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On Magic

How Magic Systems in Modern Fantasy Disrupt Power Structures of Race, Class, and Gender

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XXXXXX-XXXX

Abstract

The fantasy genre is often considered to be one of escapism. Yet modern works are increasingly grounded in our own political reality. The political allegories of fantasy have been explored somewhat within academic literature, but one aspect driving modern conceptions of the genre remains undiscussed: that of magic.

This thesis argues that the modern fantasy genre uses magic as a tool to address real political issues. Magical power, and the question of who gets to wield it, is a concept that seems far-removed from our reality. Yet the way magic systems shape the very power structures of these fantasy worlds reveals the political inequalities and prejudices of ours.

To demonstrate how magic disrupts power structures, this thesis focuses on three modern works of fantasy and the politics of their magic. In particular, issues of race, class, and gender are explored using relevant fields of literary criticism to guide analysis.

Firstly, N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* series, whose magic system parallels racial inequality. Jemisin, the first black writer to have won the Hugo Award, is a prominent voice on the racial divide in modern America. Her writing, from *Broken Earth* to *How Long 'til Black Future Month?* speaks bluntly on the risidual pain and persisting inequality of African American experience. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* uses its magic system to explore themes of black identity, coping with atrocity, and of overthrowing systems of oppression. As a postmodern work, *The Broken Earth* demonstrates not only the sophistication of fantasy as a literary genre, but also the prevalence and importance of its political magic.

Secondly, Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* is used to explore the power dynamics of gender. Jordan's bestselling epic fantasy series has seen him described as an American Tolkien, and his inclusion satisfies both the criteria for including a truly classic work of fantasy and one which is deeply relevant to issues of gender. Jordan's magic system is strictly split into male and female magic, but after the corruption of the male half only women are capable of wielding it. This premise empowers the women of Jordan's world, leading to matriarchal structures which challenge traditional gender dynamics. Yet Jordan's depictions of gender are also inconsistent. Sexist characterising of female characters persists, and Jordan's magic system is one which ultimately only accepts binary readings of gender. Jordan's *Wheel of Time* therefore shows how magic can not only reimagine power structures, but also risks reinforcing them.

Finally, Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* examines issues of class. *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*, having won the Hugo Award in 2005, is set apart from other works of fantasy by its Victorian Gothic pastiche. Clarke evokes the style of Dickens, Thackeray, or Austen, and uses her work, set in an alternate Victorian England, to champion the rights of the working class. Clarke's novel follows two competing interpretations of what

magic ought to be. Upper and lower class magics are pitched against one another, allowing Clarke to critique the social immobility of elite institutions and to rally around the causes of worker unions. Clarke ultimately launches a critique of the upper classes which translates into modern day issues of inequality. Finally, Clarke challenges static and idealistic understandings of history to urge her reader to see history as something dependent upon perspectives and critique: using her magic system to frame a solidly Marxist reading of both history and politics.

In arguing that magic is key to the political commentaries of modern fantasy, relevant critical theorists have been drawn upon. Fantasy critics including Farah Mendelsohn, Brian Attebery, and Rosemary Jackson are used alongside the works of Tolkien and Le Guin to frame existing fantasy criticism and give context to the modern works under examination. In regards to postcolonial, gender, and Marxist readings of the texts, the work of Mark Jerng, Butler and Wickham, and Freedman and Suvin, respectively, have been drawn upon to guide discussion.

Ultimately, this study finds that the fantasy genre is one of untapped value. In reading magic as a tool of allegory and insight to our world, it is shown that modern fantasy poses challenging critiques to the politics of race, gender, and class. Magic is not only a force of power, but of empowerment.

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On Magic:
How Magic Systems in Modern Fantasy Disrupt Power Structures of Race, Class, and Gender

Magic is power.

The ability to call lightning, to summon demons, to bend creatures to your will, is evidently one which grants great power, yet even in its everyday uses the term 'magic' implies influence. Merriam-Webster define magic as an 'extraordinary power or influence seemingly from a supernatural source', while the Collins dictionary defines it as 'the power to use supernatural forces to make impossible things happen', granting the user 'control'. Magic is synonymous with power, and so its redistribution therefore possesses the means to upend traditional structures of power and control.

Magic, in its most literal sense, is therefore a rich topic for exploration within literary criticism. By definition, magic is often situated alongside the supernatural, or 'other', and fundamentally connected to the magic-user's power or empowerment. Yet despite this, the concept of magic remains relatively unexplored within the very genre where it is most prevalent: namely, the fantasy genre.

From the wizards of Tolkien's Middle-Earth to the students of J.K. Rowling's Hogwarts, magic has become a hallmark of the fantasy genre. Meanwhile, the ways in which magic systems suffuse those worlds have only become more sophisticated. Modern works of fantasy tend to give far more prominence to their magic systems than the classics of the genre and use magical conventions to create powerful political allegories.

This is a development which deserves further attention, and so this thesis seeks to investigate how magic, as seen within works of modern fantasy, works to disrupt traditional power structures, particularly those of race, class, and gender. It has already been stated that magic *is* power, but it might be more precise to argue that magic *rewrites* power dynamics. Since Morgan Le Fay, magic has been resituating women into roles of power, and within fantasy, that genre of 'escapism', magic has the power to reimagine power structures, to interrogate them, and ultimately to cast a light upon the inequalities that persist within our own world.

Divided into three parts, this work will explore how magic systems drive political commentaries across issues of race, gender, and class. N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth Trilogy*, Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time*, and Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* have been selected as texts which closely examine these respective issues. Each text has received critical acclaim and acknowledgement both within and beyond the fantasy community, yet their politics of magic is a factor that has remained unexplored within

academic fields. Furthermore, in their highly unique styles the three texts constitute a broad sampling of modern fantasy. Jemisin's fragmented postmodern style, Jordan's Tolkienian epic fantasy, and Clarke's Dickensian pastiche demonstrate both the variety of modern fantasy and the unifying motif of magic.

Firstly, representations of race will be explored within N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth Trilogy*: a work which battles with cycles of hatred and the impossibility of moving on from the history of black slavery. As the first black woman to win the Hugo Award, Jemisin's deliberate politics confront us with the world of The Stillness, where *orogenes* possess the power to move mountains and quell earthquakes, yet live a life of enslavement: kept in ignorance of their cultural history and abilities. This chapter will analyse how Jemisin intertwines magic and race into her world to criticise the persistent persecution of African Americans in modern day America, whilst also exploring the fantasy genre's problematic history with representations of race.

The second chapter will focus on Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* as a commentary upon issues of gender. In Jordan's world the source of magic is divided into a male and female half, yet the male half has become tainted and will slowly kill any man who attempts to draw upon it. Only female magic-users remain: the Aes Sedai, with rank and privilege which both empowers and alienates them. Jordan's gender-based magic, along with his depiction of men and women, bares open questions about the binary nature of gender, as well as the structures of power which limit traditional male and female roles.

Finally, Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* will be explored in relation to Marxist and class criticism. Clarke's Hugo Award-winning work, written in a Victorian Gothic style to imitate that of Thackeray and Austen, imagines a Victorian England where proper 'English' magic is no longer practiced. As Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell set out to revive the respect and traditions of English magic, multiple interpretations arise and begin to compete. Theoretical, upper-class, and academic magical opinion is set in competition with the practical, lower-class, and instinctive magic that thrives amongst the servants and workers of the north, and fundamentally drives Clarke's political commentary on modern day class elitism.

Through an examination of these three works it will be shown how magic is used within modern fantasy to draw political commentary that is wholly grounded in our own world. Additionally, to better understand the history of fantasy and its bearings on issues of race, class, and gender, particular reference will be made to Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and Ursula Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* to inform discussions and draw comparisons with the fantasy genre as it stands in the modern day.

Before this work can begin, however, it is important to first address the issue of definitions. Both the terms 'fantasy' and 'magic' encapsulate murky and long-debated origins, yet a deeper understanding of their meanings will aid in illuminating the fantasy genre's long history of critiquing our reality.

On Fantasy

What is fantasy, other than a book with some dragons in it? This question is, of course, facetious; yet the closer one looks the harder it becomes to find a truly satisfactory definition of fantasy. Academics have long debated a precise definition of the genre (Jackson 13) and much of the issue lies in the fact that the very origins of fantasy are themselves obscure. Yet even in their disagreement over the specifics, an examination of fantasy definitions reveals repeated references to the importance of magic.

Definitions

The fantasy genre cannot easily be defined. As Rosemary Jackson notes in her work, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, the Latin root 'phantasticus' is described as being 'that which is made visible, visionary, unreal.' and in this sense 'all literary works are fantasies' as all fiction deals with the unreal (13). True enough, the fantasy genre draws its origins from a wide range of literary modes, putting out old roots into the mires of 'myth, legend, fable, folk-tale and romance' (Swinfen 2). One can argue that fantasy dates from Beowulf to Little Red Riding Hood, from King Arthur to MacBeth, and this issue of diverse origins refutes efforts to arrive at any precise definition.

Yet definitions, where they are to be of use, are most often compromises. In the case of fantasy, the issue of an all-encompassing definition has long been acknowledged. Modern academics, from Jamie Williamson to Farah Mendlesohn, reject the need to argue further over the definitive elements of the genre. 'The debate over definition is now long-standing, and a consensus has emerged, accepting as a viable "fuzzy set" a range of critical definitions of fantasy' (Mendlesohn xii). Yet an examination of this 'fuzzy set' of definitions reveals a reoccurring element throughout the genre that deserves closer inspection: that of magic.

Given the acknowledged exhaustion of debates surrounding fantasy definitions, this study will follow Williamson's definition of fantasy, chiefly because Williamson intends it as an imperfect, working definition. Williamson defines fantasy as 'narratives set in worlds in which the supernatural or magical are part of the fabric of reality and that center on the themes of quest, war, and adventure' (12). This definition is further useful as it is one of many which mentions magic, specifically, as a fundamental element of the genre. This traces all the way back to the very first definitions of fantasy. Noting Lin Carter's 1973 work *Tolkien: A Look behind the Lord of the Rings*, Williamson quotes Carter's definition, where 'a fantasy is a book or story . . . in which magic really works' (Williamson 4). The definition given by C.N. Manlove: 'a fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of supernatural or impossible worlds' (Attebery 16), again invokes the 'supernatural', and Brian Attebery also echoes this sentiment: 'Fantasy is generally defined in terms of a violation of expectations: prominent within a work of fantasy is some element of the *im*possible or *super*natural' (54), identifying the supernatural as the central element

of fantasy. This assembly of definitions might all be termed under 'academic' definitions, yet when it comes to the inclusion of magic or the supernatural, even 'popular' definitions seem to agree: Terry Pratchett terming the genre as 'fiction that transcends the rules of the known world […] and includes elements commonly classed as magical' (111).

The importance of magic as a defining element of fantasy arguably dates even to Tolkien's pre-genre ruminations. The input of seminal fantasy writers necessitates an important point, however, as most of these writers did not consider their work to be 'fantasy'. As Williamson notes in her charting of the evolution of the fantasy genre, 'the coalescence of fantasy into a discrete genre occurred quite recently and abruptly, a direct result of the crossing of a resurgence of interest in American popular "Sword and Sorcery" in the early 1960s with the massive commercial success of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*', yet prior to this 'there had been no identifiable genre resembling contemporary Fantasy' (1). Writers such as Tolkien and Lewis, therefore, did not consider their work under the label of 'fantasy', and Williamson notes that a truly discrete sense of the genre, 'with a definition and a canon', would not emerge fully until 1974 (5). This means that we have no way to see precisely how pre-genre writers would interpret the genre as it has been defined today, however in the case of Tolkien much can be garnered from his critical work: *On Fairy-stories*.

Tolkien's *On Fairy-stories* is notable as it has shaped the language surrounding discussions of the fantasy genre, introducing the terms 'primary' and 'secondary' worlds into academic discourse. What is more fascinating, however, are Tolkien's attempts to define the quintessential 'fairy story'. Just as fantasy stories have more to them than the veneer of dragons, Tolkien states that stories 'that are actually concerned primarily with 'fairies' […] are relatively rare, and as a rule not very interesting. Most good 'fairy-stories' are about the *aventures* of men in the Perilous Realm or upon its shadowy marches' (32). Of course, the realm of *Faërie* contains 'elves', 'dwarves', and 'dragons', but Tolkien stresses that it contains 'many things besides'. Crucially, Tolkien argues that the 'definition of a fairy-story – what it is, or what it should be – does not, then, depend on any definition or historical account of elf or fairy, but upon the nature of *Faërie*: the Perilous Realm itself, and the air that blows in that country' (32). What, then, is Faërie? Tolkien gives us a tantalizing suggestion: that '*Faërie* itself may perhaps most nearly be translated by Magic' (32). Of course, Tolkien is not musing directly on the topic of fantasy, and his attempts to describe the essence of the fairy-story are deliberately vague, as though the topic is one that must be hinted at only subtly; kept ineffable. Indeed, other critics are also touched by this romance: Rosemary Jackson suggests that the very 'value of fantasy has seemed to reside in precisely this resistance to definition, it its free-floating and escapist qualities' (1), yet this does not erase the fact that academics and fantasy writers themselves turn again and again to the concept of 'magic' to define the genre.

This consistent reoccurrence of ‘magic’ as a key to the fantasy genre is the catalyst for this investigation into how magic systems have developed alongside the genre, and operate today as powerful tools for political critique. Yet before we may turn to the concept of magic and its own definitions and uses within the genre, it is important first to situate the genre within a context of academic criticism. Fantasy, after all, has often been considered to be nothing more than escapism; nothing more than its dragons. And in understanding these criticisms, we may better argue for the genre’s place amongst literature that is soundly situated within our own politics and history.

Criticism

Attempts to define fantasy within academic circles reveal a history of ‘high’ and ‘low’ brow contention within the field. Rosemary Jackson, a key influence in the field of fantasy criticism for her development of Todorov’s ‘fantastic’ into a case for Freudian readings of the genre, categorises her own research under the term ‘literary fantasy’ to explore the ‘fantastic realism’ of Dickens and Dostoevsky, Mary Shelley and E.T.A. Hoffman, and of Kafka and Thomas Pynchon. In other words, a far more traditionally canonical survey of writers categorised under the fantasy label. Though Jackson defends this choice, her separation of ‘literary’ and non-literary fantasy, of high and low fantasy, is extremely damaging to the study of the genre and has been contested by academics repudiating ‘low art’ accusations.

Jamie Williamson, whose work *The Evolution of Modern Fantasy* emphasises the importance of ‘low art’ sword and sorcery contributions to the fantasy genre, addresses the confusion caused by works such as Jackson’s in particular. He notes that Jackson rejects ‘the best- selling fantasies of Kingsley, Lewis, Tolkien, LeGuin, or Richard Adams […] because they belong to that realm of fantasy which is more properly defined as faery, or romance literature’, a move which is no doubt ‘confusing to readers whose ideas about fantasy literature were shaped by the genre constructed in the wake of Sword and Sorcery and the Tolkien explosion’ (24). Williamson ascribes this to the ‘conventional popular-versus-academic rift’, where popular definitions are understood to be ‘flawed for sloppy and imprecise terminology, while the latter, ensconced in the Ivory Tower, stubbornly ignores the fact of common usage’ (9). Evidently, there is a fundamental tension in the defining of fantasy and a resistance felt within the community of popular fantasy readers against claims which lend airs to a genre that is deliberately whimsical. As Sir Terry Pratchett, the acclaimed satirist of the fantasy genre puts it: ‘Please call it fantasy’, ‘Don’t call it ‘magical realism’, that’s just fantasy wearing a collar and tie’ (147).

Fantasy exists, therefore, at a point of contention between academic and popular critics. Criticisms of fantasy have been further exacerbated by the view that the genre has less critical capacity than its literary counterpart: science fiction. Darko Suvin’s *On the*

Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre holds much of the credit for this academic position. In arguing for the place of science fiction within literary criticism Suvin claims the critical inferiority of the 'fairy-tale', 'fantasy', and 'hero's journey' (378). Suvin directly accuses fantasy of failing to 'use imagination as a means to understand the tendencies in reality', escaping instead into a 'closed' world 'indifferent toward cognitive possibilities' (375). By this he argues that fantasy, as an escapist genre, does not reflect on reality, but is only a 'static mirroring' that provokes no 'cognition' in the reader (377). As a genre that primarily operates outside of our own time and history, Suvin argues that fantasy cannot comment upon our own reality, and this view has proven to be widely influential (378). Yet the view that an escapist genre cannot comment upon our history and reality is fundamentally flawed, and one that this thesis will challenge throughout each demonstration of the fantasy genre's deep consideration of very politically real issues of race, class, and gender.

In Suvin's own language one can instead argue for magic as the very 'novum' which, he argues, differentiates science-fiction and allows for its daring political commentary. Suvin defines the 'novum' as 'an important difference super-added to or infused into the author's empirically "known" - i.e., culturally defined - world**'** (TSotA), giving the example of H. G. Wells' time machine. The novum is the 'strange newness' which transforms our conception of the world and allows us to reflect upon it (OtP 373), and this, I would argue, is equally true of magic within the fantasy genre. Despite the common conception of fantasy as a 'static' or nostalgic ideal of medieval heroics, magic and its cascading effects upon power structures work precisely as a novum to disrupt and critique those same ideals. Fantasy, though a genre of the distant past, is also often one which frequently centres upon the collapse of ancient kingdoms and moments of revolution. It is therefore precisely a genre of historical and political change, and one which deserves recognition amongst literary critics.

