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BOOK REVIEW:

The Shape of Fantasy: Investigating the Structure of American Heroic Epic Fantasy

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Palmer-Patel, C. *The Shape of Fantasy: Investigating the Structure of American Heroic Epic Fantasy*. Routledge, 2020. ISBN 978-367189143.

As fantasy scholars, we live in good times. With major networks and outlets all vying to adapt the next big fantasy series (most recently Netflix and Andrzej Sapkowski's *The Witcher*), the genre itself is flourishing, but the last decade has also seen a remarkable wealth of high-quality new fantasy scholarship. Even beyond single-author studies and the continuously fertile field of Tolkien studies, recent standout monographs, among others, include Michael Saler's *As If* (2012), Stefan Ekman's *Here Be Dragons* (2013), Helen Young's *Race and Popular Fantasy* (2015), and James Gifford's *A Modernist Fantasy* (2018). Yet what contemporary fantasy studies has lacked is a systematic and sympathetic analysis of those texts most closely associated with fantasy in the popular imagination: namely, *epic* fantasy. Meeting this need is C. Palmer-Patel's timely *The Shape of Fantasy*, an unabashedly structuralist account of "Heroic Epic Fantasy" (hereafter "HEF") as it appears in the two decades between 1990 and 2010. Unlike many previous scholars of fantasy, Palmer-Patel has little interest in genre definitions – despite providing a taxonomy that does exactly that. She separates fantasy along two separate axes, Epic v. Localised and Heroic v. Fragmented,[1] and she focuses solely on fantasy that is "heroic" and "epic" both. Yet, for Palmer-Patel, this heroic epic structure cuts across typical genre boundaries like SF, horror, gothic, and fantasy – for example, *Dune*, *Star Wars*,

[1] Since Palmer-Patel always (distractingly) capitalises terms like "Heroic Epic Fantasy" and "Localised", I will follow that usage here.

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and Anne McCaffrey's quasi-SF *Pern* books all employ a heroic epic structure. All told, *The Shape of Fantasy* is an excellent study on a body of fiction badly in need of scholars willing to consider the genre's positive features. Even if several of Palmer-Patel's specific defenses of HEF fall short (often significantly), it remains refreshing to find scholarship that recognises how the popularity of genre fantasy might arise from something more than placid readers who love comforting formulas and clichés.

Throughout *The Shape of Fantasy*, Palmer-Patel's methodology pays homage to John Clute's four-fold "grammar" of the fantasy story from *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. Yet, beyond modifying and reorganising Clute's main categories of Wrongness, Thinning, Recognition, and Return/Healing, HEF – as its name implies – places a comparatively greater emphasis on the hero function. Within this new grammar, the hero "realises a messianic duty via a journey, one which results in a spiritual transcendence for the hero along with the salvation of the world by the act of healing or re-creating it, thereby fulfilling their destiny" (1). Rather than prescribing any one permanent HEF formula, however, Palmer-Patel seeks only to describe HEF as it appears between 1990 and 2009 (14), and she admits that certain epic fantasies since 2010 have already begun to "evolve past the Heroic Epic patterns identified in this book" (13). Still, much like Clute's grammar, Palmer-Patel's model applies to a surprisingly wide range of fantasy texts. According to her, the messianic aspect of the hero is vital. Heroes are tasked with saving the "world through a sacrifice, usually associated with some literal or metaphorical connection to death as part of their journey" (7). At the same time, within Fantasyland "structures of fate and prophecy are essential to the narrative plot" (8). After all, only by positing a higher power can the hero find transcendence (7). Indeed, an implied greatness of scale is what makes HEF specifically *epic*. In contrast to Sword-and-Sorcery Fantasy, which is Local and non-Epic, HEF works toward world-salvation and the fulfillment of a world destiny, oftentimes through healing or re-creation. What soon becomes apparent from Palmer-Patel's model, though, are its quirks. For example, it excludes from HEF a series like George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* because no one primary protagonist or group arises to fill the hero function. As such, despite other generic similarities to texts like *The Lord of the Rings,* Palmer-Patel calls it a "Fragmented Hero" fantasy rather than "Heroic Epic" (9).

