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Notes and Fragments

WHAT IS FANTASY?

by Brian Laetz and Joshua J. Johnston

Wizards, elves, dragons, and trolls—this is certainly the stuff of fantasy, populating the fictions of such giants as Tolkien, no less than the juvenilia of many aspiring writers. However, it is much easier to identify typical elements of fantasy, than it is to understand the category of fantasy itself. There can be little doubt that, in practice, the genre is pretty well defined, concretely manifesting itself in the shelves reserved for it in video shops and bookstores. But stating why a work belongs on these shelves, rather than those in the near vicinity, such as horror and science fiction, or those more remote, like plain old fiction, presents a real challenge. Certainly, a mere few feet could separate fantasy from the other shelves, but the conceptual distance those feet represent appears great indeed. What, if anything, distinguishes this genre from other categories of mass art. In other words, what is fantasy?

To begin, fantasy is a transmedia genre, since there are fantasy novels and movies, for instance, as is illustrated by J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* saga and its recent cinematic adaptation. It is interesting to note that fantasy includes works from other media as well, such as paintings, which often accompany fantasy narratives, like Frank Frazetta's recognizable illustrations for Robert E. Howard's *Conan the Barbarian* stories. Forms of entertainment are also affiliated with the genre, such as role-playing games, like *Dungeons and Dragons*, though one might balk at considering such things even forms of mass art? Nonetheless, despite the variety of media and entertainments associated with fantasy,

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narratives occupy a fundamental place within the genre. For paintings, drawings, and the like are only recognizably fantastic given some narrative background that tells us what wizards, trolls, and dragons look like.[1] Plausibly, it is what allows us to see that a drawing depicts an elf, for example, rather than a child with odd pointy ears. Thus, even if some works of fantasy are, strictly speaking, non-narrative, fantastic narratives remain fundamental, since these other works would not be classified as fantasy without them. This warrants initially setting aside things like fantasy games and paintings to focus on narratives. What, precisely, makes a narrative fantastic?

First, fantastic narratives are essentially fictional. For regardless of how one ultimately understands the nature of fiction, the notion of true fantasy seems patently incoherent, quite unlike, say, true crime. And it must be stressed that this point should be compatible with any theory of fiction. Second, the sort of things that can make a work fantastic, like wizards and dragons, must be prominent in the work—they cannot be minor details. For example, had there been a two-minute scene in *Spartacus* in which someone cast a spell, the scene would have been fantastic, but ultimately the movie would not be classified any differently; you would still find it on the drama shelf. Moreover, this condition is not peculiar to fantasy.[2] For instance, no one who has suffered through a Steven Seagal film would seriously classify it as romance or even action-romance, simply because it has a minor romantic subplot. Fantasy is no different from any other genre in this regard: whatever features define a genre must be prominent in a work in order for it to belong to the relevant genre. Third, the sort of content that can make a work fantastic must not solely be viewed as symbols for things that are not fantastic. In other words, these elements cannot just be taken as allegorical.[3] This alone would seem to disqualify George Orwell's *Animal Farm* from the genre, since most read the intelligent animals as merely symbols portraying various factions in communist Russia. It should be noted that the actual intentions of the author probably matter little here. For example, even if scholars discovered that Tolkien merely intended the Middle Earth saga as an elaborate allegory, it would remain fantasy; few would be tempted to move the books to another shelf. Fourth, the relevant content must not solely be mocked or lampooned within the work.[4] This is necessary to block parodies of fantasy from inclusion in the genre. *Epic Movie*, for example, is a parody of fantasy, rather than genuine fantasy, just as Mel Brooks's *Young Frankenstein* is merely a parody of horror, but not actual horror. Fifth, the relevant content must not be

merely absurd. For example, suppose *Kramer vs. Kramer* were remade, and everything was kept the same, except now the Kramers are wizards who occasionally cast spells. This would just be weird, and not a work of fantasy. Though this condition is somewhat vague, it rightly excludes such films as *Hercules in New York*, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. However, the question remains open what else unites the content of fantastic narratives—dragons, wizards, and the like. Two especially common suggestions must be rejected.