In light of this criticism, it is also worth noting that this investigation will not seek to expound upon existing defences of the fantasy genre as one worthy of literary merit. Instead, it is hoped that academic value will be demonstrated by the merit of the investigation itself. Meanwhile, many thorough and compelling cases already exist on behalf of fantasy for those interested in the subject; Swinfen's *Defence of Fantasy* is one of many convincing arguments, and the success of such efforts can be shown by the existence of the 2012 publication of *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*.

However, research into the fantasy genre remains an understudied field, and considerations of magic within the genre are even fewer. Critics such as Suvin fail to see beyond the veneer of dragons, yet while this view has been criticised it is also important to consider why this perception reoccurs across studies of the genre. There is something vital to acknowledge about the urge to simply define fantasy by its clichés. In fact, when setting out on a study of fantasy, perhaps more so than in any other genre, it is hugely important to understand its reliance upon the cliché.

Clichés

Clichés, defined by the OED as 'a phrase or an idea that has been used so often that it no longer has much meaning and is not interesting', are understood to be an integral part of what forms the fantasy genre. Terry Pratchett, himself a fantasy author, refers to this as the 'consensus fantasy universe': a pastiche of clichés and precedents 'formed by folklore and Victorian romantics and Walt Disney, and E. R. Eddison and Jack Vance and Ursula Le Guin and Fritz Leiber'. We know that a work belongs to the fantasy genre by its 'dragons, and magic users, and far horizons, and quests, and items of power', clichés which Pratchett refers to as '"public domain"' plot items' (121). This overuse of tired set-pieces is one of the reasons why fantasy is often considered to be unsophisticated, yet I would argue, contrary to the OED's definition, that the clichés used within fantasy are often used precisely to *bring* meaning and new interest to the genre itself.

Clichés, in fact, are often the key to accessing internal, metafictive discussions of the genre. A reader versed in fantasy will, for example, take notice if a plucky young farm boy prophesised to save the world is killed off in chapter two. Paying attention to the ways in which clichés are adjusted, both large and small, is one of the main ways fantasy writers are able to rework ideas of the genre, and to subvert their readers' expectations. Fantasy operates upon internal rules that are older than the genre itself. Naturally, other genres also do this, but fantasy in particular owes its conventions to the strict rules of fairytales and children's stories. In its blurring of 'traditional forms such as epic, folktale, romance, and myth' (Attebery 1), fantasy picks up narrative conventions, motifs, and even caricatures. A stooping hag is surely evil, a bold-faced prince heroic, 'we know the third brother who gives food to the poor old woman is going to win through', without ever needing to be told (Pratchett 130). Attebery, writing in *Strategies of Fantasy*, notes that this 'reliance on traditional storytelling forms and motifs' is both 'a strength and a weakness of fantasy' (87), yet he also draws a crucial link between these conventions and reader expectations:

> *'Conventions are the terms of agreement between writer and reader. Plot, character, setting, point of view – the writer agrees to organize his narrative around such landmarks, while we in return agree to supply the remembered images, knowledge of human behaviour, and reading experience necessary to put flesh on the bones and make them move.'* (Attebery 51)

Attebery's link here is important, as it places focus on the role of the reader to derive readings from an interplay of convention of expectation. This echoes the warnings of Mark Jerng in *Racial Worldmaking*, who notes that 'popular fictions rely to an unusually high degree on the rules and conventions of their respective genres in building their worlds of reference' (15), and 'perhaps no other popular genre relies as much on embedding and relocating race in its worlds than the subgenre of fantasy known as sword and sorcery' (103). He argues for the vital importance of paying attention to these internal rules and conventions. 'Readers fill the gaps of fictional worlds, rendering them more coherent by

using their own knowledge or hypotheses about historical and social processes' (110), and so the ways in which fantasy relies upon or subverts clichés and common understandings in its world-building are critical for locating political commentaries within the subtext. It is, therefore, important to acknowledge fantasy as a genre of clichés, yet it is also vital to take these clichés seriously, and to explore them as a means for the author to critique and rework the genre itself. Just as Attebery concludes: fantasists are prey to convention, yet they 'remake the language as they speak it' (10).

What, then, of dragons? They are a defining motif of the fantasy genre, but 'it is not because both contain dragons that *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968) bears comparison with *The Lord of the Rings*' (Attebery 11). A dragon is never just a dragon. Ann Swinfen gives us a classic example of the dragon, used in line with its fantasy conventions, within Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, where 'the traditional magic hoarder of gold, the deadly dragon, assumes a powerful significance for men of the primary world' as it infects the heroes with 'dragon sickness', and pushes us into a commentary upon 'the corrupting effects of materialism and the lust for power' (94). So we can see that dragons serve as important symbols within fantasy novels, and as clichés are nonetheless important clues to social commentary. However this does not yet explain why Attebery suggests Tolkien and Le Guin have more than dragons in common. For this, we might best turn to the words of G. K. Chesterton, who says: 'The objection to fairy stories is that they tell children there are dragons. But children have always known there are dragons. Fairy stories tell children that dragons can be killed.' (quoted in Pratchett 148). This quote, referring to fairy stories rather than fantasy, has nevertheless been adopted and paraphrased by modern fantasy writers such as Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman (1), and serves to also represent something quintessential about the fantasy genre.

The clichéd figures of the fantasy genre echo those of our own world, both introducing concepts to the reader and teaching them how they might be overcome, be they dragons or otherwise. Swinfen calls this the 'conscious moral basis of much serious fantasy', which uses 'the form in order to present moral, religious, or philosophical ideas' (94), and it is this fundamental element, not the dragons themselves, which connect Tolkien and Le Guin as writers of fantasy. Though fantasy appears on a surface level to be an escapist genre disinterested in modern issues, the sense of fantasy as a deeply introspective genre persists amongst modern writers:

> *'The roots of fantasy go far deeper than mere dragons and elves […] Somewhere down towards bedrock level is the desire to make worlds which, however apparently complex, bizarre, and downright dangerous they may be, have graspable rules and probably also a moral basis.'* (Pratchett 130)

Ultimately, it is in the fantasy cliché that we must begin our search for subversion, allegory, and political commentary. Not all works of modern fantasy feature the classical dragon, but throughout their world building, social- and narrative structures there is a far

more regulated and understandable cliché at work: that of magic. Identified by Tolkien as the nearest term to capture the essence of fairy-tales, 'magic' is repeated as devoutly in fantasy definitions as in any mantra or incantation. To define fantasy, therefore, and to uncover its political commentaries, this study will focus on the theme of magic, so that we might further illuminate that Perilous Realm of Faërie.

On Magic

Thus far we have seen that 'magic' is central to the very concept of fantasy, we have seen how the Merriam-Webster and Collins dictionaries link the term to 'influence' and 'control', and suggest that magic, by dealing directly with power, plays a crucial role in reimagining the disenfranchised.

A History of Magic

Before unpacking this argument it is important to note that magic has not always been the main tool by which fantasy has explored inequality. That fantasy does deal in political allegory is a long-standing point. Rosemary Jackson puts this most eloquently when she argues that 'the fantastic traces the unsaid and unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'' (4). This commentary is often achieved through allegory: the reflection of our own world as seen through another, rather than through the structure of a system of magic.

Instead, magic has often the reputation of being used to fill plotholes; of being a nonsensical solution by a genre flippant towards the usual rules demanded by works of realism, where logic and internal consistencies must be abided by. Terry Pratchett satirises this aspect in his work *Thud!*, where an Ankh-Morpork guard professes 'That's why I don't like magic, Captain. 'cos it's *magic*. You can't ask it questions, it's magic. It doesn't explain anything, it's magic' (255). In essence, magic is often undermined by its own ineffability, and its use as a preposterous explanation has become notorious. Yet as we look at how the use of magic within the fantasy genre has changed since the days of Sword & Sorcery, we can see that magic has become far more grounded in reality.

Jamie Williamson notes that 'in virtually all the pregenre work, magic is, of course, present in some form. But it is only rarely that we find a clear attempt to elaborate a conceptual framework with regard to its structure or function' (17). For example, the nature of magic in *The Lord of the Rings* is rarely elaborated upon. Despite its magical properties, Frodo's battle with the One Ring is not one of power or arcane knowledge, but of spirit and moral fortitude. Gandalf's magic, and the origins of his fellow wizards, are secondary to his symbolic role apropos Saruman. 'It is difficult, in either case, to see magic in itself as a thematic concern' (Williamson 17): magic is not lowered to the status of a simple means to fill plotholes, but neither is it the primary interest.

However, towards the end of the 1970s we see a structuralising of magic within the fantasy genre. There is a 'frequent overt preoccupation with the practical structure and nature of the magic' in fantasy worlds, and we see a trend where 'magic itself must be given a clear, conceptual base and framework to be credible' (Williamson 16). A magician can no longer save the day with a wave of his hand, *deus ex machina.* Instead, magic is built upon a

framework of defined rules and logic, whether these rules are fully revealed to the reader or not, and this is where we see the origins of magic *systems*.

The concept of magic systems has been largely unexamined within academic criticism, yet the term is widely accepted and understood amongst fantasy readers and writers. Brandon Sanderson, a fantasy author and lecturer at Brigham Young University, first coined the phrases 'hard' and 'soft' magic systems in 2007: putting a name to a phenomenon that had already existed long before (First Law). Sanderson argues that magic in the fantasy genre falls onto a spectrum between 'hard' and 'soft' systems. According to his definitions, 'soft' magic systems 'don't follow very strict rules', whereas in 'hard' magic systems 'the author explicitly describes the rules of magic'. To be clear, this division between hard and soft magic is not to be read as a value judgement. Sanderson elaborates on the differing advantages that each system presents, arguing that Tolkien, for example, employs 'soft' magic where the reader 'rarely understands that capabilities of Wizards', and in doing so evokes the sense of wonder held by the hobbits' perspective. 'By holding back laws and rules of magic, Tolkien makes us feel that this world is vast, and that there are unimaginable powers surging and moving beyond our sight' (First Law).

Understanding the distinctions between 'hard' and 'soft' magic systems is further useful to this study, as Sanderson's terms highlight the importance of the *readers'* knowledge. In hard systems the reader is explicitly told the rules of the magic system, though that is not to say that soft systems are not also governed by rules, potentially known only by the author. Focusing on the reader's expectations, and subverting them through breaking conventions and precedents, is the main method through which magic becomes a tool of political commentary.

Magic Systems

The emergence of magic systems allows us to isolate how magic and political commentary become intertwined within the fantasy genre. Magic systems are primarily defined as magic that is governed by rules and structures, and the specifics of these rules prompt immediate questions with consequences upon the novel's world, its narrative, and its politics.

If magic is a trait that one can wield, is magical talent inborn or must it be learnt? Does magical aptitude occur randomly, or is it genetically encoded, and therefore follows hereditary lines? If magic grants power, who gets to wield it? One can see how such ideas, particularly within worlds of elves and dwarves, begin to equate magical aptitude with concepts of race. Other systems play with the concept of gender-based magic, where magic ability is strictly divided by gender binaries: men can do magic, women can't, or vice-versa. Likewise, the issue of class recurs again and again within such stories, following a model where genetically inherited magic creates a dominant overclass of magical-users, yet may

also emerge randomly within the populous. This premise primes the narrative for the story of a magically-gifted underdog, some member of the lower classes born with an inexplicable aptitude for magic, ready for a rise to power which will involve an undermining of the authority of the overclass and a re-evaluation of the rules by which society has governed itself.

We can thus determine a larger taxonomy of magic. Common systems include genetically inherited magic, i.e. passed down through bloodlines, magic as random genetic mutation, gender-based magic, and magic as learned versus innate, intuitive magic. Choosing any one of these magic systems as a foundation for a fantasy world has automatic implications for the development of its society, politics, and culture. Of course, it should be noted that many novels choose a mix of origins: hereditary magic that can also occur at random is just one example already mentioned. The implications of these choices will, of course, be further explored when it comes to analysing how the magic systems of Jemisin's *Broken Earth Trilogy*, Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*, and Jordan's *Wheel of Time Series* explore issues of race, class, and gender, respectively. However, for now, it is important to build towards a methodology by defining what is, and is not, meant by the term 'magic system', and seeing how these concepts work in practice.

Outside of the discussions of fantasy writers such as Sanderson, it is uncommon to find academics using the term 'magic system'. Yet academic discussions of fantasy often refer to the same structuralisation and increasing importance of magic. Brian Attebery in *Strategies of Fantasy* notes that:

> *'The impossible in fantasy is generally codified. Magical operations are grouped into principles resembling natural law: shape shifters must conserve mass in transforming, knowledge of names gives power over things. And uses of magic are governed by ethical structures: one is responsible for the forces one unleashes. Magic is indeed not merely codified: it is itself a code as old as language, or older. It is as rule-bound as language'* (55)

While speaking about 'codes' of magic rather than 'systems', Attebery is describing the same concept, and his points are extremely useful in guiding an analysis of how magic is used. When considering magic within a text, there are natural laws which may be isolated, such as Attebery's example of 'shape shifters conserving mass', yet there are also 'ethical structures' which must be paid attention to. The cultural and moral expectations which surround magic and govern magic users are vital to analysing the political commentaries of fantasy novels: a point which Attebery makes almost explicitly as he states that 'the magical code allows the author to send messages' about 'the boundary between the fictional and the real' (55). The term 'magic systems', therefore refers to more than the pure rules and logic of magic as it has been implemented in a given world, extending also to social and moral considerations.

A further example demonstrates how thinking of magic systems purely as rule-bound affordances, rather than considering their ethical and political facets, can severely limit our ability to read deeper meanings into the uses of magic in a text. Farah Mendelsohn falls prey to this in *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, where when describing the magic of J.K Rowling's *Harry Potter* series she argues that

> *'there is no system of magic, no sense of what each kind of magic can achieve, the choice of potions versus wand spells versus magical objects is frequently arbitrary and prevents planning – Hermione's use of a transformation potion requiring the risky business of securing genetic material is one such occasion. One cannot but wonder why there is no safer, wand-based spell. There may be a reason, but as there are no rules, Hermione cannot make choices or argue her choice.'* (63-64)

Here, Mendelsohn seems to argue that what Sanderson might categorise as a 'soft' magic system is no system at all. Supposedly the magic of *Harry Potter* is 'arbitrary' and has 'no rules', yet this argument does not carry water. The magic of *Harry Potter* is categorised incredibly neatly into different schools, with clear ideas of what each can achieve, namely charms and hexes, or even into fixed schools of transfiguration, charms, and defence against the dark arts. Spells are governed by rules of pronunciation and wand-movements, and the transformation potion which Mendelsohn refers to requires determined ingredients and time-frames to create (CoS 159). Even the issue which Mendelsohn identifies: 'why there is no safer, wand-based spell', is clear enough: naturally the magic of transfiguration could produce the same results as the polyjuice potion, but the students are not yet well-versed enough in magic to be able to feasibly transfigure themselves with a wand.

What can be admitted is that given the 'soft' magic of the *Harry Potter* universe, the specifics of magic are to some extent arbitrary. Yet this begs the question of what, precisely, these arbitrary instances of magic are serving. One answer lies in the example of the Ridikulus spell, a spell introduced in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, which is used to turn the caster's greatest fear into something manageable, something which can be laughed at and overcome. The message of this spell is immediately recognisable. Magic here is quite literally a coping mechanism for fear, and the novel uses this very spell as an important narrative beat that focuses an exploration into how we overcome the fears that are a part of us: whether Harry's fear of being immobilised by fear itself, or Lupin's fear of his own internal nature as a werewolf. This spell is governed by arbitrary rules, but it is not arbitrary in itself, rather it is deeply meaningful and used with great intention in regards to the interests of the plot. To call it arbitrary, therefore, does a great disservice to how Rowling's magic system works.

Lastly, a reading of Rowling that claims 'there is no system of magic' misses the most important aspect which has already been identified as the most vital to this investigation: the issue of origins. Here, *Harry Potter* follows extremely clear rules which could be categorised as a 'hard' magic system. Magic is known to be genetically inherited, yet to also

occasionally occur, or fail to occur, in the general populace. This causes the existence of 'Mudbloods' and 'Squibs', the former being a witch or wizard born to non-magical parents, and the latter a person with little or no magical talent born to parents of magical blood. (CoS 115-6, 121) The contention of the rights of 'Mudbloods' and 'Purebloods' becomes central to the story of *Harry Potter*, as does the subjugation of non-human races such as half-giants and house elves, which plays into a much larger political commentary on institutionalised racism in the UK, as discussed by Karin Westman's *Specters of Thatcherism*, just one of several essays tying *Harry Potter* to political readings within Lana Whited's *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter*. The magic of *Harry Potter* is therefore highly important when it comes to understanding the series' political commentaries. The series certainly employs a magic system, yet it is one which demonstrates the flexibility of magic and the necessity of analysing it from multiple perspectives.

This leaves us with an understanding of the importance of considering magic systems in multiple dimensions. In regards to methodology, this paper incorporates a close reading of the selected texts, paying specific attention to how magic is implemented. Through Attebery and Mendelsohn's commentaries we can see that it will be vital to explore magic not only by the basic rules it must abide by, but also by the ethical and cultural rules which govern its usage, giving rise to political commentary. By distinguishing between 'hard' and 'soft' magic, as well as playing close attention to the logistics of its implementation, we can begin to see how fundamentally magic systems come to shape the worlds of modern fantasy, and have become so vital to the political commentary that exists within the genre today.