After laying the groundwork of her study in the introduction, Palmer-Patel then spends each following chapter detailing one aspect of the hero-function or HEF narrative, using one illustrative HEF text per chapter. The first three chapters focus on the heroes themselves – and these chapters particularly challenge the notion, often raised by detractors, that prophecy or fate acts to limit the hero's free will. A different solution to this problem appears in each of the three chapters. For example, chapter 1 shows how, while destiny itself may be fixed, heroes use their free will to "determine whether to fulfill the functions of their design" (20). In other words, freedom is much like Madeleine L'Engle's claim in *A Wrinkle in Time* that life is like a sonnet – people are "given the form, but you have to write the sonnet yourself. What you say is completely up to you" (qtd. in 29). In chapter 2, whereas heroes must voluntarily let fate work through them as in chapter 1, heroes also must "actively manipulate events and prophecy itself as they negotiate the demands of fate" (33). Success is not predetermined. Heroes, who must choose between one or more possible

branching futures, act "much like the stone thrown into a pond which creates ripples on the surface" (39). A third variation appears in the next chapter. Although fate affects heroes, heroes affect fate too, and Palmer-Patel selects the *ta'veren* from Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* as her example, characters who push and pull the people and events around them. She further asserts that this lack of fixity despite the presence of destiny challenges the view expressed in Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy* that portal-quests curtail the interpretative choices available to readers – a rebuttal with potential, in my view, although Palmer-Patel sorely overreaches when she calls Rand al'Thor, the Dragon Reborn, an "unreliable narrator" due to his madness (55).

In chapters 4 and 5, two more hero functions come under Palmer-Patel's microscope: heroic messianism and the "ou-hero", the most original new coinage in *The Shape of Fantasy*. In this latter category, the proposed hero *fails* to save the world, meaning that they fail to restore balance to a world that has grown increasingly chaotic. Correspondingly, the proposed hero becomes a *not-hero*. In worst-case scenarios, poor decision-making might even transform the ou-hero into an outright villain, and these villains, who have misused their free will by making unwise choices, are led down paths committed to skewing the cosmic balance. Oftentimes, ou-heroes also operate as a reflection or mirror upon the hero – for example, Lord Voldemort and Harry Potter. One intriguing question left unexplored by Palmer-Patel, though, is just how far her ou-hero concept should replace the "Dark Lord" concept traditional to genre fantasy. Although treated as roughly equivalent concepts in chapter 4, Palmer-Patel does later distinguish between them, calling the admirable Vin and Elend from Brandon Sanderson's *Mistborn* trilogy both "ou-heroes" (141).

Turning to chapters 6 through 8, Palmer-Patel sets her sights on the narrative of Fantasyland itself, devoting one chapter apiece to a major variation on the HEF plotline. *Entropy* becomes Palmer-Patel's major concept in these chapters. Chapter 6, for example, argues that entropy – a combination of Thinning and Wrongness – always triggers the plot in Fantasyland and operates to "unbalance good and evil in the world" (101). In chapter 7, the hero is a liminal figure between worlds who reverses entropic decay, restores the cosmic balance, and finally re-establishes a "closed system" that insulates Fantasyland from otherworldly entropic intrusions (118). Some form of Healing usually concludes these narratives, whether of the hero or the land or both, but healing Fantasyland can lead to new world orders as often as to Edenic returns. As such, chapter 8 takes up the subject of Fantasylands that undergo far-from-equilibrium conditions, but here Palmer-Patel's argument becomes somewhat puzzling. On one hand, she states that the perpetual entropy of HEF makes it an anti-utopian genre. Given the prevalence of sequel series, no stability achieved by the HEF narrative is ever truly permanent. At the same time, the *populace* of Fantasyland, when faced with radical chaos during far-from-equilibrium conditions, seems to prefer a hegemonic or totalitarian political order. This means, in turn, that the hero must anti-democratically subvert the popular will and rebel "against this order and … break out of the flat line of stability and progress into the future" (145). Here Palmer-Patel's adherence to description over evaluation becomes frustrating because, despite partly gearing her argument towards a defense of HEF, the tension this chapter observes between *progress* – always implied by heroic messianic time, which is linear and future-orientated – and *return* is troubling. Both sides of this tension seem

to have disturbing hegemonic implications, but Palmer-Patel leaves these implications unexplored.