One popular idea is that fantasy essentially bears some special relationship to the imagination. Indeed, it is often thought that fantasy represents the very heights of imaginative expression. After all, what are Tolkien's stories of Middle Earth, if not wildly imaginative? However, this is not an essential feature of the genre. For, like any genre, the paradigmatic works of fantasy inspire countless imitators, who borrow the uniquely imaginative elements of these works. Indeed, even a passing acquaintance with the genre reveals that Tolkien's works spawned a large industry of unabashed imitations. But clearly these derivative works still belong to the genre. Thus, imaginativeness, in any interesting sense, is not an essential feature of fantasy, though paradigmatic works of fantasy are credited with it, as are the paradigmatic and seminal works in any genre. Another common idea is that fantasy necessarily involves magic. Certainly, supernatural technology, as it were, is common to much fantasy—wizards casting spells, witches seeing the future through crystal balls, and so on. However, a moment of reflection readily establishes that this is not really necessary, for it is easy to imagine a simple fantasy merely involving a war between knights and dragons, but entirely lacking wizards, spells, sorcery, or witches. So stated, both of the above proposals are mistaken, though each one may just be an indirect or misleading way of stating a very plausible one, namely, that fantasy essentially involves the supernatural.

It seems quite plausible to think that all works of fantasy at least require supernatural content, be they characters or events, for fantastic works contain plenty of both. Various supernatural characters are regularly found in fantasy: dragons, dwarves, elves, trolls, nymphs, wizards, warlocks—the list goes on. Supernatural events abound as well: magical storms, inexplicable levitations, the sky raining frogs, and the like. Indeed, one might be tempted to just stop here and claim that the remaining ingredient of fantastic narratives just is supernatural content. However, things are not so simple. This definition would allow too many works into the genre. Before explaining why, however, a

slight emendation of this proposal should be considered. Strictly speaking, it seems possible for a work to be fantasy, though the audience is mistaken in judging its content to be supernatural. This suggests that the real necessary condition here, supposing there is one, is just that audiences believe that the content is supernatural, even if it is not. This may seem a little implausible or just too abstract. So, some explanation is in order. Consider first whether it is credible to think that one can ever be wrong about what is supernatural, however the supernatural is ultimately to be understood. Is this even plausible? Many have thought so. For example, pantheists claim that God just is the whole of nature, and so must think that other theists are mistaken in assuming that God is supernatural, since it is conceptually puzzling to think that the whole of nature is supernatural. Now apply these considerations to fantasy. Obviously, most audiences think that dragons are supernatural, but suppose they are mistaken and dragons are actually an extinct species of dinosaur, though this is never discovered. Going further, it is plausible to think that many works with dragons would remain works of fantasy, because audiences believe that dragons are supernatural, despite their ignorance. Nevertheless, it is at least safe to conclude that fantasy either requires supernatural content or content that audiences take as supernatural. These points, and preceding ones, take us a considerable way to a reasonable theory of fantasy, but not all the way. The relationship between fantasy and a number of affiliated genres still remains to be explored. Two that immediately come to mind are mythology and religious fiction.

There are clearly close ties between fantasy and mythology. Seeing precisely what these are further helps to reveal the scope and limits of the genre. An especially useful case to consider here is the 1981 film, *Clash of the Titans*, featuring Sir Laurence Olivier. The plot, aside from minor deviations, is based upon the boast of Cassopeia, a Greek myth in which Perseus rescues a princess from a sea-monster after slaying the Gorgons. Thus, the film and myth possess indiscernible supernatural content that clearly helps to make the former fantasy. Given this, one may be tempted to conclude that the myth is also a fantastic narrative, albeit an ancient one. However, this suggestion belies typical classificatory practices, and it is precisely these practices that are in need of explanation. So, the myth cannot be considered fantasy. But then, how can fantasy be distinguished from mythology? A plausible hypothesis is that works of fantasy are inspired, directly or indirectly, by myths, legends, and folklore. This can be endlessly illustrated. For example,