To return to the protest of Terry Pratchett's guards: that you can't ask questions of magic because 'it's *magic*!', I would argue the very opposite. Magic is fascinating because of the very way in which it provokes questions. Magic is not easily explainable, but nor is it arbitrary. Therefore, with a clearer idea of what is meant by 'magic systems', and a methodology of close reading specified, we will now move on to implement these concepts in a deeper analysis of the individual texts, and the political implications of their magic.

On Race in N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth Trilogy*

N.K. Jemisin, alongside writers from Octavia Butler to Evan Winter, has brought discussions of race to the forefront of fantasy discussion in recent years. Her critically acclaimed *Broken Earth* series, consisting of *The Fifth Season*, *The Obelisk Gate*, and *The Stone Sky*, has won the Hugo Awards for three consecutive years: a feat which was simultaneously marked with controversy, Jemisin being the first black novelist to have won the award (Guardian). *Broken Earth* similarly distinguishes itself from the standard voice of fantasy, the story being told across fragmented times, tenses, and perspectives, some chapters portraying their characters in the second person, and others claiming the authority of a narrator. Jemisin's story, as with her setting, is constantly shifting and submerging: a disorienting experience for a reader of a genre that often lies far on the opposite scale to postmodernist literature (Attebery 42). Jemisin rejects the ponderous style established by Tolkien or Lewis in favour of bold, undecorated language, which declares sharp truths and harsh realities as it sees them.

Coupled with this is the *Broken Earth* series' direct addressing of race, slavery, and black experience: a factor which unsettled parts of the fantasy community, but which has now sparked movements to diversify and push the limits of the genre (Guardian). Race is an issue which Jemisin has explored and continues to explore both within and beyond the remits of the fantasy genre, most recently with the short story collection: *How Long 'til Black Future Month?*. This context is important, not only as justification for the selection of Jemisin's work to explore fantasy representations of race, but also to understand Jemisin as a writer who is openly and deliberately exploring issues of race within her work.

Unlike works of fantasy that only address issues of race in the most reductive ways, the *Broken Earth* series is deliberate in its politics, and questions of authorial intent need not be shied away from. Jemisin herself outlines her intentions: writing in 2013 she describes her experience growing up as a black girl in the United States, surrounded by a geek culture which did not represent her (HLTBFM). She writes that 'even then I noticed that there was no one like me in most of my geekery' and 'the closest thing to non-white people that anyone saw in fantasy were orcs'. Evidencing the struggles of black writers such as Samuel Delaney, Jemisin lays the blame for black exclusion at the feet of both fans and publishers. She concludes that 'if I wanted to see people like me, doing things I could relate to, I had to look to my own'. The result has been a body of work that has shifted perspectives within the fantasy genre, and issues of race remain an overt theme for exploration throughout all of Jemisin's writing.

In analysing magic and race in the *Broken Earth* series, Mark Jerng's *Racial Worldmaking* will be drawn on in particular as a guide to how issues of race are encoded into literary worlds. As a critic paying particular attentions to works of science fiction, Jerng's concept of worldmaking, a 'phrase for narrative and interpretive strategies that

shape how readers notice race so as to build, anticipate, and organize the world' (1), highlights the aspects of race that do not rely on visibility, but are instead encoded on the level of text and expectation, and therefore provides and extremely useful framework for reading Jemisin's many-levelled representations of race.

Ultimately, it will be shown how Jemisin's magic system fundamentally rewrites the power structures of her world, recalls the atrocities of the slave trade and questions how to come to terms with historical and systematic subjugation, and finally lays bare the persisting modern persecution of African Americans.

Representations of Race

Jemisin's *Broken Earth* series takes place in a world fundamentally shaped by magic. The Stillness: a landmass under constant threat from earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, and prey to repeating natural disasters known as 'Seasons', is governed from the central city of Yumenes and its ruling caste-system. Amongst all this are the *orogenes*, a race of people with the power to control the earth: capable both of quietening an earthquake or tearing a mountain to the ground. To use this power, orogenes draw energy from around them, turning that which they touch cold enough to freeze over, and are capable of freezing the life out of those who come too close (TFS 58). Despite their ability to safeguard the unstable continent from the threat of earthquakes, orogenes are considered as a lesser race: they are 'filthy Earth-spawned beasts' that 'have to be drowned as babes' (TOB 44). Their ability to kill unintentionally, should they fail to control their power, is but one of the reasons the rulers of The Stillness use to justify the enslavement and to perpetuate the hatred of orogenes, who are to be trained solely in the capital and under their close tutelage at the Fulcrum. Finally, orogenes under the control of the Fulcrum are ranked into ten classes shown by how many rings they wear, reflecting the extent of their magical ability, and are deployed by the state to quell earthquakes, safeguard cities, or to be bred and produce yet more powerful magical bloodlines.

The enslavement of the orogenes brings to mind slave narratives, dystopian science fiction settings, and naturally the very real and lived history of the slave trade. However, Jemisin's portrayal is not so straightforward as a slave/enslaver dynamic. Jemisin is careful to depict all actors in moral complexity, whilst nevertheless condemning the act of slavery. The first, and perhaps most important way in which this is shown is through skin colour. Colour, at least in a black/white dichotomy, is *not* used as a designator of moral fortitude. Rather, the vast majority of the population on the Stillness are dark-skinned, though no less diverse and segmented through other physical markers of race and geographical origin. The main character, known as Damaya, Syenite, and Essun throughout different stages of the novels, knows even as a child how to recognise, if not how to understand these physical markers. The first pale man she sees is immediately strange to her, 'His skin is almost white,'

even ‘paper-pale’, which along with his ‘long flat hair [...] might mark him as an Arctic’, meaning of the people who live in the Arctic communities (TFS 29). The ‘almost white’ man is a riddle to Damaya, who tries to place him within her understanding of races, but his hair is not that of an ‘Eastern Coaster’, and ‘people from the east have black skin’, unlike him.

In this way, the narrative voice throughout the novel works to engage with, and to disrupt, any understanding of racial identity the reader may bring from the outside world. The reader quickly becomes aware that it is the default assumption that any character introduced is dark skinned, and that any aberration from this norm, for example being white or pale skinned, would be a difference meriting description. This is a perfect example of the earlier discussion of reader expectations within fantasy. As we heard from Mark Jerng’s consideration of representing race, ‘readers fill the gaps of fictional worlds, rendering them more coherent by using their own knowledge or hypotheses about historical and social processes’ (110). In the case of slavery, therefore, it is a considerable and deliberate choice by Jemisin to subvert the reader’s expectation both of the fantasy cliché of a Caucasian, medieval, central-European setting (Young 1), and of a starting point in which nearly all characters, not only the enslavers or enslaved, are dark-skinned. This denies any inbuilt assumption by the reader that skin-colour must correlate with slavery, or even with moral fortitude. More so, the decision catches us in our assumption, makes it visible to us, and allows us to question why such an assumption would be made in the first place. This is hugely important, as Elisabeth Leonard explains in her anthology *Into Darkness Peering: Race and Color in the Fantastic*, because imaginary worlds ‘can both reenact and alter racial codes and representations’ (4). That is to say, the choices made by authors, both consciously and unconsciously, in racial representation are crucial as they are capable of rewriting cultural biases just as much as they are of reinforcing them.

Likewise, Jemisin goes far further in her depiction of race than merely defining skin colours, and she makes decisions in her world building that move beyond the precedents set by seminal fantasy authors such as Ursula Le Guin or Tolkien. Le Guin is a key influence in terms of race representation in the fantasy genre, and Jemisin mentions her impact when describing her early experience of the genre. She names Ursula Le Guin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea* as a notable exception in a time when ‘the closest thing to non-white people that anyone saw in fantasy were orcs’ (HLTBFM). Le Guin adopts an approach far closer to role reversal, where early on in *A Wizard of Earthsea* we are distantly aware of ‘savage people, white-skinned, yellow-haired, and fierce’ (18), while the majority of Le Guin’s world and main characters are dark-skinned. Le Guin herself notes that ’a great many white readers in 1967 were not ready to accept a brown-skinned hero’ (Bellot), which may in part be owed to the overwhelming influence of Tolkien-inspired settings.

At the same time, it would be a disservice to imply that race representation throughout the history of the fantasy genre has been one originating in unabashedly racist material and developing gradually towards a profusion of enlightened modern works. Jemisin’s argument that orcs were the closest thing non-white people had to representation

in early fantasy is a point that has been highly contested within academia. Readings of Tolkien, for example, range widely in their critique of his representations of race. Elisabeth Leonard criticises a lack of non-white characters, noting ‘the only human characters of color are the men of Harad, although Saruman’s human soldiers are sallow-skinned and slant-eyed’, ‘the dark-skinned Orcs’, and the contrast of ‘Gandalf the White’ and ‘Black Sauron’ (9). Meanwhile, an analysis by Swinfen begins to show some of the holes in this reading of orcs, noting that they are ‘an amalgam of goblins and other horrors of the dark underground’, ‘dark’ here once again a marker of race, but going on to speak of the orcs as ‘slaves’ under Saruman (85). This would seem to raise some issues, if we are to both consider orcs as stereotypically racist depictions of African Americans, yet simultaneously a race of slaves at the mercy of Saruman the White, who is inarguably one of the villains of the tale, then Tolkien is ultimately criticizing the white slave-owner.

Other academics take the middle-ground on Tolkien’s representations of race. Brian Attebery argues that while it is true that Tolkien uses ‘longstanding English prejudices to portray evil beings as short, swarthy Easterners speaking harsh (i.e. Slavic-sounding) languages [...] this ethical division is rendered increasingly invalid as the story progresses’. By the end of The Lord of the Rings we see that ‘the kingly Gondorians, the blond Riders of Rohan, the seemingly incorruptible wizards, and even the thoroughly English hobbit-folk of the Shire’ are not immune to the lures of evil: of power, greed, and cruelty (32-33). It is, therefore, unfair to assume a lack of complexity within early fantasy representations of race, however, the point remains that people of colour have been, and still are, monumentally underrepresented within the fantasy genre. Jemisin’s work, meanwhile, goes far further than mere representation.

In addition to the dominance of European influences within fantasy, the genre faces considerable struggles in regards to race representation due to the authorial freedom inherent in worldbuilding. The ability to invent races and decide the power structures of a world presents not only the danger of poor or lacking depictions of race, but also the temptation to ‘solve’ issues of race and thereby risk disacknowledging those very same issues. Elisabeth Leonard praises Le Guin’s *Earthsea* in this regard, as depicting a ‘place in which such an issue is not significant’ is helpful both in allowing ‘heroic acts to be performed by people of color’ and because ‘the removal of skin color as a power issue in and of itself allows the reader to contemplate other bases’ of power (37). There are, therefore, clear merits to greater representation and it should be remembered, just as Jerng argues, that racial narratives are far more deeply embedded into the stories we read than the mere skin colour of their characters.

Set against the history of racial representation in fantasy, Jemisin goes further both in depicting a world of diverse colour, and in denying the correlate of skin colour and slavery, yet nonetheless making race a point of great contention throughout her world. Characters can dream of finding kinship in ‘Midlatters like you who are brown but not too brown, big but not too big, with hair that’s curly or kinky but never ashblow or straight’ (TOB

22), and in one blow establish both that brown skin is the norm, yet that shades of brown remain markers of racial origin and of social desirability. With this in mind, it is to magic we must turn to explain and understand the racial power structures embedded within the *Broken Earth Series*, to uncover both Jemisin's subversions of fantasy standards, and her scathing critique of the treatment of modern day African Americans.

Of Magical Blood

Turning to the specifics of magic within Jemisin's *Broken Earth* series, we are greeted by not one, but two systems of magic. The first, which has been made reference to, is orogeny: the power of humans, termed 'orogenes', to direct energy in the world around them. We can categorise this magic system as what Brandon Sanderson would term 'hard magic': it follows strict rules which are, at least partially, revealed to the reader, and which even attempt a level of realism in following the rules of thermodynamics, the conservation of energy: 'All energy is the same […] Movement creates heat which is also light that waves like sound which tightens or loosens the atomic bonds of crystal […] In mirroring resonance with all this is magic, the radiant emission of life and death' (TSS 97).

Equally, we immediately understand orogeny to be both a hereditary genetic trait, and an ability that must be learned in order to master. Powers are instinctive, 'inborn', so much so that even 'a newborn orogene can stop an earthquake' (TFS 141). Yet orogenes are also dependent on being honed and trained by the Fulcrum, to learn self-control and to avoid accidents that might kill innocents (TFS 36). There are errors, of course, within these assumptions which Jemisin intends the reader to make and which will be further explored as the relationship between orogeny and racial politics is further unpacked.

The misinformation surrounding the rules of orogeny, however, is closely related to Jemisin's second system of magic. The line between orogeny and this second magic, quite literally termed 'magic' (TOB 106), is deliberately blurred. The Fulcrum, who have strict control of all known orogenes, have long suppressed any information on this second, greater power lying dormant within orogenes. Orogeny, we are told, 'doesn't work on flesh' (TFS 290) and 'isn't meant to be applied to air' (TOB 37), yet 'magic' can do all of these things, 'the silver – magic – comes from life' and connects all living things (TSS 247). From a genre perspective this second magic system is extremely interesting because it lies far closer to Sanderson's description of 'soft magic'. Compared to orogeny, 'magic' follows far fewer obvious rules, spiting the rigidity of the Fulcrum. 'Magic' is instead uncovered by the slow self-rediscovery of the characters themselves, constituting an internal and emotional force of magic. Alabaster, the orogene who first rediscovers this long-lost ancestral power, not only flouts the rules of the Fulcrum, but also the entire logic of magic. 'It hasn't ever really made sense, has it, the way orogeny works?', he argues, 'it shouldn't work at all, that willpower and concentration and perception should shift mountains', 'what we do isn't

logical.' (TOB 101-2). This outburst is fascinating as it suggests that Jemisin is playing with the conventions of 'hard' and 'soft' magic systems: encouraging the reader to accept and assume the rigidity of what is presented as a hard magic system: the Fulcrum's version of orogeny, then deconstructing those very rules to move towards a soft magic system that acts as a metaphor for reclaiming one's ancestry. There is more to say on Jemisin's use of 'learned' magic and political commentary through the Fulcrum, however for now conversation will focus on the magic of blood, 'genetic' or 'hereditary' magic, and how this is used to create a powerful commentary upon issues of race.

The first and most obvious racial parallel in the *Broken Earth* is between the history of black slavery and Jemisin's enslaved orogenes. Orogenes are assigned to a slave-master Guardian, and 'every Imperial Orogene listens – listened – to their assigned Guardian. Those who didn't died or ended up in a node' (TOB 14). Here, we are reminded that the Fulcrum is an 'Imperial' power, echoing the slave trade of the British Empire. Orogenes are likewise treated as subhuman, 'lynched' during times of peace (TFS 124) and slaughtered during times of hardship (TOB 72). Jemisin also parallels racist slurs: terming orogenes as 'roggas': 'a dehumanizing word for someone who has been made into a thing' (TFS 140). When Damaya, a child at the time she discovers her own orogenic power, hears the slur, it causes a re-evaluation of her identity and place in the social order:

> *'Damaya inhales, horrified. It has never occurred to her that roggas- she stops herself. She. She is a rogga. All at once she does not like this word, which she had heard most of her life. It's a bad word she's not supposed to say, even though the grown ups toss it around freely, and suddenly it seems uglier than it already did.'* (TFS 89)

Here, Jemisin parallels the realisation of black identity, as we witness the childhood breaking-of-innocence as racial orders are revealed to Damaya. Later, after much introspection, some characters come to reclaim the word. 'I'm both […] a headwoman, and a rogga. I choose to be both' (TSS 71), though its usage is never fully situated outside of its ugly history; 'rogga' is always claimed in defiance, or in spite of, its negative context.

One point which starkly separates the stigmatised magical ability of orogenes and those of real-world racism is the question of visuality. That is, while the world of the Stillness is highly charged with racial markers and corresponding social hierarchies, one cannot identify an orogene by any physically visible trait. Jemisin, however, and the authorities of her world, do not allow for the markers of an orogene to be entirely hidden. The Guardian who controls Damaya can sense the presence of orogenes, like all other Guardians, and tells her that she 'can no more hide that than you can hide the fact that you are female' (TFS 36). Jemisin does not bring to question the visuality of gender here without consideration. The *Broken Earth Series* consistently and without ceremony references a spectrum of genders (TFA 234), and Jemisin herself is an advocate of intersectionality, so it is reasonable to argue that when Schaffa compares the visibility of Damaya's orogene power with the visibility of her gender, the reader is intended to be sceptical, and to be made wary of the arguments

made by authority figures within Jemisin's world. Magical ability, then, is not as visual a matter as race, and instead often plays out along tensions reminiscent of closet narratives: 'how long would the both of you be able to hide what you are?' (TOB 22). In a society such as those in the Stillness, it is only a matter of time before an orogene slips up and is made visible.

