Walter Scott, for example, or the works of James Fenimore Cooper, H. Rider Haggard, and Edgar Rice Burroughs.

Only a few minor points can be brought against The Evolution of Modern Fantasy, which overall is a highly intelligent, informed work. Williamson’s writing style leaves something to be desired; while his book’s structure is clear, individual sentences tend to be verbose and repetitive. Williamson also strangely neglects contemporary fantasy criticism. He discusses Colin Manlove (1975, 1983), Rosemary Jackson (1981), and Ann Swinfen (1984), but Williamson could have just as easily discussed the much more recent A Short History of Fantasy by Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James (2009), which would only have bolstered Williamson’s larger point about post-BAFS discussions of the pre-BAFS fantasy canon. Additionally, Williamson might have complicated his discussion in a few more places. For example, since he has a strong grasp on Tolkien, he surely knows that Tolkien (one of the antiquarians) believed that his literary aesthetics reflected those of the Beowulf-poet, whom Tolkien considered almost an antiquarian himself, thus making Beowulf a “fantasy” text (under Williamson’s terms) prior to the eighteenth-century. In response Williamson might have said, as he does of Spenser’s The Faerie Queene, that the Beowulf-poet “did not follow on or accompany an intellectual movement bent on recovering a lost past” (42, my emphasis); still, the point might have been worth a discussion. Nonetheless, the many valuable distinctions and nuances introduced by The Evolution of Modern Fantasy might make it the most definitive history of fantasy literature yet written.
A Book Review:
Colin B. Harvey – *Fantastic Transmedia: Narrative, Play and Memory Across Science Fiction and Fantasy Storyworlds*

*Aino-Kaisa Koistinen and Tanja Välisalo*


Quite recently “transmedia” and “transmediality” have become buzzwords in media and cultural studies. Drawing on Henry Jenkins’ conceptualization of “transmedia storytelling,” scholars have started to pay attention to how stories and storyworlds develop on and expand to various media. In *Fantastic Transmedia: Narrative, Play and Memory Across Science Fiction and Fantasy Storyworlds* Colin B. Harvey focuses especially on transmedia storytelling in fantasy genres. Harvey argues that science fiction and fantasy have, in fact, established themselves “as dominant modes of transmedia storytelling” (1), which has to do with their tendency to build fantastic worlds that can easily be expanded on via stories that are told on different platforms (38, 94–95, 189). It is easy to accept this claim as, indeed, many “transmedial worlds” (Klastrup and Tosca) are created around fantasy narratives – a famous example being *The Matrix* that Jenkins (93–129) cites as an example of transmedia storytelling where each medium and each transmedia extension benefits the overall storyworld.

**The Role of Memory in Transmedia Storytelling**

The aim of Harvey’s book is to create a broad definition of transmedia storytelling, one that does not exclude closely related phenomena (1). In doing so, Harvey emphasizes the role of memory in transmedia storytelling, arguing that “transmedia expressions ... ‘remember’ other elements in a given transmedia network” in different ways (2). Therefore, transmedia storytelling is not only about the ways transmedia expressions remember the elements of a given network, but also the memories they evoke in the audience (Harvey 3). Drawing on Jason Mittell, Harvey also claims that
the dominant mode of transmedia storytelling is not as coherent and balanced as in Jenkins’ conceptualization (87).

To better understand and organize the complexity of transmedia storytelling Harvey (186) argues that a transmedia storyworld can comprise of multiple infra storyworlds that together form the broader supra storyworld. The infra storyworlds may be inconsistent with each other. For example, Tim Burton’s *Batman* films, Christopher Nolan’s *Batman* films, *Arkham* videogames, *Lego Superheroes* and several different *Batman* comics are all infra storyworlds of their own, but also part of one large *Batman* supra storyworld (Harvey 186). Moreover, in Harvey’s definition transmedia worlds include non-diegetic content such as toys, collectibles and other merchandise, and these can even expand the storyworld (161, 182).