much fantasy is based upon Greek mythology, like the films, *Clash of the Titans*, *Jason and the Argonauts*, and *Hercules*. Likewise, *sword and sorcery*, such as *Conan the Barbarian*, is inspired by Nordic mythology. Moreover, *high fantasy*, the work of Tolkien and his followers, largely stems from Western European legends and folklore from the Middle Ages, such as the tales of King Arthur.[5] Given these sorts of examples, one might go further and suggest that, not only are all fantasies inspired by myths, but, more specifically, they are inspired by pre-Modern myths, roughly dating before the sixteenth century. However, this hypothesis is an oversimplification.

Consider the fact that Sophocles and Euripides both wrote tragedies about the boast of Cassopeia. Indeed, various artists created mythically-inspired works before the modern era. Are these fantasies as well? Again, the fantasy shelf of most bookstores exclaims not. But why is that? In some instances, perhaps the story is taken to have genre-transcendent literary value. This might work in the case of the great Tragedians, but surely not every such work written by a Greek possesses this. And, nonetheless, they still are not fantasies. A more plausible hypothesis is simply that many audience members at the time of the work's composition believed in the sort of supernatural content found in the myth, unlike the modern audience of *Clash of the Titans*. If this is right, then fantasies are not just inspired by the supernatural content of myths; they are also inspired by myths that few or no audience members accept at the time of the work's creation, which seems sufficient to exclude Sophocles's from the genre.[6] Equally, it also suffices to disqualify contemporary religious fiction as fantasy, like the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. Since many audience members do believe in God, angels, and the Rapture, these works cannot be considered fantasy. However, it also rightly leaves open the possibility that if in the distant future Christianity becomes as implausible as Greek myths are to everyone now, then an author might be able to appropriate the supernatural content of a story like *Left Behind* to make a work of fantasy, as has been done with Greek and Nordic mythology. This condition then, provides a plausible explanation for our classificatory practices. However, a slight emendation of it seems advisable. Returning to Greek mythology, although modern audiences think that many ancient Greeks really believed in the sort of supernatural content contained in these narratives, one might think that we could easily be wrong about ancient psychology. Perhaps no Greek really did believe in the Pantheon or the deeds of the heroes by the time Sophocles composed his play about the boast of Cassopeia.

Moreover, one might think that, nevertheless, it is not thereby fantasy. One proposal that could secure this is to say that it is necessary that present audiences believe the Greeks believed in the myths, whether or not they are mistaken. In other words, if an audience did not believe the Greeks believed in their myths, then Sophocles's play would be considered fantasy—nothing else is relevant. In any case, the preceding discussion suggests at least three points. First, the supernatural content of fantasy is inspired by myths. Second, there must be no significant groups that believe in the relevant content at the time of the work's composition. Finally, either this content must have been believed by the people whose myth it derives from or the audience believes that these people believed in it. With these in mind, it is easier to distinguish fantasy from its two sibling genres, horror and science fiction.

On the face of it, one difference is that horror and science fiction are not dependent on the folklore of previous cultures, unlike fantasy. However, this is not to say that works in genres cannot also exploit the supernatural content of mythology, even without introducing any novel supernatural content of their own. So, it must be explained why these particular narratives are not fantasy. A relevant science fiction example here is the 2002 film, *Reign of Fire*. Briefly, the story takes place in an apocalyptic future where dragons have all but destroyed the human population, after London construction workers unwittingly freed some while tunneling underground. Plausibly, the reason why this story is not fantasy is simply that the dragons are presented in a naturalistic fashion, for the characters in the film view them no differently than we regard dinosaurs, whereas dragons are not presented along these lines in fantasy. This suggests that the supernatural content in fantasy must not be naturalized within the work and this condition successfully excludes similar science fiction works from the genre.[7] A relevant horror example is readily provided by the *Leprechaun* film series, which center on an evil leprechaun that terrorizes anyone who takes his gold. Why are these not fantasy? The difference here is just that the supernatural content in *Leprechaun* is primarily meant to frighten audiences, unlike a fantasy. Of course, fantasies often have some monsters that are meant to frighten us, but if all the supernatural elements of a work function this way, then it truly is a work of horror, even if all the creatures are literally taken from mythology. All the preceding suggestions address the content of fantasy, but neglect their plot. However, it is equally important to consider what kinds of storylines or scenarios works of fantasy concern.