However, as Mark Jerng argues in *Racial Worldmaking*, it is important to understand and consider race beyond its visual markers. He suggests instead that 'the assumed visuality of racial difference on the body is itself something that is *rendered* visible and *made* salient through a set of social practices' (6). This argument is useful because it reminds us that visual markers are secondary to the social constructions that give them meaning. Precisely the same assumption is undermined when readers realise that black/white skin colour is not a correlate of social standing in Jemisin's world, but that prejudices nonetheless exist based on parallel stigmas. Other fantasy worlds likewise make the ridiculousness of our own social customs evident in creating such parallel stigmas: Brandon Sanderson's *Stormlight Archive*, for example, makes the act of reading a feminine art, far too womanly for men to consider and leaving much of the male population illiterate as result, while the act of displaying one's left hand is utterly scandalous for a woman, and left hands must instead remain gloved or (better) sown into a closed sleeve. Likewise, when Jemisin makes skin colour an irrelevant factor to the racism faced by orogenes, she reveals what Jerng terms the '*salience of race*', i.e. that 'we are taught when, where, and how race is something to notice' (2), and simultaneously subverts inherently faulty assumptions that skin colour will play a factor.

We can also see how the magic system itself rejects arguments of racial superiority. Like many fantasy series operating with a genetic-based magic system, what Jemisin first presents as a hereditary trait proves to be tricky to control. We are told that the Fulcrum 'breeds' orogenes of powerful bloodlines, attempting to capture, control, and improve upon their stock of orogene slaves (TOB 99). Yet despite this, and despite the supposed understanding that genetics and education (likewise controlled by the Fulcrum) are the two best indicators of magical aptitude, the Fulcrum's breeding system is not a success. Alabaster, one of the most powerful orogenes controlled by the Fulcrum, says orogenes are not 'meant to be raised by stills' (TOB 99), a term for non-orogenes. He argues that the control exerted by the Fulcrum stifles the instinctive potential of young orogenes for the sake of the Fulcrum's greater control. Meanwhile, Jemisin's world sees prejudice against what are termed 'feral' orogenes: those born naturally, outside the Fulcrum, to non-magically capable parents. The prevalence of such powerful exceptions to the Fulcrum's genetic control undermines any suggestion of racial superiority potentially latent in a system of genetically inherited magic. Ferals, Alabaster tells us, are 'the proof that they'll never understand orogeny; it's not science, it's something else. And they'll never control us, not really. Not completely' (TFS 72). This shows us that genetic-based magic systems such as Jemisin's, far from reinforcing race narratives, are uniquely placed to undermine racial assumptions which, consciously or not, extend into our understanding of the real world.

It is clear from this that Jemisin encourages the reader to 'embed race into our expectations for how the world operates' (Jerng 2), but beyond the parallel of genetically inherited magic and the visuality of race, Jemisin also uses her magic system to create powerful metaphors and political commentary regarding race. The earth-magic of orogeny already acts as a ready metaphor for a people suppressed under generations of pressure and servitude, obligated to act within their minute allowances of freedom, lest the foundations of the world crack and break under the explosion of their rage. The enslavement of orogenes and the telling of their eventual rebellion is presented with the inevitability of the building of pressure beneath the earth's surface. 'There's no point to quelling microshakes', we are told, 'and indeed, doing so might make things worse the next time a larger shake occurs' (TFS 117), yet it is later revealed that the Fulcrum suppress microshakes constantly, exploiting the brutalised and unconscious bodies of orogenes who could not be controlled (TFS 139). Our understanding of plate tectonics, as with our understanding of Jemisin's magic system, tells us that this suppression can only lead to an outburst. 'The earth does not like to be restrained', we are warned (TFS 117), and in this way the racial allegory of Jemisin's magic system extends to the very bedrock of her world.

The metaphorical implications of Jemisin's magic systems also extend to matters of time and generational change. As with the earth, the institutionalisation of racial prejudice is a matter which cannot change quickly, and the scars of such conflicts are felt for many thousands of years. The sombre reality of this slow change is felt by the orogenes, who know that the coming 'Season', a period of natural disaster, will last 'ten thousand years', rather than mere decades as the 'stills', non-orogenes, hope. Centuries must pass 'for the Yumenes Rifting to stop venting and the skies to clear. Not long at all by the usual scale of tectonics' (TOB 68). This may be read both in terms of anger from the orogenes, the subjugated minority, whose pain from what amounts to centuries of historical abuse will not be healed in a short matter of years, despite the hopes and beliefs of the ruling majority. Equally, the time-scale 'of tectonics' reminds us that to speak of changes in cultural codes is to speak of slow, generational change, with all the frustration of the slowness of the earth.

The framing of this magic system with racial commentary also explains why it is not a tale of sudden and overwhelming success. Jemisin does not depict an empire being utterly overthrown, nor do the characters take up thrones or go on to live lives unmarked by their struggles. Instead, characters face the reality of gradual change and dream of easier lives for their children unmarked by prejudices of magic (TOB 22). In this way, Jemisin builds racial commentaries into the very logic of her magic system and the metaphors of orogeny. Naturally, Jemisin's critique of slow cultural change may also be applied to other political issues. Climate change and environmental issues is just one area where literary critics have already picked up on Jemisin's political arguments, Brent Bellamy, for example, offers a convincing analysis of *The Broken Earth* within his essay *Science Fiction and the Climate Crisis*. This moves us far beyond the merely visual coding of race, however one element

remains to be examined in terms of Jemisin's racial commentary a propos the fantasy genre: a commentary which functions of the level of the text itself.

It has already been argued that the fantasy genre has largely been dominated by European influences, and this extends to conventions of style and structure. The foundations laid by Tolkien massively inspired later American titans of the genre, such as Ursula Le Guin or Robert Jordan, and this work set a tone and expectation for what future works must live up to. Omniscient narrators and long, rolling swathes of descriptive paragraphs are a hallmark of the fantasy genre (Mendlesohn 46), yet as Jerng has argued, such precedents demand closer evaluation. Matters of race are 'built into; the context, the atmosphere, or the structures of decision making and causality' (207), and in Jemisin we see a response to racial worldmaking on the level of narrative voice and structure. As has been mentioned, the *Broken Earth Series* rejects the customary fantasy style in favour of shifting tenses and perspectives. We are told the story from first, second, and third person interchangeably, across time and place, and the authority of our narrator is never assured.

A clear example of this rejection of fantasy precedents can be seen in Jemisin's use of maps and epigraphs. Both Farah Mendelsohn and Jamie Williamson, in their works *Strategies of Fantasy* and *The Evolution of Modern Fantasy* respectively, refer to maps, appendices, and the like as tools of authority. Mendelsohn argues that 'since the late 1970s, genre fantasy has frequently been signalled by these two devices': the map and the epigraph, creating a 'fixed and narrated past' which 'complete the denial of discourse' (14). Which is to say, that fantasy, through maps shown within the opening pages, or epigraphs of quoted legends often 'signed by a legendary figure, or by "a historian"', have historically lent total authority to these fictive sources. Historiography plays no role in the annals of fantasy legends and sources are rarely disputed, or even doubted. Williamson lodges the same critique, exampling works from Le Guin, to Guy Gavriel Kay, to Robert Jordan whose 'maps, formulated background "mythologies," attention to issues of sociopolitical history (often in the form of quasi-historical appendices), and so on' create an illusion of history (16), but often fail to go further.

Naturally, this precedent is one which Jemisin subverts. Some epigraphs echo the standard fantasy usage: the first chapter, for example, tells us 'The shake that passes will echo. The wave that recedes will come back. The mountain that rumbles will roar. -*Tablet One, "On Survival," verse five*' (TFS 24). This quotation establishes the authority of multiple 'tablet's, later termed laws of stonelore. Yet as the series progresses we are given reason to doubt these epigraphs. An entry recording the 'FUNGUS SEASON: 602 Imperial' notes how 'nearly all affected comms [communities] were able to subsist on their own stores, thus proving the efficacy of Imperial reforms and Seasonal planning. In its aftermath, many comms voluntarily joined the Empire, beginning its Golden Age.' but this paints too rosy a picture for belief, and hangs upon the caveat '*nearly* all' comms survived [emphasis added]. Later entries are directly contradicted, reveal the internal conflicts of academics and moves to silence their work, or hint at the erasure of history (TOB 72, TSS 215).

Furthermore, Jemisin's epigraphs address issues of race. Legal documents and imperial reports document the categorisation of orogenes as subhuman: 'any degree of orogenic ability must be assumed to negate its corresponding personhood. They are rightfully to be held and regarded as an inferior and dependent species' (TOB 258). Other quotations address the pain of disproportional shootings of African Americans in the United States, mimicking the style of police reports (Martinez, Shah):

> *'Witnesses in the comm of Amand (Dibba Quartent, western Nomidlats) report an unregistered rogga female opening up a gas pocket near the town [...] Another rogga female reportedly stopped the first one's effort [...] Amand citizens shot both as soon as possible to prevent further incidents.'* (TSS 42)

Elsewhere, we hear a children's rhyme: 'Tamp them down // Shut them up // Just a hop, a skip, and a jump! // Seal those tongues // Shut those eyes' (TSS 263-4), which though not referring directly to orogenes does, in the context it is delivered in, deliberately echo the history of nursery rhymes of racist origin such as *Baa Baa Black Sheep* and *Eeny Meeny Miny Moe* (Petley). Ultimately, Jemisin's use of epigraphs is designed to raise issues of race, and to remind the reader of the danger of propaganda, erasure, and blind trust in authority. Contrary to the precedent set within the fantasy genre, Jemisin's political commentary upon race is embedded into the very voice, style, and structure of the *Broken Earth Series*. Just as Jerng suggests, sometimes 'authors reflect back on these narrative and interpretive strategies and they relocate race in ways that both make visible this embedding of race and produce alternate, oppositional forms of antiracist worldmaking' (207).

Simultaneously, we see Jemisin succeed in employing a genetic-based magic system which champions minorities over the dominant powers of her world. Orogenic magic is a clear analogue for racial identity and the struggle to overcome the atrocities of history. Meanwhile, Jemisin also introduces a second magic system: related, yet separate to that of orogeny, and one which is seen entirely through this lens of disputable authority and the suppression of knowledge. Here, in Jemisin's second-magic system we begin to deal with concept of a learning-based magic system and its imperial gatekeepers.

The Ivory Tower

Issues of race in Jemisin's *Broken Earth Series* are reflected not only through her central magic system: that of orogeny and genetic-based magic, but also through a second system, quite literally termed 'magic' by the world's inhabitants, the very existence of which has been kept secret. Through this second magic system, Jemisin is able to critique issues of educational access, historical bias and erasure, and explore the rediscovery of one's ancestry.

Contrary to genetic magic, Jemisin's second brand of magic depends upon the belief that magic is learning-based, and must be taught at the Fulcrum: but as the story unfolds we see that this belief is a lie told to keep orogenes from discovering their true power. Supposedly, the necessary knowledge to wield magic and train orogenes is held by the Fulcrum, an ivory tower, whose imperial apex is described quite literally as 'a massive structure' 'larger and more daring than them all', which sits, 'seeming to balance there lightly – though in truth, every part of the structure is channelled toward the sole purpose of supporting it', atop a pyramid of 'obsidian brick' (TFS 3). Jemisin's imagery is relentless, here painting the bodies of the black masses, the 'supporting' 'obsidian brick' in subservience to a ruling class whose seat of power is nonetheless 'precarious' (TFS 3), should only the pyramid start to shift. Orogenes are kept in service to their rulers in part by the belief that their powers are dangerous, requiring tutelage and strict control, yet as we shall see, none of this is true.

Jemisin's second kind of magic, dormant within orogenes, parallels attempts to suppress minorities and prevent them from mobilising together. We first glimpse this in the strict rules dictated by the Fulcrum, offered as indisputable truths, which misguide any attempt to explore and push magic abilities on their own terms. 'Orogeny isn't meant to be applied to air,' we are told, 'but there's no real reason for it not to work' and, as our characters discover, it *does* work (TOB 37). Similarly, we are told that 'Orogenes cannot work together. 'It's been proven. […] It's why the senior orogenes run the Fulcrum' (TFS 129), a lie later disproved in *The Stone Sky* operating as a justification for the controlled 'senior orogenes' to wield authority. This aspect hits again upon the fear of mobilisation: the Fulcrum seek to prevent orogenes from discovering an ability to work together, bringing to mind the potential of mass movements from the Civil Rights marches to Black Lives Matter. The eventual revelation that orogenes *can* work together is a moment of clarity and wonder for Essun, as she witnesses a 'network of roggas' 'using orogeny and magic together in a way that supports and strengthens each, making a stronger whole', 'working toward a single goal, all of them together stronger than they are individually' (TOB 363). This, surely, is a sentiment that applies not purely within the fictional world of Jemisin's characters, but as a universal and political call to action for the subjugated who, working together against their oppressors, might succeed in overthrowing the system.

Notably, however, Jemisin complicates her depictions of race by making orogenes complicit in their own suppression. The senior orogenes who have proven themselves subservient enough to be granted some authority are part of the propaganda machine that perpetuates their enslavement. Cycles of abuse, once realised, are not easily escaped: a reality which we see when Damaya, raised at the Fulcrum yet having fled later in life, incorporates their strict methods in the training of her own orogene child. Damaya goes so far as to break her own daughter's hand, just as her Guardian once did to her, to ensure her satisfactory control (TOB 154, 269). This portrayal acknowledges that cultural indoctrination plays a role in the suppression of minorities, and that cycles of abuse may be repeated even

by their victims. Orogenes who rebel, such as Alabaster and Essun, understand the systems of abuse, for example the Fulcrum's ranking of orogenes into ten stages of ability and control, each marked by the giving of a ring. Alabaster spells out the insidiousness of the system: 'They told you how high and you jumped no further, all to get a nicer apartment and another ring' (TOB 13), yet he himself continues to use it as a means of reference, and Essun 'can't help surprise and pleasure' from hearing that she 'might be a nine-ringer now' (TOB 99). Magic, then, is governed not only by laws of physics, but also by the social constructs which form around it, and which here reflect methods of cultural indoctrination.

However, Jemisin also raises doubt as to those same laws of physics which we might assume are governing her magic system. As has been discussed, orogenic powers might be categorised as a hard-magic system, as we are given clear rules for their usage and even reference to scientific logic behind them. Yet as we have just seen, these rules do not hold true and, even more so in the case of 'magic', these rules fall to the wayside in deference to the strength of character's will and emotions. 'Magic', the second magic-system, is far closer to what would be termed 'soft magic', in that it does not follow strict rules. Jemisin not only makes this apparent but flaunts the illogical nature of 'magic' to undermine the authority of the Fulcrum's rule. 'This is magic, after all, not science. There will always be parts of it that no one can fathom' is a persuasive argument and one which sets magic in opposition to the rigidity of 'science' (TSS 322). Compare this to the Fulcrum's methods of "teaching", where lessons contain mathematical methodology: we are asked if 'a shake in Erta emits push waves at 6:35 and seven seconds, and vibrational waves at 6:37 and twenty-seven seconds. What is the lag time?' and told that 'an orogene's region of consumption is not *circular*, it is *toroidal*' (TSS 194). In this way Jemisin uses the precedent of hard-magic systems within the fantasy genre along with the assumed authority of scientific language to feed the reader the lies of the Fulcrum, only to dissect and later reveal them to be a means of control. The introduction of the second, 'soft' and more emotional system of magic is a foil to the Fulcrum's rigidity.

This same 'soft' magic system is further used to play into narratives of the destruction of history, and the rediscovery of one's ancestry. As with the rules of the Fulcrum's training, the law of the Empire is set down indisputably into what is termed 'stonelore'. Consisting of tablets, assumed to date from the last great empires before the Seasons came and shattered the continent into the tumultuous environment it is during the time of the story. Stonelore mandates the necessary measures that must be taken to keep comms alive during times of struggle. Naturally, stonelore is also a means to instil prejudice into the population: 'they kill us because they've got stonelore telling them at every turn that we're born evil' (TFS 124). Once again, blame is laid at the feet of academics: 'Only lorists speak' of the first Season, 'and the Seventh University has disavowed most of their tales' (TOB 92). Such sections even parallel the history of physiognomists' faux-science, used to justify slavery and the superiority of the white race:

'It became easy for scholars to build reputations and careers around the notion that Niess sessapinae were fundamentally different, somehow – more sensitive, more active, less controlled, less civilized [...] This was what made them not the same kind of human as everyone else. Eventually: not as human as everyone else. Finally: not human at all.' (TSS 210)

Yet it is implied that this prejudice was not originally a part of stonelore, rather, stonelore has been manipulated and destroyed in order to establish yet another means of control. We are told that 'Stone lasts, unchanging. Never alter what is written in stone' (TOB 198), which claims the unchanging authority of stonelore itself. Yet we later hear evidence of 'Five tablets, not three' (TOB 74), suggesting that some tablets have been destroyed or hidden from public memory. Meanwhile rebels such as Alabaster have long concluded that 'Stonelore changes all the time [...] There's a reason Tablet Two is so damaged' (TFS 125). This erasure of knowledge and sustained attempt to reshape the structure of society amounts to what the book later describes as 'genocide'. The 'killing a people, down to the very *idea* of them as people', is acknowledged as the ultimate goal of those who manipulated stonelore, raised an empire, and founded the Fulcrum (TSS 177). Yet the utter destruction of this people ultimately fails, and it fails due to the magical potential lying dormant within their ancestors.