Harvey also discusses the relationship between adaptation and transmedia, which is relevant when one considers the long cultural history of adaptation. For Harvey, memory is a defining factor in distinguishing adaptation from transmedia storytelling. Adaptations tend to remember their so called original versions vertically, so that memories travel only from the source material to the adaptation, while in “transmedia storytelling memories can travel back and forth across the horizontal axis” (Harvey 91). Harvey nevertheless problematizes the relationship between adaptation and transmedia by pointing out that a storyworld can include both adaptations and transmedia storytelling, such as in the case of Marvel’s Cinematic Universe that “both adapts elements of the original comic books and invents new elements, including characters and plots, arguably making it simultaneously an example of transmedia storytelling and an example of adaptation” (9). Thus, it is not always necessary to try to draw clear lines between adaptations and transmedia.

**Taxonomy of Transmedia Storytelling**

Harvey also highlights the impact of legal parameters on transmedia memory. Control over intellectual property is an important factor in determining how transmedia productions can “remember, misremember, forget and even ‘non-remember’ diegetic elements from elsewhere in a … transmedia network” (Harvey 2). To further clarify this Harvey presents a taxonomy of transmedia storytelling focusing on the relationship between the holder of the intellectual property (IP) rights and the creator of the transmedial material. (1) *Directed transmedia storytelling* describes the idealistic view of transmedia as a coordinated and coherent whole where the IP holder exercises strict control over the material. In (2) *devolved transmedia storytelling* expansions are created by a third party and often have diegetic distance from the material created by the IP holder, for example featuring a different location, time period or perspective. Unofficial transmedia expansions, created beyond the legal arrangements of the former two categories, Harvey describes as (3) *detached transmedia storytelling*. (4) *Directed user-generated content* is transmedia storytelling created by users yet encouraged by the IP holder, whereas (5) *emergent user-generated content* is the domain of fan works (Harvey 185–190). In including user-generated content Harvey’s taxonomy thus incorporates the audience perspective, which is refreshing as transmedia theories tend to focus on transmedia production or narratives instead of users.

**Redefining Transmedia**

All in all, *Fantastic Transmedia* can be recommended to anyone interested in the connections of transmediality and fantasy fiction. For transmedia theory the main contribution of the book is the instrumentalization of memory as a key concept in transmedia storytelling, and how this concept binds together productional aspects, storytelling, and audiences. Including audience perspective in the definition of transmedia storytelling, indeed, attempts to open a new direction in transmedia
theory. It would have been interesting to follow this trajectory further to an even more detailed analysis of how audiences navigate between different transmedia expansions and how this reflects Harvey’s taxonomy of transmedia storytelling. However, it is understandable that it is not possible to cover everything in one book.

Harvey’s concept of transmedia memory, as well as his taxonomy, offer new analytical tools for examining the construction of transmedia worlds. The book would also serve as a good textbook on transmedia storytelling, as it offers a comprehensive discussion on the transmedial construction of stories and worlds without forgetting the relations between adaptation and transmedia – or transmedia and intertextuality. However, there are some minor errors in the timing of transmedia material mentioned in the book, for example, Middle-earth Role Playing Game was originally published in 1984, not in 1997, as claimed by Harvey. However, these are minor flaws in an otherwise compelling, comprehensive and well-constructed book.

Works cited


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The position of the editor-in-chief in *Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research* is now open from 1 January 2017. Currently, the journal has two editors-in-chief who will continue in their posts in 2017.

**The journal**

*Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research* is a peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary academic journal published by the Finnish Society of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research (Suomen science fiction- ja fantasiatutkimusseuran seura ry, http://finfar.org) from 2014 onwards. The journal is published in electronic format four times a year.

*Fafnir* aims at serving as an international forum for scholarly exchange on science fiction and fantasy and for discussion on current issues on the field. In order to achieve this, the journal introduces and develops research focusing on science fiction and fantasy literature, audiovisual art and media, games, and fan culture by providing an interdisciplinary perspective into the research within these genres. *Fafnir* publishes various texts ranging from peer-reviewed research articles to short overviews, essays, interviews, opinion pieces and academic book reviews on any subject suited to the paper. The main language of the journal is English, but articles are also published in Finnish or in the Scandinavian languages.

Publication Forum for the Federation of Finnish Learned Societies has given *Fafnir* Level 1 Classification as an academic publication channel important in Finnish research perspective. *Fafnir* is indexed in MLA International Bibliography and international The Science Fiction and Fantasy Research Database (SFFRD).

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