A common and plausible suggestion here is that fantasies are adventures, filled with quests to save a world, a kingdom, or just a princess. This is almost right. Consider the *Harry Potter* series, a recent addition to children's fantasy. In terms of plot, these stories are basically just mysteries, with a dose of coming-of-age school drama. So, while they have plenty of action, and even some adventurous episodes, they do not fit the traditional mold of what one would call an "adventure." Rather, their parallel is any ordinary action-mystery, rather than adventures, be they fantastic, like *The Lord of the Rings*, or not, like an *Indiana Jones* film. However, it still seems plausible to think that all fantasy must involve a lot of action, as it were, even if not much adventure. For if a work lacked this, but possessed all of the other relevant features, it would simply become absurd. For example, suppose Rowling wrote a new Potter story without any action at all, instead concentrating on Harry's mid-life crisis following a divorce, and his ten-year battle with alcohol and drug addiction. Even granting its affiliation to fantasies involving young Potter, the supernatural features would just become absurd.

At last, we may fully state our theory. On our view, fantastic narratives are fictional action stories with prominent supernatural content that is inspired by myth, legends, or folklore. Further, this content is believed by few or no audience members and is believed by audiences to have been believed by another culture. Moreover, it is not naturalized, solely allegorical, merely parodic, simply absurd, or primarily meant to frighten audiences. These are all important elements for a definition of fantasy, though the relations they bear to one another might be debatable. For instance, one might reasonably wonder whether one condition ultimately reduces to another or whether one of our negative conditions reduces to a positive one. Even granting some minor changes, however, the account would surely remain complicated and is thus likely to win few points with fans of elegance. However, it cannot be seriously faulted on these grounds, for any adequate theory of fantasy will have to distinguish it from a variety of affiliated genres and this is no simple task. Further, our definition may well be susceptible to some counterexample, and so we expect it to be the beginning of discussion, rather than the end of it. In particular, classificatory practices may change in the future and reveal further aspects of the genre. This is nothing new. When a genre hides unrealized possibilities, artists will discover it—not philosophers. That being said, the theory defended here provides a plausible characterization of fantasy, as it now stands. It systematizes, in a clear fashion, very common intuitions about the genre, which is all that can be reasonably

expected from any genre analysis in the first place. However, it does not accommodate all of them; we have ignored some common ideas about fantasy. Two of these are worth considering at length.

One notable omission from our definition is any mention of wonder. This is no accident. Though fantasy is frequently associated with this affect, ultimately it cannot be incorporated into an analysis of the genre itself. Consider the inadequacy of some obvious proposals, which attempt to do so. To begin, the suggestion that works of fantasy necessarily inspire wonder is hopelessly oblivious to the countless B-movies and second-rate novels within the genre that completely lack this affect. Anyone should be able to think of at least one such work. Failure to do so plausibly indicates insufficient acquaintance with fantasy, rather than a scarcity of legitimate counterexamples. A natural response to this point would be to instead propose that fantastic narratives are necessarily intended to inspire wonder, though they may fail to do so. This constitutes an obvious improvement over the first proposal, though it still seems problematic. For one can easily imagine discovering that some story traditionally classified as fantasy was not intended by its author to elicit this response, for example, simply because they thought it was not capable of that, though they did think it could mildly entertain audiences. But if the work in question satisfied all of the other conditions in our definition, few would reclassify it, which suggests that this proposal is flawed. Of course, if the overwhelming majority of those taken to be writers of fantasy claim that this is one of their intentions, one might reasonably dismiss this intuition. However, this is unlikely. Indeed, it is implausible to interpret the majority of fantasy as being meant to inspire wonder.