Through this second magic, which flies in the face of logic or the command of training, the characters are able to reconnect with their ancestry. The institutions of the Fulcrum attempt to discourage the instinctive aptitude orogenes have for their ancestral magic: we are told that it is 'crucial to keep orogenes' eyes on the ground and not the sky' (TOB 37), and that 'The Fulcrum's methods are a kind of conditioning meant to steer you toward energy distribution and away from magic' (TOB 203). Cultural heritages are therefore suppressed by the Fulcrums very means of education, comparative to modern educations which omit or excuse the histories of Native Americans, the slave trade, or imperialist atrocities.

Without access to their own cultural history, new words must be found for the orogenes' magical abilities (TOB 137), while others, such as 'magic', are uncovered from the past. Language, as with knowledge, is seen as a crucial means of controlling identity: 'The civilization that made the obelisks had a word for this' we are told, 'I think there's a reason we don't. It's because no one for countless generations has wanted orogenes to *understand* what we do. They've just wanted us to do it' (TOB 102). When Nassun, Damaya's child, learns to channel both 'magic and orogeny' through instinct and self-exploration, Damaya doesn't know what to call it: '"I've never seen that before"', 'there was no Fulcrum-esque precision in what Nassun did', yet our narrator, who lived in the time of their ancestors recognises it: 'we called it tuning' (TSS 377). Jemisin's critique of learning-based magic in the favour of one that is instinctual and introspective argues that one's ancestry and culture can never be fully eradicated, so long as descendants remain. This element also curiously echoes an argument of Jamie Williamsons' who, in *The Evolution of Modern Fantasy*, posits that

fantasy as a genre may often be seen as 'an imaginative recovery, an attempt to center the imaginative impulse in indigenous tradition, or an act of ethnic imagination' (31). Jemisin's race of orogenes, in Williamson's terms, may be read as a direct attempt to recover and come to terms with lost ancestry through creative interrogation. Despite the erasure and destruction of the orogene's history, the indoctrinating efforts of their education, and the scars of countless atrocities, Jemisin argues that heritage can be reclaimed through a rediscovery of ones' body, ones' abilities, and ones' freedom to think.

Ultimately, Jemisin's use of magic becomes the key symbol for both the lives of minorities and the inconsolable rage after systematic abuse. Paralleling Pan-Africanism, when we finally hear the story of the orogene's ancestors we are told that the 'Niess' people were 'a part of of *every* land, *every* people', and as result 'Magic is everywhere in the world' (TSS 209). Narratives of genetic superiority are wholly undermined by this realisation, as all people, no matter how distantly, have some ancestral link to orogene ancestors. Meanwhile, Jemisin's second magic system, which 'comes from life' and connects all living things' (TSS 247), becomes itself a metaphor for the lives of people. 'Magic could not be owned', the Niess insisted, 'any more than life could be' (TSS 209), yet racism driven by hatred and jealousy for their magical competence sets in motion the subjugation of the Niess people. Magic, too, bears the remnants of what was done to their ancestors: it can '*remember* horror and atrocity' and it wants '*Justice'* (TSS 332-333), and it is the rediscovery of this power that allows the characters a chance to set the world right again. It is through magic that resentments are woken within the earth itself and begin the destructive cycle of the Seasons (TSS 342).

However, at the very end of Jemisin's story, it is not magic she reaches for to carve a solution. 'Orogeny,' we are told, 'was never the only way to change the world', nor was the 'imprisonment of orogenes', the 'lynching', 'the nodes', 'all of these were choices. Different choices have always been possible' (TSS 395-6). Jemisin's point is one that grounds itself solidly in reality and politics. She argues here that it was racism, never magical imbalance, that caused enslavement. Likewise, it was never 'magic' that set them free, but their own decisions, their self-rediscovery, and empowerment. Jemisin urges us to understand that though her setting is fictive, her political commentary is one that speaks to and seeks to empower real minorities, and to address the horrors of real atrocities. Ultimately, magic is the lens through which her story becomes possible, but Jemisin urges us to see beyond the fictive elements and to read into it the politics of our own world. Magic makes Jemisin's allegory and the orogene's rebellion possible, but the people of our world do not need magic to overthrow suppression.

The fantasy genre of today stands alongside fellow literary works; with a sophisticated understanding of the genre's history and customs, Jemisin is able to weave a story that deals directly with black experience, holding to account both historical and modern day abuses through allegories of empire and modern day violence, and seeking to find some means of resolution to those still reeling from pain and anger in the face of

atrocities. Through her magic, we are introduced to a world of rigid power structures which command both racial and academic dominance, paralleled in genetic and learning-based magic systems, yet this power imbalance is ultimately undone through journeys of self-discovery which empower those caught within the cycle of hatred.

It is understood that fantasy has been a genre where 'arguments about race and racism are rampant' (Jerng 106), yet in those works which speak with the skill and power of those like Jemisin's, fantasy across all periods of history makes visible 'the working life of slaves, the oppression of women, or any intimation of their suffering' (Jackson 176). Through the mirror of fantasy, issues of race, class, and gender may be illuminated and thrown into question by new, challenging systems of magic.

On Gender in Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time*

Magic in the fantasy genre may be a means of undermining power structures but it is also capable of upholding them. Brian Attebery writes in *Strategies of Fantasy* that 'Fantasy invites us to recreate what it has denied', yet 'a willingness to return to the narrative structures of the past can entail as well an unquestioning acceptance of its social structures' (67, 87). In other words, fantasy can be a means of resistance to old ideas but it can also reinforce them, and it is in this tenuous balance that we find Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* with both radical, and restrictive, depictions of gender.

Jordan's epic fourteen-book series is today a cornerstone of the fantasy genre: an American Tolkien whose work has served to inspire new generations of genre writers. Published between 1990 and 2013, with the final three volumes being finished by Brandon Sanderson after Jordan's death in 2007, *The Wheel of Time* presents somewhat of an outlier in regards to the accompanying selections in this thesis: *The Broken Earth* and *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* having been published in 2015-2017 and 2004 respectively. Jordan's work, in both its style and social depictions, is far from modern in comparison to the avant-garde approach seen from writers like Jemisin. However, *The Wheel of Time* provides an opportunity to analyse a series couched in the style of 'classic' fantasy, as opposed to Jemisin's postmodern or Clarke's Victorian gothic. Above all else, Jordan's work bears relevance in that it is an outstanding example of gender roles and power structures subverted by magic. Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* presents a world in which magic can only, and must only, be wielded by women:

> *'"The One Power," Moiraine was saying, "comes from the True Source, the driving force of Creation, the force the Creator made to turn the Wheel of Time." [...] "Saidin, the male half of the True Source, and saidar, the female half, work against each other and at the same time together to provide that source. Saidin"-she lifted one hand, then let it drop- "is fouled by the touch of the Dark One [...] Only saidar is still safe to be used."'* (TEotW 168)

Reversing the concept of original sin, in Jordan's setting 'it was the men who went mad and broke the world', 'the women were not part of it' (TEotW 181), and thus the world is 'tainted for men's pride, tainted for men's sin' (TDR 265). When men succumbed to the Dark One's power, it left the source from which they channel magic, *saidin*, tainted. As a result, any man who attempts to use magic will slowly turn mad and die. This premise fundamentally reverses traditional gender roles throughout Jordan's world. Women who can draw on *saidar* to wield the elements of earth, air, fire, water, and spirit, join the ranks of the Aes Sedai who, along with their magical abilities, act as advisors to kings and queens, sway the tides of battle, and hunt down men who seek to channel magic.

However, despite Jordan's reversal of gendered power structures, *The Wheel of Time* maintains, even reinforces, many of the traditional gender stereotypes we would expect to

have been similarly reversed. In a world where women may walk the path to greatness, the women of Andor are nonetheless prey to many of the same patriarchal social constructions seen within our own world. With such a range of roles to play in society, so many women fall into the categories of love interests, nagging shrews, matronly wives, and cold misandrists (Wickham 77-78). Yet this criticism is hasty and fails to account for the sheer vastness of Jordan's work. *The Wheel of Time* series, accounting for just under 4.5 million words, amasses room both for inconsistency, subtlety, and character development. Jordan's depiction of gender, thrown into imbalance by the very premise of his magic system, is therefore hugely complex.

This chapter will therefore explore how Jordan's magic both reimagines and paradoxically reinforces stereotypical depictions of gender. Analysis will be guided by the work of feminist and gender theorists such as Butler's *Gender Trouble*, defining gendered power structures in terms of patriarchal versus matriarchal societies, gendered cultural practices and taboos, and finally in terms of gender binaries and heteronormativity. With this frame, it will be shown how Jordan's magic system both reimagines gendered power structures, explores bodies and sexuality, and reinforces the concept of gender binarism. First, however, the historical context of Jordan's work demands explanation. As a devotee of Tolkien, Jordan's decision to represent women of power alone marks a significant shift in the role of gender in the fantasy genre, and an exploration of this context will serve us in assessing how Jordan's world reshaped the image of the female magician.

A Female Gandalf

The limited roles of women in fantasy have been subject to longstanding debates throughout academic and fantasy-reader communities. Thus, the prominence of Robert Jordan's female characters is alone a notable feature of *The Wheel of Time*, given the work's beginning in the 1990s and its tribute to the style of classic fantasy. 'A majority of the central figures in fiction are male,' writes Brian Attebery, 'reflecting cultural biases and the prevalence of men in the ranks of writers' (88), and in the case of fantasy this imbalance of representation has been all the more magnified. 'As a genre, Fantasy traditionally adheres to clearly patriarchal narratives,' writes Kimberly Wickham, 'and unlike Science Fiction did not experience a clear and sustained feminist challenge to the genre' (6). Similarly to what we have seen in issues of race, part of this problem stems from the belief that series starring black or female characters will not sell to the general public, thus leading to an industry-wide stifling of such tales, yet in the case of gender we are also met with curiously recurring issues in even *imagining* a female magician.

'Can you imagine a female Gandalf?', Terry Pratchett asks in his collection of essays: *A Slip of the Keyboard* (124). He argues that the distinct lack of female roles in classic fantasy is both a hallmark of close-mindedness within the industry, and a result of the historical sexism surrounding imaginings of witches and wizards: fantasy as a genre being based on

those very same mythologies, fairy tales, and legends. To ask whether you can imagine a female Gandalf might as well ask whether one can imagine a female Aslan, a female Odin, or a female Jesus, given the transcendental role the character fulfils. Instead, depictions of female magicians must first be reconciled with the image of Morgan le Fey: all too often relegated to roles of lusty temptresses or manipulative sorceresses. Pratchett argues, in fact, that the very magic used by women in classic fantasy is shown as lesser to that of men: 'magic done by women is usually of poor quality, third-rate, negative stuff, while the wizards are usually cerebral, clever, powerful and wise' (122). Furthermore, he rejects the assumption that 'witch' is the gendered counterpart of 'wizard', arguing that this makes a false equivalence where, in reality, equality is incredibly lacking. 'There is a tendency to talk' of witches and wizards 'in one breath, as though they were simply different sexual labels for the same job', yet, he argues 'there is no such thing as a male witch', and 'certainly isn't such a thing as a female wizard' (122). Pratchett, having written extensive books following the adventures of female witches, most notably *Equal Rites* and the Tiffany Aching series, is by no means imposing strict limitations on our conceptions of 'witch' and 'wizard' here, but rather expressing the extent of the inequality in depictions of witches and wizards within the genre.

Much of this discussion over gender, as Pratchett's reference to Gandalf exemplifies, stems from Tolkien. To say that women in Middle-Earth are sparse would be to understate the reality. 'There are no living female characters, human or animal, in J. R. R. Tolkien's 255-page fantasy *The Hobbit*' writes William Green in *Construction of the Feminine in The Hobbit*, 'a fact that makes it unusual among stories of its length and complexity. Other adventure tales for boys project masculine worlds but do include at least token women' (188). Meanwhile, he identifies a 'tendency for the women in *The Lord of the Rings* to be goddesses, monsters, or other stock foils for more complex male characters' (190).

Naturally, there is more than one side to this criticism: In *The Lord of the Rings* books, Eowyn stands out among examples of fantasy heroines: a shieldmaiden of Rohan, she is determined to fight where women ought not, which to leads her to destroy the Witch-king of the Nazgul and avenge of her father's death. However, whether this independence is lessened in the resolution of her storyline is debateable. William Green also points to Belladonna Took as an example of Tolkien's complicated portrayals of women. He notes that Bilbo is in fact introduced as 'Belladonna Took's son', giving precedent to the matriarch of the family, and argues that 'she is central to *The Hobbit*', essential to forming 'the dynamic half of Bilbo's personality, the neglect of which has led to his stagnation', and a factor which we also see repeated in the character of Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings* (188). Green identifies the origins of this submerging of female characters in Tolkien's childhood, noting that, 'orphaned at age twelve' he 'identified with his mother's family and kept her portrait on his bureau all his life' (189), yet also evidences that with his 'conservative Roman Catholic' upbringing (191), Tolkien's work ultimately becomes at best 'a revisionist version

of Victorian ideology', exploring the virtues and vices of feminine and masculine qualities, but not revolutionising them (193).

Tolkien therefore does portray some strong female characters, but the overall lack of women in *The Lord of the Rings* remains a disappointing reality: consistent across race and creeds and emblematised in the missing dwarf and ent-wives, a factor which we shall also come to observe in Jordan's *Wheel of Time*. Yet in a final twist: despite a genre-wide failure to imagine a female Gandalf, the inspiration for the character appears to have been a woman all along. William Green evidences from Tolkien's letters how Bilbo's journey over the Misty Mountains was based on a '1911 hike through the Swiss Alps with a botanist aunt', a 'biologist' who 'was "one of the first women to take a science degree"' (189) and who, he argues, stands as 'a fictional proxy' for Gandalf (193). While the truth of this may be debated, we are left with the suggestion that in the shadow of every wizard, it would seem, there is a witch waiting to be uncovered. Tolkien's failure to more richly depict female characters, for whatever reason, set the tone for the fantasy novels he inspired: ones which we have already seen noted by Brian Attebery were overwhelmingly written by men. One exception, whom Attebery notes, is Ursula Le Guin as a prominent fantasy writer throughout the period (88). Yet what is fascinating here is that Le Guin herself admits a failure in regard to depictions of gender, and an inability to, as we have put it, 'imagine a female Gandalf'.

Le Guin echoes the argument that early fantasy lacked female representation: 'the principle characters [in fantasy] were men', 'the stories weren't about the women. They were about men, what men did, and what was important to men' (Bellot). If featured, women according to Le Guin were too often 'a passive object of desire and rescue (a beautiful blonde princess)' or 'active women (dark witches)' who 'usually caused destruction or tragedy' (Bellot). Here, we can also see Le Guin reinforcing the belief that 'witches' were not put on any equal level to the male wizards of such stories, and this criticism of fantasy representations of women extends to her own work. While Le Guin has, in this thesis, been used as an example of progressive depictions of race, Le Guin herself says that in regards to gender '*A Wizard of Earthsea* was perfectly conventional. The hero does what a man is supposed to do... [It's] a world where women are secondary' (Bellot). In a 2018 interview for *The Guardian*, Le Guin's reflections on her long career in the world of fantasy reveal that she felt what she'd 'been doing as a writer was being a woman pretending to think like a man' (Flood). The 'conventional' story of Ged in *A Wizard of Earthsea* is explained by Le Guin, who reflects that 'from my own cultural upbringing, I couldn't go down deep and come up with a woman wizard' (Flood), and it would not be until 1990 with the publication of *Tehanu* that Le Guin would come to tackle this lack of representation and 'to think about privilege and power and domination, in terms of gender, which was something science fiction and fantasy had not done' (Flood). It is fascinating that, despite being a woman initiated into the world of fantasy, Le Guin would not venture to tell a story from the perspective of a female

magician, nor even feel able to conceive of the female Gandalf, until 1990, the same year in which Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* would begin to be published.

With Jordan's female magicians: Moiraine, an Aes Sedai and surrogate Gandalf who sets the events of the story in motion, Egweyne and Nyneave, a farm girl and a village 'wisdom' raised to the ranks of nobility by their magical aptitude, and Siuan Sanche, Armyrin Seat and head of the Aes Sedai, advisor to Kings and Queens alike, we are forced to note the significance of Jordan's move to depict, and ability to imagine, complex and powerful female characters. Jordan's work succeeds in representation where so many before him had failed and for that, as we move towards an examination of how his magic system both destabilises and reinforces gendered power dynamics, we must credit Jordan in the context of his predecessors. While in many ways *The Wheel of Time*, written into 2013, is far less 'modern' in comparison to the works of Jemisin and Clarke, the series, couched in nostalgia and the style of classic fantasy, was nonetheless far ahead of its time.