The Shape of Fantasy ends with a brief coda chapter on sequel series and a short conclusion. As my short summary has probably made clear, though, Palmer-Patel – in addition to outlining the "shape" of Heroic Epic Fantasy – also seeks to defend the genre against its various detractors. Unfortunately, while her grammar of HEF is highly useful, the defense aspect of her project falls short in several key areas. For example, she seeks to counter charges of fantasy's irrationalism (a criticism familiar from Marxist critics like Darko Suvin) by drawing from multiple fields of discourse – literary criticism, of course, but also philosophy and science, particularly chaos theory as outlined by N. Katherine Hayles, which spurs Palmer-Patel's discussions on entropy. The main intuition is that HEF operates according to a cultural feedback loop between the invented secondary world and certain discourses from the primary world, and these discourses authorise critical intellectual topics like fate and personal freedom, individual choice, or the relationship between self and community. Or, to put the same insight another way, "Heroic Epic Fantasy … contains real-world scientific and philosophical ideas which are embedded directly into its narrative structure", and it matters less whether specific fantastical elements are scientific, magical, or supernatural than how those "elements are connected to the embedded narrative structures of the Heroic Epic" (176). As far as this cultural feedback loop goes, the insight seems plausible, and it certainly helps Palmer-Patel resist critical methodologies that attempt to locate the "value" of fantasy in "psychoanalytic, archetypal, allegorical, or pedagogical readings of Fantasy" (4).

Still, in a book barely 180 pages long, it is almost impossible to do full justice to complex ideas drawn from fields as diverse as philosophy and science, and Palmer-Patel's use of chaos theory seems particularly like an attempt to legitimise with a veneer of scientific jargon arguments that might have survived on their own. Do we really need to invoke "strange attractors" (47) to claim that "Heroic Epic Fantasy *is* a rational literature" (15, emphasis original)? This tactic brings up another potential shortcoming of *The Shape of Fantasy* – its lack of engagement with ideology critique, which has generally encouraged a wide array of critics to disparage genre fantasy as conservative and regressive. Despite glancing references to Darko Suvin and utopian studies, Palmer-Patel never engages the arguments that have traditionally relegated her chosen genre to the sidelines – unhistoricised ontologies of Good and Evil, the presence of magic, the evasion of historical and social contradictions, the lack of mass political activism, etc. Defending messianic hero-figures, for example, by showing how their choices fit into philosophical discourses on freedom and fate will, after all, will hardly sway those critics who view an emphasis on liberal individualism as the key problem to mostly everything. Likewise, chapter 8's tensions over HEF's anti-democratic potential seem more damning than helpful.

This is only to say, of course, that I doubt that *The Shape of Fantasy* will do much to overturn any entrenched animosity against genre fantasy, whether from mainstream literary studies or from scholars of speculative fiction in general. And, historically, structuralist accounts have typically had difficulties with engaging ideological critique. Still, *The Shape of Fantasy* remains a fine book, a desperately needed excursion into a woefully neglected part of modern

fantasy – the most popular and arguably most influential part of modern fantasy, in fact. Its key terms pay tribute to the continuing usefulness and resilience of John Clute's own grammar, now over two decades old, and Palmer-Patel modifies and augments Clute when needed, especially in her useful "ou-hero" concept. Just as importantly, the book highlights several fantasy writers who deserve greater critical attention than they have previously received, and Palmer-Patel's own admiration for HEF shines through in her analysis. While *The Shape of Fantasy* might not advance the most important theoretical debates over genre fantasy, Palmer-Patel has nevertheless given us a necessary and incredibly detailed gateway into a vast body of fantasy that has unfortunately seen too little academic respect.

Biography: Dennis Wilson Wise is a lecturer for the University of Arizona interested in the relationship between political theory and fantasy literature. Previous academic work has appeared in *Tolkien Studies*, *Law & Literature, Extrapolation*, and *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, plus others, and he has recently earned an R. D. Mullen Postdoctoral Research Fellowship from *Science Fiction Studies*. Wise also serves as the reviews editor for *Fafnir*.