One reason for thinking this involves an appeal to the rationality of authors who write fantasy. Presently, there are just a few basic styles within the genre and the majority of fantasy stories and novels are firmly rooted in one of these. Indeed, even very respectable fantasy authors basically just master the enjoyable details and nuances of a very familiar style, like high fantasy, which J. R. R. Tolkien pioneered, or sword and sorcery, which owes much to Robert E. Howard's *Conan* stories. In short, most fantasy is just a continuation of established narrative traditions, the best of which skillfully and entertainingly demonstrate knowledge of these. But further, despite its recent commercial renaissance, fantasy authors knowingly write for a rather small audience of mostly adult readers, experienced in the genre. There can be little doubt that such audiences are unlikely to experience wonder at the supernatural con-

tent of these works, even if their interest in the genre partially stems from experiencing this as youths, when they likely first discovered it. And, more to the point, it seems likely that many fantasy authors are completely aware of this, and thus often do not have this unrealistic goal in composing their stories. A less contentious reason for maintaining that fantasy authors do not always intend their works to elicit wonder is simply that there are some prominent styles within the genre that seem as uninterested in this as other genres, like horror. For instance, many works of *dark fantasy*, like its precursor, sword and sorcery, are preoccupied with graphic depictions of violence and sexuality, albeit in a fantastic setting full of the usual trappings of the genre. It seems implausible to see these very "adult" works as meant to inspire wonder, even if this is true of so many memorable works of fantasy.

Ordinary familiarity with the culture of avid readers and writers of fantasy should confirm these points. Nevertheless, though wonder should not figure in a definition of fantasy, the proposal does highlight something important that any thorough commentary on the genre should acknowledge. Many great works of fantasy do inspire a sense of innocent wonder, especially for children and youths. And this is a very important part of the genre's historical legacy. Indeed, it may even be largely responsible for the initial development of the genre. Perhaps then, this accounts for the temptation to incorporate wonder into a definition of the genre, since wonder is such a valuable feature of so many paradigmatic works of fantasy. However, there is a distinction between what merely makes a story fantastic and what makes a story good fantasy. Perhaps wonder should figure into an account of the latter, but it need not in the former. The temptation to embrace a commendatory definition of the genre, such that a work of fantasy is necessarily meritorious, should be resisted; like all genres, there is enough room for bad stories too. To maintain otherwise, would be to just stipulate a definition of fantasy, based upon personal taste. On a related point, however, it is worth noting that an even-handed view of the genre probably would not claim that all good works of fantasy inspire wonder in receptive audiences. As mentioned above, some styles within the genre, like dark fantasy, do not fit the traditional mold of the classics written by Tolkien or Lewis, whose value undeniably has something to do with wonder. Thus, unless much contemporary fantasy is to be dismissed as *automatically* inferior to these, the idea that some meritorious works of fantasy need not involve wonder anymore than works from other genres should be taken seriously.

Another interesting test for our theory is posed by *animal stories*, a staple of children's fiction. On the face of it, many narratives featuring intelligent talking animals will satisfy all of the conditions set forth in our account. Some of these rightly belong to the genre, like Richard Adams's *Watership Down* and other works of *xenofiction*. However, stories like *Babe*, for example, saturate children's film and literature and it is not clear how they could be excluded from the genre, on our account. Surely, the animals they feature are supernatural and a rich part of world folklore. And often, though not always, they are presented in children's fiction without a hint of allegory, parody, absurdity, and the like. In short, many animal stories are probably included in the genre, on our definition. And, of course, in a broad sense, such stories are fantastic, but not all of them are obviously fantastic in the more restricted sense under consideration. But this is somewhat questionable; it certainly seems strange to place *Babe*, for example, alongside *The Hobbit*. What should be made of this?