From Morgan le Fay to Moiraine

Robert Jordan's magic system in *The Wheel of Time* fundamentally reverses traditional power structures of gender. Through a magic that has, for many centuries, been accessible to women and corrupting to men, women have been raised to positions of power that verge on, if not equality, then towards matriarchy. Primary among these are the Aes Sedai: women trained in magic, 'puppeteers who pulled strings and made thrones and nations dance in designs only the women from Tar Valon knew' (TEotW 101). Though magic is not cited directly in justification of their power, the women of Jordan's world rule as queens, the throne of Andor even favouring female succession with matrilineal primogeniture (TDR 564), and whose queens are traditionally trained in magic at Tar Valon to the extent that men 'think of the throne of Andor and Aes Sedai in the same thought' (TEotW 526). Elsewhere, we find empresses where one might expect emperors, and even wolf packs are led by female wolves (TEotW 347), so it is clear that Jordan makes a concerted effort throughout his world to represent the female gender in positions of power. Primary among these female figures is that of Moiraine Damodred, who first enters the story as a surrogate Gandalf: a magician arriving in the peaceful and cheerfully indifferent shire of the Two Rivers, where she then rescues three boys, and two girls of magical potential, from the clutches of dark riders and sets them on an adventure that will take them to the seat of the kingdom's power, and beyond into certain doom. When we first meet her, Moiraine is described as having 'maturity' beyond her years, with a 'grace and air of command' that despite her short stature elevates her above those around her (TEotW 26). She commands immediate authority, and thereby sets the tone of Jordan's gendered power structures from the very beginning of the series.

However, in many ways Jordan's depictions of female sorceresses falls prey to sexist stereotyping. Arguably, Jordan's women of power fail to escape the image of Morgan Le

Fay, whose legacy lurks in the distant mythology of Jordan's world; the king 'Artur Paendrag' was 'murdered by the witches of Tar Valon' (TGH 495), just as Arthur Pendragon is usurped by Morgan Le Fay, and the ghost of Morgan haunts Jordan's representation of women throughout the novels. Jill Hebert's *Morgan Le Fay, Shapeshifter* provides a useful guide to the paradoxical portrayals of Morgan le Fay, from 'benevolent healer' to 'evil witch' (1) and 'man-eater' (3): the silky seductress and manipulator of men. These infamous latter portrayals of Morgan Le Fay are echoed in countless depictions of female sorcerers, and Jordan's characters are no exception. While undoubtedly powerful, the women of Tar Valon are simultaneously cast as manipulators (TEotW 100) and 'puppeteers': women who can never be trusted (TEotW 99), and whose desire to rid the world of magically-corrupted men amounts to misandry (TDR 290). Furthermore, the Aes Sedai are repeatedly associated with the image of a 'spider' (TEotW 524): combining the lie-spinning manipulator, and the man-eating devourer into one, inhuman form.

The societal changes brought on by women's superior potential for magic are likewise conflicting. In the village of Two Rivers, for example, women are expected to conform to many traditionally 'feminine' roles, despite sitting on the Women's Council and having their opinions reckoned alongside the male leaders. 'Every girl' is said to 'eagerly' look forward to the day that they are old enough to braid their hair: a sign of maturity in the Two Rivers, and point of conflict which grows between Egwene and Nyneave when she chooses to leave her hair unbraided, in the style of Moiraine's. Domesticity too, is an expected norm, and though undermined by the ambitions of the female heroines, its persistence throughout the world of *The Wheel of Time* raises questions as to why we so commonly see women judged for their cooking and housekeeping (TEotW 608), or as serving maids fondled at bars (TEotW 472). If magic has provided a means to escape the limited female role of dutiful wife then it is an opportunity given to very few women in Jordan's world, and sexist treatment of women persists even in cases where one would think it entirely illogical within the setting. For example, we are told that women across cultures are known to fight in battle alongside the men (TEoTW 87, 134), we are told that an Aes Sedai is 'worth a thousand lances' in battle (TEoTW 697), yet societal taboos such as Rand thinking he could never hit a girl persist even when he is faced by a band of all-female warriors (TGH 507). This would seem to reinforce the view of Rosemary Jackson, who argues that 'namings of otherness in fantasies betray the ideological assumptions of the author and of the culture in which they originate' (53), in the sense that Jordan, whilst progressive in his sheer representation of women in fantasy, is arguably limited in his realisation of feminine power by the societal customs and taboos he has absorbed.

Furthermore, the opportunity to transcend social barriers by becoming an Aes Sedai and thereby dispense with expectations of becoming a dutiful housewife create suspicion and resentment towards independent women. Marriage, for example, is a cultural expectation of women throughout the world of *The Wheel of Time*, yet our female characters set their ambitions beyond this expectation. Egwene, whom we understand to be

in some way promised to marry Rand, professes her belief that women do not 'ever' need to marry, and instead decides that she will train as the village Wisdom: a wise woman who 'almost never marries' (TEoTW 43). This decision is one which casts her as rebellious, and sets her upon a path alongside the Aes Sedai, who likewise almost never marry (TGH 139-40), and the female warriors of the Aiel, who give up marriage in order to take up the spear (TDR 435). This consistent cultural phenomenon across lands and peoples begs the question as to why women must give up marriage in order to claim power. Marrying, alongside having children, reads as incompatible with female power: a depiction which seemingly assumes that women, once married, must somehow be diminished or deferent. This view of marriage curiously persists even across races, as we learn that Ogiers: an ancient race that guard the trees and watch over history, have a custom of arranged marriages which Loial, a travelling Ogier, fears will tie him to a shrewish wife who will occupy all his time (TGH 511).

The women of Jordan's world are therefore far from free of the confines of sexist cultural practices by the changes brought about by their ability to access magic where men may not. In fact, their access to power may even exacerbate sexist prejudices, as has just been evidenced. Yet the portrayal and the persistence of cultural practices which reflect our own arguably aids us in recognising them as restrictive. Jordan's choice to portray, rather than erase, the feminist struggle to be both wife, mother, and independent woman, is welcome, and further provides the characters a chance to rebel against the norm and to forge their own paths. The Aes Sedai are not free of Morgan Le Fay's legacy, nor of the sexism of our own reality, but seeing them battle and contend with it provides a chance both for it to be acknowledged and overcome.

Due to the sheer vastness of *The Wheel of Time*, it is difficult to neatly categorise Jordan's gender representation as either progressive or regressive. Some characters, for example Lanfear, the beautiful and alluring seductress who tries to tempt each of the three male heroes onto the path of the Dark One, falls entirely under the archetype of a Morgan Le Fay man-eater: '"I have guided his steps, pushed him, pulled him, enticed him"' (TGH 671), she boasts, though our heroes, naturally, heroically resist her temptations. Yet elsewhere, female characters are deliberately manifold and diverse. It is true that some Aes Sedai exhibit hatred towards men and eagerness to 'gentle' those of magical ability (TEotW 169), yet this generalisation belies the fact that these Aes Sedai make up only one of seven denominations within Tar Valon. Rather than being defined or typecast by their magic, the Aes Sedai span multitudes of ability, interests, and beliefs. Moiraine dispels this very misconception when her student, Egwene, expresses her fear that she will somehow be changed by the discovery of her magical abilities. Moiraine reminds us that the Aes Sedai are neither 'wicked', nor 'good and pure', but 'human, no different from any other women except for the ability that sets us apart. They are brave and cowardly, strong and weak, kind and cruel, warm-hearted and cold' (TEoTW 182-3). This emphatic description of the female characters, delivered so early on in the series, suggests a deliberate effort to portray women in diverse roles. Furthermore, this passage goes so far as to pre-empt criticisms within

gender theory: namely, that ostensibly progressive depictions of female roles often overcompensate on potentially negative characteristics by replacing them with traits that are overwhelmingly positive or hyperfeminine (Brown 49-50). Moiraines' insistence that Aes Sedai are fundamentally 'human', rather than 'good and pure', is therefore a welcome one.

Female representation is, therefore, both at times restrictive to gender stereotypes, and at others diverse and empowering. Jordan's prolixity leaves room for fault and inconsistency in his portrayals. Another angle of approach, therefore, is to consider the impact of his divisive magic system on the narrative itself, and it is here that we begin to see the series' balance tip in favour of its male heroes. As has been established, Jordan's gender-based magic system is one which privileges female empowerment, with men capable of channelling the One Power doomed to madness, death, or 'gentling' at the hands of female Aes Sedai. However, it is precisely this power imbalance which constitutes the main tension of the series, when its central male character: Rand al'Thor, discovers his own magical potential. In terms of deixes, within the socially constructed world of the novel, male-magic is treated as a thing of horror, shame, and disgust (TGH 38). However, on the level of the narrative Rand's magical abilities and the context of saidin's corruption determine a plot that revolves around Rand's journey to cleanse the True Source and reclaim the male magic of old. In other words, the narrative both defaults to the importance of Rand as its male hero, and to a resolution of the magical corruption which originally acted as a means to set women on equal footing with the men.

Kimberly Wickham's *Questing Feminism* expands upon this concept of a male-privileging narrative. She similarly identifies 'women's access to power through magic' as 'an important tool for them to challenge patriarchal expectations' (2), but focuses particularly on the narrative form, specifically in *The Wheel of Time*, as one which privileges the male hero. She argues that 'Rand's narrative role as hero effectively subordinates the stories of most of the magical women characters, regardless of their power', and despite varied and complex personalities the majority of the main female roles 'are either his lovers, assist him in some way, or are his enemies' (79). The progressive politics of Jordan's magic system therefore falters here on two levels. Firstly, on the level of female empowerment, where the imbalanced nature of Jordan's gender-based magic system imposes a tension that demands resolution, yet one which will inevitably disempower its female characters. And secondly, in regards to narrative focus, Rand's exceptional nature given the rules of the magic system elevate his role in the novel above that of the female magic-users, and arguably at their cost. Wickham concludes that 'simple misogyny is not a satisfactory explanation for this compulsion to subjugate the narratives of magical women to their male counterparts', and further cites Tolkien in influencing the narrative traditions of the fantasy genre such that 'the hero's quest' takes 'primacy' above 'all other narratives' (97). Wickham too, it should be noted, also hotly disputes Darko Suvin's position 'that fantasy has no social or political aspirations' (39), and her analysis of Jordan's complex interaction with portrayals of gender and the corresponding politics of those depictions clearly evidences this.

Therefore, despite Jordan's successful subversion of patriarchal systems through female-privileging magic and his diverse portrayals of female characters, Jordan ultimately fails to go far enough in his reimagining of gendered power structures. In regards to narrative, we may conclude that Jordan's magic system fails to undermine traditional power structures of gender, and instead ultimately upholds the status quo of dominant male heroes within the fantasy genre. Morgan Le Fay is subsumed once more by the primacy of King Arthur, and it is Rand: Artur Paendrag reborn, around whom the story ultimately revolves.

Magic, Sex, Bodies

These conflicting portrayals of masculine and feminine dominance are further seen on a metaphoric level, where magic acts as a metaphor for the body. Here, we may read a subtext which fundamentally expands our understanding of how Jordan uses magic to deal with issues of sex and power. To follow this reading we must first understand that the magic of *The Wheel of Time* is not only divided by gender, but also presents itself in traditionally feminine and masculine traits which reinforce gender stereotypes. It is understood that of the five flows of the One Power, the men who once wielded magic were 'strongest in wielding Earth and Fire': ones which Egwene assumes to be 'the strongest Powers' assumedly due to their associative masculine qualities of brute strength and violence (181). Moiraine assures her that no such thing as 'stronger' powers exist, but her argument that women's tendencies towards Air and Water can slowly wear away rock or snuff out fire only plays into the narrative of female magic-users as manipulators of men, and likewise leaves women with the equally false characterisation of being softer and more flexible in predisposition.

Descriptions of magic-use are similarly reminiscent of feminine and masculine traits, to the point of sexualised passages in the case of saidar: the female half of the One Power. Saidar is paired with feminine imagery and metaphors: described as being 'like the smell of perfume or the touch of silk' (TGH 536), evoking sweet and soft sensory experiences. The method used to awaken novices to saidar employs particularly ionic imagery, instructing the woman to imagine themselves as 'a flower bud […] ready to open' and be filled by the True Source (LoC 311). Egwene's first use of the One Power is particularly evocative: Moiraine tells her 'You are very close to your change, your first touching. It will be better if I guide you through it […] It is better this way than fumbling alone' (TEotW 170). A first touching of the True Source, itself something that tends to occur around the age of puberty (TEoTW 320) reads as an ultimate right of passage into maturity. Moiraine 'gently' guides her as Egwene's hands 'tremble', and the first touching culminates in what any psychoanalyst would confidently take to be a metaphor for the female orgasm: 'Another flash came, and another, until the azure light pulsed like the beating of a heart' (171). This intimate reading of feminine magic is only reinforced by the fact that Moiraine and Egwene's private meeting is

seen through the perspective of Rand, eavesdropping upon their exchange. Rand, as Egwene's all-but-promised husband, witnesses this moment in silent terror: 'Rand's fingers dug into his knees; his jaws clenched until they hurt. *She has to fail. She has to.*' (TEoTW 170). The consummation of Egwene's 'first touching' and opening to saidar is therefore one which separates her from Rand and initiates her into the sisterhood of the Aes Sedai. Rand's fear, perhaps to be likened to that of the fear of male obsoletion in the face of a self-sustaining female society, is that Egwene's awakening to the One Power will set her on a path away from the limitations of his country-village worldview, and ultimately his fear is not baseless as this is precisely what Egwene goes on to do. Jordan's bodily metaphors for female magic therefore echo male anxiety over the prospect of female independence and domination.

Meanwhile, we must also deal with the problematic usage of female versus male bodies in the conception of magic revealed in this passage. Whereas saidar, the female half of the One Power, is visualised as a 'flower bud' 'opening', wherein the woman 'flows' alongside and 'gently' guides the power (LoC 311), saidin, the male half of the One Power, is visualised as a single focused flame within a black void, and is to be seized and 'wrestled' into 'control' (AMoL 101), once more problematically reinforcing male stereotypes of brute strength and violent natures. Rand's ultimate use of the One Power against the Dark One likewise culminates in phallic imagery as he points his 'sword at Ba'alzamon's heart' and 'light lanced from the blade, coruscating in a shower of fiery sparks like droplets of molten, white metal' (TEotW 762). Both male and female magic in *The Wheel of Time* therefore each read as highly sexualised, and in the problematic representation of female magic as a submissive receptacle, and male magic as the aggressive actor, a fear of sexual power is woven throughout the text.

If magic is a symbol for the body, then the strict control of magic in the novels reflects a fear of sexuality. This last point is further reinforced in the character of Nyneave, who struggles with the realisation that she is capable of magic. Nyneave, at first, wishes to reject the reality of her magical ability, yet cannot reject something that is an internal part of her: '"No, I'll have nothing to do with-" *With what? Myself?*' (TEoTW 323). Throughout the series, Nyneave struggles to control the power within her, and is constantly at odds with her own body. When Moiraine reveals her power to her, Nyneave is incapable of bringing her body under control, she wants 'to scream', and must blink 'back tears', whereas 'Moiraine's calm never slipped' (TEoTW 326). This might easily be read as a fundamental fear of her own sexual desire and power, especially for a girl who wishes she could be 'taught to use a sword' (TGH 275), rather than wield the power of an Aes Sedai, and whom suppresses her desire to marry Lan, a powerful king and swordsman (TEotW 731). Equally, Nyneave's difficulty in accepting her own power is expressed in her rejection of the image of a budding flower to represent her opening to saidin, in favour of 'a blackthorn bush', something far more potent and dangerous, and evocative both of her fear of her own power, and its greater violent potential above her fellow Aes Sedai (TGH 208).

Ultimately, the subtext of Jordan's magic system reads, throughout its metaphorical usage, as a power struggle between the genders. This conflict culminates in the cleansing of the male half of the One Power through the union of a man and a woman. The imbalance between the power of men and women is resolved through both Rand and Egwene channelling the One Power in unison, and culminates, finally, in Egwene's death. Male power ultimately wins out through the sacrifice of the most powerful female Aes Sedai, and the power imbalance which had privileged women so far as to allow them an advantage beyond male dominance is ultimately erased. Wickham is quick to note that 'there is more than a little irony to the fact that Egwene's death is literally caused by her acquisition of too much power […] at the point at which her narrative threatens to challenge the primacy of the hero's journey' (91). Power is therefore deferred in what simultaneously constitutes a heteronormative pairing of man and woman, and 'balance' is finally restored. Despite the image of the female Aes Sedai as spider: devourer of men, it is Rand's power which ultimately consumes Egwene, and her deference to him which resolves the impingement put upon male power.

Throughout this usage of metaphor, imagery, and subtext, it is clear that Jordan's magic system is a primary means to explore the tensions of power imbalances between genders. Independence, sexual or otherwise, is treated as a point of fear, danger, and resentment through the eyes of the male characters, and it presents a power struggle at the heart of the narrative which is ultimately dissatisfactory resolved to the eye of a feminist reader. Through the visualisation of magic within the male and female body, Jordan tends towards uncomfortable stereotypes of what constitute traditionally masculine and feminine qualities, and arguably fails to reimagine what might have been an opportunity to present the powerful male and female magic-user. This last echoes true for the third, and final aspect to be considered in regards to gender, which has up until this point remained entirely uncommented upon within Jordan's text: namely, the question of gender binarism and heteronormativity.

In regards to the politics of gender binaries Jordan's magic system is utterly restrictive, and reinforces, rather than reimagines, a male/female gender binary. The concept of transgender people, or of gender as a spectrum, appears at best to be unconsidered within *The Wheel of Time*, and this is only reinforced by the stark divergence between men and women that underlines both the magic system and thereby the social development of the world. Men and women are repeatedly presented as being cleanly split into two groups, from the very beginning of the series where the women's interests are represented by the 'women's circle', and the men's by the 'village council' (TEoTW 13). In line with the power tension introduced by the magic system's upending of traditional social orders, we consistently see men and women presented as entirely different creatures. 'No man knows the mind of a woman' (TEotW 526), we are told, and even Min: a tomboyish character who comes comparatively close to blurring the lines of feminine/masculine traits

with her boyish haircut and style of clothing, thinks that 'the Creator must have been tired when it came time to make men, sometimes they hardly seemed human' (TSR 12). This alienating of the opposite gender only reinforces strict gendered stereotypes, in a setting where, despite their magical potential, women are nonetheless often expected to conform to codes of conduct such as braiding their hair (TEotW 27) and wearing dresses (TSR 12).

The strictly binary antagonisms felt between men and women throughout the world of *The Wheel of Time* are only outdone in limitation by the magic system itself. In making a magic system where women have access to one kind of power, and men another, Jordan surprisingly does not address the possibility of a transgender magic-wielder, and in doing so arguably erases their existence. Even the metaphors used within the novel to explain the difference between saidar and saidin fall short in this regard. We are told, for example, that it is impossible for a woman to train a man in magic, as one 'cannot teach a fish to fly' (TGH 126). In fact, Jordan frequently uses similar appeals to nature, falling into their logical fallacy, whilst simultaneously ignoring the biological reality, as he does here, in failing to imagine the very real concept of a flying fish. In this way, the concept of a gender binary is reinforced, and the possibility of other options routinely silenced.

Furthermore, the few cases where Jordan does directly address gender identity are fundamentally problematic. When, via magic, Jordan introduces a character who has died and been reborn inside a body of the opposite gender, his treatment of this arguably transgender character only reinforces the male/female binary. Aran'gar, born a powerful male sorcerer, is a character whom the Dark One resurrects into the body of a woman, ostensibly as a joke aimed at Aran'gar's previous tendencies as a womanizer. The fact that Aran'gar's unconsented-to transition is treated as a light joke is in itself insulting to a modern-minded audience, yet it is further problematic in that it goes on to reinforce the concept of biological sex as fundamentally unchangeable, or even linked to the soul. This is shown in the fact that despite Aran'gar's transition into a female body, the ability to channel saidin, and only saidin, is unchanged. For Aran'gar, 'all of her mannerisms had changed since she became a woman, but not the core of what had been placed into that female body' (WH 262). In other words, this 'core' is considered unchangeable, and fundamentally links Aran'gar's sex to that of male, thereby making him only capable of channelling the male half of the One Power: saidin. Biological sex is therefore portrayed as being intrinsically linked to gender identity, a proposal that flies in the face of modern gender theory.

Gender theory stresses an understanding of gender as existing in, and depending on, social constructions. Just as Jerng argues that race depends on instilled cultural perceptions, Judith Butler's critical work *Gender Trouble*, describes gender as 'a psychic and/or cultural designation of the self' which is for better or worse defined and understood in the context of a 'limited' 'oppositional, binary gender system' (30-31). Jordan ultimately fails to reimagine this cultural conception of binary gender in his restrictive magic system, and Aran'gar is ultimately relegated to the role of a 'trap': using a feminine appearance to wield male magic undetected by the unsuspecting women around him, and worse is played off as

a joke given little to no serious consideration. Jordan's inclusion of women is a step forward in the context of female representation in fantasy, yet his representation of transgender characters is at best outdated to a modern audience. Despite its clear potential, Jordan's gender-based magic system is ultimately one which fails to reimagine the gender binary, and thereby reinforces the gendered power structures which privilege the cisgendered.

'He was a writer of his time' has become a rather tiresome defence for authors whose works fail to satisfy modern sensibilities, yet it is nonetheless a relevant one. Ultimately, it must be remembered that it is a critic's role to consider works in all their complexity, and to understand that there can simultaneously be progress in one regard of representation, whilst there is failure in another. *The Wheel of Time*, which Jordan began to work on in 1984, notably with his wife Harriet McDougal acting as editor, constitutes conflicting representations of gender. Yet Jordan's inclusion of women and exploration of their roles within fantasy must be credited in itself for portraying powerful women and cementing their rightful place in the fantasy genre, and for future authors to explore. One must also be careful in lambasting an author on such terms. Ursula Le Guin examples this: in *Dancing on the Edge of the World: Thoughts of Women, Words, Places* she argues that 'the trouble with print is it never changes its mind' (vii). And within the essay *Is Gender Necessary?* she re-examines, corrects, and critiques her own previous representations of gender, going so far as to express her 'regret' for what, in her modern view, failed to reimagine gender more radically (14). Robert Jordan, having died in 2007 before the completion of *The Wheel of Time*, was robbed of this chance to reflect wholly upon his work. Brandon Sanderson, meanwhile, who finished the series after Jordan's death, has expressed his wish for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters and stressed the importance of this representation (Lapidario, Tor). Today, 'a large proportion of contemporary fantasy fiction is written by women', including the likes of 'Patricia McKillip, Dianna Wynne Jones, Susan Cooper,' and 'R. A. McAvoy' (Attebery 89), and the fantasy community has only continued to develop, reinvent, and challenge the image of the female magician which Jordan so deliberately championed.

Ultimately, *The Wheel of Time* is an example of a work that both reimagines and reinforces power structures of gender. While progressive in comparison to the sexless standards of Tolkienian fantasy, and deliberately experimenting with themes of female independence and empowerment, Jordan simultaneously upholds gender normativity, his representations of women are prey to stereotypes and inconsistency, and he ultimately defers to the seniority of the male hero's journey. Jordan's work, while not a clean example of progressive gender politics in modern fantasy, demonstrates the centrality of magic systems in the work of critically reading the genre. Magic in *The Wheel of Time* is fundamental to the power structures of its world, to understanding its symbolic and metaphoric representations of gender, and to accessing its subtext of sexual anxieties and power struggles.

On Class in Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*

Magic in Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* forms an intrinsic part of the novel's politics and history. Clarke's 2004 work is set apart from other fantasy novels by its Victorian Gothic style, imitating the works of Dickens, Thackeray, and Austen. Yet central to Clarke's novel is the will to address issues of slavery, feminism, and class. In Clarke, the lives of servants do not disappear into the woodwork, but rather are both acknowledged and empowered to shape a future for Britain that moves towards equality.

The central tension of Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* novel is the question of 'why there was no more magic done in England' (4). Clarke's work is set within an alternate history: the Victorian England of 1806-1817, specifically, where 'magic really works' (Williamson 4) but has been in decline for many years. Unlike the noble days of Merlin and Sir Orfeo, magic in 1806 is a subject very few people understand. Magic has become either a topic for academics, buried in their 'long, dull papers upon the history of English magic' (3), or a means for counterfeiters and conmen to beg a few pennies in exchange for fortune-telling and sly pyrotechnics. This premise prompts the urge to restore magic to its 'once-great state' (19), to employ it 'for the good of the nation' (29) and, naturally, to use it 'to outdo the French' (22). Through this satirisation of British self-importance, Clarke uses the return of English magic to ridicule British imperialism and its deeply divided members of society.

The magic of Clarke's world is ultimately caught between two competing interpretations. The future of English magic hangs in the balance between the upper and lower classes, between theoretical and practical applications, and between a means of class suppression, or of revolution. Through the political commentary inherent in these two competing visions, Clarke is able to champion working class causes in her depictions of servants, Northerners, and the Luddite movement of the early 1800s, and to bind her fantasy novel to the heart of working class history. Clarke critiques issues such as inequal access to higher education and the power of elite institutions, and ultimately incites revolution in a call to reclaim the pride of subjugated classes and to demand their equal rights.

In addition to its direct relevance to issues of class, Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* is extremely useful in demonstrating the breadth and variety of the modern fantasy genre. The Hugo award-winning work, taking inspiration not only from *The Lord of the Rings* but also from classic Victorian literature, is more in line with what critics such as Rosemary Jackson consider 'literary fantasy' following the traditions of Dickens and Dostoevsky, whilst Clarke's mastery of fantasy and Victorian literary conventions evidences the sophistication of both. Meanwhile, the contrasting styles of *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*, the *Broken Earth Trilogy*, and *The Wheel of Time* shows not only a trifecta of modern fantasy that represents its variety, but also demonstrates the relevance of magic across the genre itself.

Lastly, Clarke's work is a valuable example in regards to Marxist criticism within the fantasy genre. Carl Freedman's *A Note on Marxism and Fantasy* will be one of the primary critical guides for this chapter, alongside the recurring critique of Darko Suvin's position that fantasy does not situate itself in the politics or history of our own reality. Freedman, who argues that there is 'little positive to say about Marxism and Tolkienian fantasy' (265) and asks whether works of another template might exist, may be refuted by Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*, in that is it both a work of the 'Tolkienian' template, and one which places itself solidly within Marxist politics and history. These, and further arguments will now be explored as we attempt to place the fantasy genre within a history of class criticism.

Fantasies of Class

The history of fantasy and Marxist criticism is one which is bound up in Darko Suvin's criticism of the genre in favour of science fiction's superior potential. Freedman outlines the influence of Suvin, himself 'rigorously Marxist', in arguing that science fiction 'is potentially rich with rational, utopian imaginings' whilst fantasy is lessened to 'a subliterature' and 'a genre committed to the empirical environment' rather than one with the potential for radical imaginings (262). Freedman acknowledges that Suvin's 'dismissal of fantasy remains one of the most influential points in a justly influential book' (262), yet Freedman also argues for the potential of the fantasy genre within Marxist criticism, and he is not alone in doing so. Brian Attebery in *Strategies of Fantasy* similarly argues that fantasy is extremely promising in its 'overturning of class- and gender-based canons' (xii) and further proposes Marx's 'dialectical analysis of history' as a theoretical model for the analysis of fantasy's 'treatment of social action and interaction' (31). Meanwhile, K.L Maund in *History in Fantasy* writes that 'Fantasy as a genre is almost inextricably bound up with history and ideas of history' (468), quite the opposite of anti-realist or escapist conceptions of fantasy.

According to critical theorists, therefore, fantasy is indeed a genre which lends itself to Marxist critique. Yet it must first overcome the Suvinian accusation that fantasy, as an 'ahistorical mode' (Freedman 262), is not suited to the reimagining of our own political realities. Certainly, much of the criticism that fantasy is often historically stagnant, shallow, or idealistically nostalgic is merited. This goes back to Mendelsohn's argument that much of classic fantasy operates with the idea of a 'fixed and narrated past', a golden age of heroes whose nobility cannot be, and is not, challenged, and constitutes a 'denial of discourse' worked into the very conventions of the fantasy genre (14). We see this in the conventional medieval setting of many fantasy novels, whose quiet championing of rightful kings and humble peasants, it may be argued, romanticises the power structures of the divine right of kings and feudalism. It is difficult to imagine how a genre openly in allegiance to medieval nostalgia could challenge modern concepts of class division, yet naturally genre conventions are not so fixed.

Class criticism can be seen even in classic works of fantasy. Freedman, for example, harshly critiques Tolkien who, as he quite rightly claims, sets the template for much of modern fantasy. Freedman is indeed scathing in his interpretation of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, characterising the work with a 'neurotic desperation to evade history' (265) and, as with any academic, prefers his insults to be communicated in Greek or Latin, terming those under the Tolkienian influence as 'weak-minded sub-Tolkienian ephebes to whom evasion of stubborn historical difficulty and complexity is immediately congenial' (264). Yet Freedman's argument that *The Lord of the Rings* is ahistorical is a curious one. Freedman posits that Tolkien's work is fundamentally 'anti-historical', where 'material interests – economic, political, ideological, sexual – that drive individuals and societies are silently erased', and that the world is without class conflict, the only hint of class divisions being 'the embarrassingly paternalistic one between the evident rentier Frodo Baggins and his pathetically loyal servant Sam' (263). Furthermore, he argues that the 'free-floating' nature of Tolkien's concepts of good and evil, 'independent of history and culture', is fundamentally opposed to Marx's concepts, where good and evil are 'deeply rooted in the systemic material actualities of particular times and places' (264).

While it is perfectly true, and has been expounded upon within this work, that Tolkien's world lacks representation of sexual and political dynamics, Freedman's refusal to acknowledge the historical commentary of the work is strange. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, as we have already seen multiple academics argue, is fundamentally linked to the history of the World Wars and of the industrialisation of England. The One Ring, which Freedman considers 'pointless' to read into – he claims we need not ask 'why possession of the ring should bend the inclinations of its possessor toward evil. It just does' (264) – is elsewhere identified by literary critics as a symbol of the dangerous temptation of power that corrupts: addressing the traumatic experiences of the trenches, German machines of war, and the slow industrialisation of the English countryside (Swinfen 85, Leonard 9). While *The Lord of the Rings* certainly presents a surface of ahistorical romance, it is thoroughly untrue to suggest that Tolkien bears no historical context, nor political commentary.

Furthermore, as Brian Attebery notes in connection to Marxist critiques that though Tolkien appears disinterested in the 'material actualities' which Freedman demands, he is far from silent 'on the problems of the human community' (31-32). Tolkien is uninterested in the political and economic forces of Middle-Earth, yet in the violence of Mordor, the industry of Isengard and the destruction of its forests, and primarily in the near-loss of The Shire to a man who would reshape it in fire and steel, Tolkien shows his terror of the forces of war and industrialisation and their potential to warp England into a caste system. Certainly, alternative readings of Tolkien's political commentary and the historical situating of his world are possible, but a total denial of Tolkien's relevance to issues of class and history would be disingenuous.

Though Freedman feels there is 'little positive to say about Marxism and (Tolkienian) fantasy' (265), followers of Tolkien's 'template' have nonetheless shown deference to the

importance of their world's politics and economies. Works of fantasy, versed in the conventions of medieval politics, are therefore uniquely positioned to subvert and challenge them, as has been seen in the modern example of George RR Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Meanwhile works such as Andrzej Sapkowksi's *The Witcher* series, also inspired by *Conan the Barbarian*, which Freedman also criticises (266), incorporates the importance of import taxes, exchange rates, and other economic concerns into the tapestry of its world. Such Tolkienian works are not, as Freedman supposes, 'miles wide but only inches deep' (263), and this argument instead seems to repeat the mistake of reading fantasy only as deeply as its surface tropes and clichés. Once again, Sir Terry Pratchett's distinct ire on this topic speaks best as he notes how his own 'Discworld books have spun on such concerns as the nature of belief, politics, and even of journalistic freedom, but put in one lousy dragon and they call you a fantasy writer' (172).

Meanwhile, in modern works of fantasy a formula for undermining class structures is already pervasive: namely, through magic. Cases where genetic-based magic systems allow for a "lower class" character to break out of the confines of their class and undermine that which supports the upper classes' hold on power may be read in Brent Weeks' *Night Angel Trilogy*, Brandon Sanderson's *Mistborn*, Trudi Canavan's *Black Magician Series*, or Patrick Rothfuss' *Kingkiller Chronicle*. Tolkienian fantasy's depictions of class roles, far from stagnant, is one which is consistently subverted through the deployment of magic and fantasy conventions.

Fantasy is, therefore, fully capable of reimagining and challenging our politics. Fantasy stands alongside science fiction in its potential to capture societal anxieties and explore their implications. In its conventions of medieval nostalgia, fantasy is vulnerable to simplistic representations of class, yet this does not mean that its depictions are never complex. Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* therefore acts an interesting counterpoint to this discussion. As both a work inspired by Tolkien and one which draws on the Victorian Gothic tradition, Clarke uses magic to explore issues of class that both echo and surpass the subversions of other fantasy works. Placed so solidly within our own history, it is difficult to deny the relevance of Clarke's political and economical commentary upon our world: a demonstration which shows how the inheritors of Tolkien's concepts have come to directly tackle issues of class relations that persist into the modern day.

Gentleman Magicians

The problem with magic is that it 'is not respectable' (Clarke 92). In the Victorian England of Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* nothing governs magic so strictly as rules of etiquette and social propriety. Entrenched in this are issues of class and prestige: what kind of person ought to be allowed to become a magician? Ought they to fall among the ranks of workmen, clergymen, or politicians? And how might the profession be of service to

king and country? These societal and economical issues are central to Clarke's novel and to her primary characters: Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell, who aim to restore the former glory of English magic.

To explore how Clarke connects issues of class with those of magic, we must first understand her magic system as something deeply rooted in history and cultural identity. Clarke's magical history is bitterly divided between the north and south of England. Though by 1806 magic has become most prevalent in the south, a subject to be studied behind closed doors and in universities, magic is nonetheless strongest in the north. 'Northern magicians', we are to understand, 'had always been better respected than southern ones' (4), and it is the cities of York and Newcastle, not London, that are considered to be the most magical and boast the largest number of magicians (21). This power imbalance between the north, traditionally the poorer blue-collar hub of the country, and the richer service-sector of the south, is a theme which runs throughout the novel. The different habits of northern and southern peoples are constantly pitched at odds (173), and the jealousy felt by southern magicians over the intuition of their northern counterparts is evident (4).