One initially credible way of coping with this implication is to simply understand these stories as children's fantasy, rather than as fantasy intended for adults.[8] Indeed, there is probably no better rationale for accepting them as part of the genre. However, there is a wrinkle to this suggestion. Even within children's literature, there seems to be a real distinction between fantasy and other genres, and many animal stories are not assigned to the former. For example, *Charlotte's Web* is just plain old children's fiction, while children's fantasy is reserved for works like Madaleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and other stories that clearly parallel much adult fantasy. If this popular distinction is to be preserved, then it looks like our definition must require a further condition. But what might that be? Here a page from Tolkien might be helpful, for he encountered a similar problem in attempting to distinguish *fairy-stories*, now a subgenre of contemporary fantasy, from what he termed, *beast-fables*.[9] Perhaps another necessary condition may be culled from his ideas to exclude the animal stories that seem least likely to belong to the genre. What then, did he suggest? In fact, Tolkien offered multiple observations on this issue. Three stick out as especially important. First, human characters are either absent or play a small role in beast-fables. Instead, the animals are protagonists and their concerns are paramount, unlike fairy-stories. Second, when humans are present in beast-fables, they do not understand the animals or converse with them, again, unlike fairy-stories. More generally, perhaps one could just say that human characters are unaware of the full extent

of the animals' intelligence in beast-fables. Finally, and closely related, Tolkien suggests that the speech of animals in fairy-stories represents, on some level, the desire of human beings to bond with or feel close to the rest of nature. Presumably, this is because human characters speak with animals in fairy-stories, unlike beast-fables. These remarks are interesting, but can they be enlisted to distinguish the genre from animal stories that are not fantasy? A strength of Tolkien's criteria is that any one of them do appear to rightly exclude some works from the genre, like *Babe*, for the human characters in the story are arguably minor, and certainly do not converse with Babe. However, there are weaknesses. First, one wonders whether these common features of animal stories are truly universal and, if they are not, whether anyone would assign animal stories lacking these features to fantasy. For example, suppose that the farmer in *Babe* did actually understand and talk to Babe. Would one then feel substantially more comfortable placing it alongside *The Hobbit*? Our own intuitions are divided on this point. A greater problem is simply that the criteria also seem to disqualify *Watership Down*, for instance, as fantasy, though it is regularly assigned to the genre. What to make of all this? Borrowing from Tolkien, one might conclude that humans, at best, play a minor role in the animal stories that should not be classified as fantasy, whereas they may in a work of fantasy. To one of us, this is acceptable, and, to the other, it is not. We suspect, however, that this is not unusual and that our own disagreement is likely to be duplicated among others. This may suggest that there simply is no established convention regarding the relationship between fantasy and animal stories. If not, however, it may be very difficult to precisely and convincingly demonstrate what that is.

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1. Of course, one could draw a novel fantastic creature that has not appeared in any narrative. However, such a drawing could only be fantastic, if it sufficiently resembles other creatures whose origin is narrative. Otherwise, it would be surreal, rather than fantastic.

2. Gregory Currie echoes this suggestion in chapter 3 of his *Arts and Minds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

3. Tzvetan Todorov makes the same suggestion about an affiliated, but broader genre

that he dubs *the fantastic*. For further details, see chapter 2 of his monograph *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Clevland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1973).

4. Tolkien makes a very similar suggestion in his essay "On Fairy-Stories" reprinted in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966).

5. Of course, we are not suggesting that every fantasy is a literal adaptation of some particular myth. The point is just that the relevant supernatural content of a fantasy depends on a background of mythological narrative or folklore. Perhaps this suggestion can be sharpened, though we will not attempt to do so here.

6. It should be noted that this point is compatible with the now typical view among classicists that many Greeks no longer believed in the myths by the time of the great Tragedians, for we assume that myth devotees were, nonetheless, not demoted to the status of a cult.

7. It should be noted, nonetheless, that nothing we have said excludes the possibility of hybrid works or works that belong to both fantasy and science fiction, like the comic, *Thor*, for example, or the *Star Wars* saga, both of which are excellent examples of sci-fi fantasy.

8. Noël Carroll offered this suggestion to cope with a similar counterexample at the 2007 Pacific American Society for Aesthetics meeting, where we presented an earlier draft of this article.

9. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," pp. 42–45.