Coupled with this geographical divide is the economic power of magic. As a counterweight to imbalances of power, magic, or even the pretence of magic, has the potential of elevating the very poorest people to positions of power. One example is given in the form of Absalom, a magician who, despite doing no real magic in his lifetime, 'was born in poverty and died a very rich man'. If we measure a magician's success by how much money they made, we are told, 'then Absalom was certainly one of the greatest English magicians who ever lived' (267). Magic therefore presents a real economic threat to the upper classes: people of low birth who are either gifted with magical powers, or the skills to counterfeit them, are able to climb the social ladder and overcome their low rank. This unfortunate circumstance drives the upper classes to decry magic. Unable to perform it themselves, public opinion moves to distinguish *theoretical* magic from *practical* magic: 'Magic was what street sorcerers pretended to do in order to rob children of their pennies', an academic informs us, 'in the practical sense' magic is 'much fallen off. It had low connexions', and while 'a gentleman might study the history of magic' he could not himself perform it (5).

Here, we see the ivory tower invoked once again to drive a wedge between the magic of the lower classes, and that of the upper. The academics of Clarke's world suppose that magic is *theoretical*, a learning-based and prestigious profession, and that *practical* magic is distasteful, ignorant, and improprietous. As we have seen in other fantasy novels, the premise that magic is learning-based is intended to be understood to be false, and this allows Clarke to critique the model of upper classes restricting education access to those of a lower class background. One such example is the 'Learned Society of Magicians of Manchester', a northern workers hub whose 'members were clergymen of the poorer sort, respectable ex-tradesmen, apothecaries, lawyers, retired mill owners who had got up a little Latin': people who, in the academics' terms might be considered 'half-gentlemen', are

ridiculed as people who have no 'business becoming magicians', and for their suggestion that, as 'practical men', they might 'apply the principles of reason and science to magic as they had done to the manufacturing arts' (9). The ideas of this lower-class group are snubbed and quashed by academic circles. In contrast, *theoretical* magic, albeit of no practical use, is kept only in access to the richest and most powerful members of society.

The restriction and academising of magic is further seen in the literal removal of magical books from the market. Norrell, set on realising his own singular vision of what English magic should be, works to place the upper echelons of magical education out of reach to anyone but himself (151). Meanwhile, magic is classified into syllabuses (269) and placed behind the demands of years of (theoretical) education (178). This regulation of magic is specifically designed to keep its power out of reach to the likes of farmers and tradespeople (488), who are indeed not 'the sort of person' who ought to be encouraged to take up magic whatsoever (703).

The ultimate threat of the lower classes taking up magic is one of widespread revolution. Alongside the fear of economic toppling, as seen in Absalom and the Manchester societies' designs to put magic to practical use, Clarke suggests that freely accessible magic would be a means of uniting the subjugated classes. Here, Clarke further binds her depiction of northerners to the history of our own country and to class warfare. Clarke directly parallels the Luddites, the northern-arising movement of textile workers who protested the industrialisation of their jobs by destroying machinery and began worker rebellions in the early 1800s. In *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* we find the 'Johannites', similarly termed as 'machine breakers' (686), whom our narrator sympathetically describes as 'the common people in Northern England' who have 'suffered a great deal' from 'poverty', 'lack of employment', and the 'threat' of 'new machines which produced all sorts of goods cheaply and put them out of work' (685-686). This clear reference to the Luddites grounds Clarke within our own history, and in a political stance that sides with the 'suffering' workers of the north and their united protests.

Yet magic, as styled by Mr. Norrell, also presents an economic threat to the lower classes. As with the machinery replacing the jobs of textile workers, the magic of latter-day theoreticians relies upon 'the use of a tool or key made specifically for the purpose' (936), Dr. Pale's writings, we are told, are 'full of such machines for doing magic', including the 'Quiliphon': 'something between a trumpet and a toasting fork' which places yet another barrier between the magician and the realisation of their magic (724). The prospect of machines for magic evokes the horrors of job obsoletion during the industrial revolution and outlines the failings of a capitalist market eradicating jobs through improved industrial efficiency, rather than one which protects its workers. Similarly, Clarke's work explores the commodification of magic after Norrell re-establishes it as a fashionable profession. With magic *a la mode*, London establishments begin 'to sell magical philtres, magic mirrors and silver basins which, the manufacturers claimed, had been specifically constructed for seeing visions in', yet which, as is apparent to the reader, are utterly unnecessary for the actual

practice of magic (731). In this sense a commodified magic undermines the very value of the manufacturing workforce, creating objects that are both soulless and unnecessary in favour of capitalist interests. Clarke therefore plays with the competing views of what a resurgence of English magic ought to consist of, wherein an elitist, capitalist vision of magic threatens the livelihood of the working classes, yet at the same time the honest history of that magic lends its aid to the cause of those very workers.

Clarke's magic is further intrinsically connected to the worker's history, culture, and identity: a factor which has the power to unite them against the upper classes. This is shown in the figure of the Raven King: a mythologised king who ruled the kingdoms of northern England, alongside those of Faerie and otherworlds (269). This ultimate figure of English magic is problematic to the southern mind of Mr. Norrell, as the Raven King was neither English nor upper class. The Raven King 'could not read and write' (398) and therefore does not fit with the gentlemanly image of scholarly, theoretical magic. His was a magic that set him on equal footing with laymen and charcoal burners (915), and which becomes a symbol for northern identity. As Mr. Norrell's northern servant tells us, the Raven King, 'John Uskglass', *is* the north: 'Our towns and cities and abbeys were built by him. Our laws were made by him. He is our minds and hearts and speech' (914). Likewise, the Raven King is seen as a symbol of the 'Johannites and madmen' (914) and worse, those that want to establish '*democracy'* (929) through revolution (686). Like the Luddites who rallied around the legend of Robin Hood, the Raven King draws the belief of the Johannites and calls them to claim their own identity and equal stature.

Meanwhile, if access to magic and the means of bettering one's place in society are restricted by the upper classes, then so too is the very history of the Raven King as a magical symbol of power in the north. In line with the lie that magic is learning-based and requires years of study to achieve, academics such as Norrell attempt to erase the very history of the Raven King as a reminder of the power imbalance between north and south. Clarke portrays this silencing and erasure through Norrell's newspaper periodicals, *The Friends of English Magic* and *Modern Magic* establishing an 'orthodox magical opinion' (286) throughout magical literature which omits all mention of the Raven King in favour of later, more academic, and more English magicians (286). Once more, we are reminded of the Marxist perspective that history must be treated with a critical eye for its authors, and for the histories which are not told. Clarke highlights the wilful destruction of inconvenient lower-class figureheads by a class who hold a monopoly on both the knowledge of the subject and of the means of distributing that knowledge.

Yet, ultimately, this attempt at erasure and subjugation fails, and this is once again due to the fundamental nature of Clarke's magic system. At its heart, Clarke's magic system is essentially a democratic one. That is, magic in the world of *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* appears to be neither solely learning-based nor genetic-based, but occurs indiscriminately within the population. To portray this, Clarke uses the tactics we have seen in other fantasy works: by exploiting the genre conventions for hard or soft magic systems. Magic in Clarke's

world, as argued by Mr. Norrell and the upper classes, would be a hard magic system that is strictly 'regulated' (520) and conforming to 'proper forms and etiquette' (110); Norrell supposes that magic can only be achieved by adherence to its rules and a deep understanding of its complex requirements, alike to algebra or Latin. Yet this is evidently not the case and Clarke's magic is in fact a soft magic system: it does not accord to strict rules despite the convictions of the upper classes. Clarke's magic is instead fundamentally intuitive: Strange, who performs magic instinctively, reveals this, much to Norrell's distaste, when he says he has 'only the haziest notion' of the magic he performs, and compares the practice of magic to a 'sensation like music playing at the back of one's head – one simply knows what the next note will be' (295). The magic itself is not described in express terms, save for those invented and recorded by academics, we hear of 'spells of remembering, spells of finding, spells of awakening' (427), and even the specifics of casting such spells: from vocalising them, thinking them, or even employing 'a bead of blood from the magician's finger', yet the rules, applications, and limitations of the magic appear to be as limitless as imagination itself (449). We are thus faced with what is evidently a soft magic system, around which the upper classes of the world have attempted to derive rules and theories: all of which are ultimately false. Clarke therefore plays with the conventions of fantasy: using the familiar concept of a hard magic system to ridicule the unnecessary pomp and bureaucracy of her upper class characters. Furthermore, it is the reality of this egalitarian magic system which ultimately denies efforts of class suppression.

Clarke's novel ultimately ends with English magic being restored to all classes of people. This climaxes in the realisation that no amount of controlling or denying the common people their history or identity can stop the return of a fundamentally instinctive magic. As commonfolk throughout the land begin to cast spells without once studying to learn them, the academic grip upon English magic is forced to loosen (888). Strange, who glimpses the Raven King's plans to revive the magic of England, declares the unstoppable democracy that is facing them: 'Norrell denied them. Norrell silenced them. But they are magicians nonetheless' (858), and no theoretical paper or newspaper article can reject the reality of this magical revolution. Clarke closes her novel with a scene of the new generation of magicians, with schools opening to 'anyone who might wish' to learn (997), a decision which controversially includes the 'largely uneducated', 'farmers', 'shopkeepers', and even 'a woman' (998). Naturally, Clarke does not magic away the prejudices of her Victorian society. Women, farmers, and other disenfranchised figures are not immediately welcomed into the ranks of the prestigious role of magician, but in portraying the difficulty of achieving change, even slow change, Clarke acknowledges the historical reality of societal change. We are left, instead, with the prospect of slow but necessary progression, and a reminder of the need to persistently test and challenge that which has become custom.

Finally, Clarke's work argues for a Marxist reading of history. Through its magic system, *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* makes a compelling case against the fantasy genre's tendency to idealise the fixed historic past. Instead, Clarke solidifies her historiographical

stance as one which demands thorough interrogation of history. As has been mentioned, the fantasy critic Farah Mendelsohn argues convincingly that fantasy tends to portray the past as something glorious, fixed, and unquestionable (14). Yet Clarke, in her multiple and contesting accounts of magical history, both refutes the concept of a 'fixed and narrated past' and warns of the dangers of not thinking critically about it.

Clarke links this critical conception of history to the very bodies of her northern characters. The character of Vinculus comes to symbolise the inseparable nature of northern magic, history, and identity when it is revealed that an ancestral book of magic is written 'beneath' his very skin (967). The book of the Raven King, thought to have been lost for many centuries, represents the magical heritage of the people of northern England. Yet this sought-after book is unlike any that could be stored in Norrell's private collection. Vinculus, himself a Yorkshireman (395), as well as being a vagabond, thief, and magician, is himself the book of the Raven King. His skin is inscribed with the words and letters of his ancestral monarch, and through him the history and the dormant power of the north lives on. Like the servant Childermass, who claims the Raven King lives on in the northerners' 'minds and hearts and speech' (914), here the key to northern history, identity, and magic may be read symbolically and literally as one with the body and self. Clarke, like Jemisin, posits that cultural identity and heritage can always be rediscovered while descendants remain, and uses magic as the primary metaphor to express her argument.

Furthermore, Vinculus' bookishness completes the argument against a stagnant and preserved past. Upon the return of the Raven King, the writing on Vinculus' body changes, much to the shock and horror of its academic discoverer. 'We must preserve every scrap!' Norrell's servant argues, and 'make a record of exactly what was written upon you before', yet Vinculus argues the opposite: 'it is just as well I have changed – or I would have become a History! A dry-as-dust History' (994). Vinculus, and certainly also Clarke, argue here that history cannot, and must not, be static. Rather than a thing to be confined to books and museums, history is an actor whose contents change depending on readings, perspectives, and discoveries. This position also applies meta-fictively to Clarke's work itself: in writing an alternate-history fantasy of the Victorian era that gives prominence to the roles and struggles of the working class, the north of England, and to servants, Clarke is actively challenging the contemporary perspectives that overlooked or silenced these voices. This implies, too, that Clarke does not intend for her work to be read in the isolated perspective of the Victorian era, but rather for her political commentaries to be extrapolated and used to challenge the very real modern issues of class. Poverty in the north, worker unions, the threat of new technology to the labour market, and indeed the responsibility of elite institutions and the press as arbiters of knowledge, are all issues that persist into the modern day, and which Clarke addresses.

Ultimately, *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* exemplifies how fantasy may be solidly placed within history. Clarke's political commentary hinges upon that very *novum*, to borrow the term from Suvin, which makes the work a fantasy: magic itself. A propos

Suvinian readings of fantasy as ahistorical or even anti-historical, Clarke pointedly addresses the real history of class warfare in paralleling the northern Luddites, and goes further to challenge the very concept of history as something ephemeral, static, or perfectible. Clarke therefore roots her fantasy in the realities of class struggle and creates a Marxist critique of upper class elitism and censure which is equally relevant to the politics of today. Through a magic system that is fundamentally democratic, Clarke ridicules the subjugation of lower classes on the basis of genetic or academic inferiority, and envisions a magic that is entwined both in history and cultural identity to provide the means of revolution. In the end, English magic is indeed restored to the once-great country, but it is not the idea of Englishness conceived of by Mr. Norrell or Jonathan Strange. Instead, it is the English magic of the farmers, the workers, and the servants, that sets out to restore what had been forgotten.

Conclusion

Discussions of magic are fundamentally discussions about power. We have seen how magic in the fantasy genre is used as a force to disrupt power structures of race, class, and gender. Magic ultimately allows for displacements of power, and therein the opportunity for powerful political commentary.

In Jemisin's *Broken Earth* magic is a means of fighting back against an empire, of rediscovering one's ancestry, and an argument against narratives of genetic inferiority. The destabilising power of Jemisin's magic lays the basis for her scathing criticism of racism in modern America, and questions how a people can escape cycles of hatred in the wake of historic atrocities.

Jordan's *Wheel of Time* presents a far less consistent reading of gender, yet nevertheless demonstrates the relevance of magic as a tool of political commentary within fantasy. The premise of Jordan's male and female magic empowers the women of his world and rewrites patriarchal power dynamics. However, a close reading of the metaphors surrounding the magic of his world reveal deep anxieties towards sex and the body. This aspect is only magnified when it comes to the restrictive gendering of the magic itself, which ultimately paints a reductive and heteronormative view of gender. Jordan's magic attempts to reimagine the power structures of our world, yet the places where he fails to do so are equally revealing of our own cultural biases.

Lastly, Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* uses the lens of magic to champion the rights of the English working class. The internal debates between Clarke's characters highlight competing visions of upper and lower class magic and allow her to envision a sense of Englishness that includes the country's downtrodden. Paralleling worker unions and the rebellions of the industrial revolution, Clarke openly critiques elitist narratives of genetic or academic superiority and ties her magic to the pride and identity of common English people.

These three works constitute three very unique representations of the modern fantasy genre. Jemisin's fragmented postmodernist style, Jordan's Tolkienesque fantasy epic, and Clarke's Victorian Gothic pastiche show the breadth and diversity of the genre. Yet the works are also unified in their use of magic as a means of political commentary, and therefore strengthen the assertion that magic is a tool of commentary across the fantasy genre itself.

In addition, the classic works of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* have provided useful points of comparison. As works which reflect the early history of the fantasy genre, it has also been explored how these classics depicted issues of race, class, and gender, and further laid the framework for how magic is used within the genre today. These works demonstrate that the fantasy genre has, and continues to, directly address issues of politics, history, and culture – whether by means of magic or otherwise.

Magic systems as a concept remain unexplored within academic research, but their implications and sophisticated usage merit further investigation. Thinking of magic as a system of rules, whether hard or soft, highlights their potential to reimagine our world. Magic reveals us: genetic-based magic systems primed for racial commentary, learning-based magic laying open inequalities, and gender-based magic highlighting the strangeness of our own socially constructed world. As we have seen, the results of this tinkering with power structures does not necessarily lead to progressive commentaries or even successful ones, but the reimaginings posed by magic reveal systems of power to us and allow us to challenge them. As Jackson puts it, the 'fantastic traces the unsaid and unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible' and makes it visible to us once more (4).

These findings directly contradict Darko Suvin's argument that fantasy 'does not use imagination as a means to understand the tendencies in reality' (OtP 375). Instead, in Suvin's own terms, it has been argued that magic constitutes a *novum*: a 'strange newness' which redefines the known world and provokes us to see it in a new light (OtP 373). Venturing towards a definition of fantasy, therefore, one might turn to magic as the fantastic element which unifies the genre. Magic is that which allows for a destabilising of our expectations, and therefore insight and criticism of our own world.

The fantasy genre therefore merits further consideration within academia. In some sense, the breadth of this study has limited it. In order to argue that magic systems as political commentary are common across the fantasy genre it has been necessary to cover multiple works, where a single work might overwise have provided more depth of analysis. It is hoped that this thesis has laid some of the groundwork for further studies into the fantasy genre's critique of race, gender, and class issues respectively, and that the highlighting of magic systems as a key to political commentary will allow the genre to be seen in new light. For readers new to the genre, it is hoped that this analysis will prove to be a worthy demonstration of the genre's academic value and political weight.

Today, the fantasy genre is radically changing with the provocative work of new voices. Genre conventions are subverted with sophistication, showing the genre's capacity for introspection and complexity which merits further study. Modern fantasy writers are, as Jemisin argues, 'trying to create the fairy tales that we need to survive' (Bereola). They are writing stories which question the power structures we live in, and reimagine them in worlds where magic, dragons, are revolution are really possible.

Ultimately, magic in the modern fantasy genre disrupts power structures that exist within our own world, and question how we ourselves might fight them. These works are deeply political, and magic is a fundamental part of their allegory. Yet as Jemisin reminds us in *Broken Earth*, ultimately it is not the magic that is truly important– but our own power, will, and capacity to fight for change.

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