A review of

Stories about Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth

Tom Shippey

Rather more than twenty years ago, Brian Attebery's *Strategies of Fantasy* filled a considerable gap in the critical scene. At that time, one might say, there were people (like this reviewer) who knew a good deal about fantasy, but not much about changing fashions in literary criticism. Conversely, there were critics who were beginning to take notice of fantasy – which had already established a dominant position in popular culture – but had only sampled it, often without much enthusiasm. Attebery's intention was to find a theoretical base for fantasy criticism, and he made a number of very telling points, both historically and theoretically.

Among them was the claim that there are two poles of fiction, mimetic and fantastic. Obviously, any story or novel will have an element of both, an element of observed fact, an element of invented fiction: but critical tradition (Attebery cited Erich Auerbach's famous *Mimesis*) has often operated as if only one pole was respectable, adult, worthy of being called 'literature'. Many angry denunciations of Tolkien in particular have been based on that unconsidered prejudice. Attebery considered the critiques on fantasy written by Rosemary Jackson, Christine Brooke-Rose, and Fredric Jameson, noting of the first two that they 'seem incapable of paying close attention to the text',[1] and of the third that his Marxist orientation prevents any close engagement with Tolkien in particular, 'for the external world examined by *Lord of the Rings* is not fundamentally the economic and political one which Marxism posits'.[2] Attebery summed up well, if regretfully, by saying that what such criticism showed was that fantasy literature was still outside the power-structure of the modern academy – in which he was perfectly correct. (This reviewer can confess that he did not take the plunge of writing a book about Tolkien until he was a full professor with a Chair and his own department: for a junior lecturer to write such a book might well have been, in the 1980s, professional suicide. Even then that first book, *The Road to Middle-earth*, was shielded by its commitment to comparative philology, a discipline notoriously independent of or hostile to literary criticism.)

What, then, was the way forward? Attebery further argued that even writers like Tolkien were not completely outside the spirit of the age. Tolkien could be seen as in some ways a Modernist, but his Modernism was not that of (for instance) Edmund Wilson, which Attebery described with his usual highly quotable turn of phrase as 'scientific realism fused with the surrealistic language of the French symbol' or 'essentially mimetic reporting striving to turn into lyric poetry'.[3] Nevertheless there really could be very little doubt that Tolkien, like many other authors of fantasy, was reacting to events of his own century – and, many would say, with more awareness of them than the sheltered classes of Bloomsbury or the Ivy League could ever rise to.

So why did critics persist in rating (to leave fantasy out of it for the moment) E.M. Forster or D.H. Lawrence much higher than far more popular authors like Dickens or Scott? Attebery suggested that critical orthodoxy preferred the covert conventions of the novel to the explicit conventions of romance. What needed to be shown was that such conventions could be varied, exploited, used to produce original effects – for instance, and here Attebery discussed successively E.E. Nesbit, Diana Wynne Jones, and T.H. White, the 'magical disruption of time sequence'.[4] When it came to the delineation of individual character, so often held up as the main achievement and *raison d'être* of the realistic novel, Attebery noted Ursula Le Guin's trenchant rebuttal of Virginia Woolf's essay on Mrs Brown, and suggested that we needed to accept a wider definition of character: for in mimetic fiction characters may be described as *acteurs*, in fantasy as *actants*, figures who are there to do rather than to be or to perceive, drawing much of their power (as Le Guin indicated) from their relationship to archetypes possibly hardwired into human consciousness. Attebery drew out very well the way in which Alan Garner's characters changed, from the relatively mimetic figures of *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* to the teenagers of *The Owl Service* – still highly mimetic, indeed painfully mimetic in their presentation of differences of class and wealth, but at the same time connected to, even re-enacting the mythic figures of *The Mabinogion*.

It seems to be at that point that Attebery's new book picks up the thread. His subtitle is 'Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth', and his title suggests that fantasy is in a way a second-order phenomenon, based on something which, to tell the truth, is no longer there. It is not that myths are not available to us: bookstores are full of guides to Norse, Classical, Celtic and other mythologies, collectors have been busy now for centuries recording oral traditions: but we have changed. It is hard for most of us now to enter into the state of belief which (we presume) was there for those who created the mythologies we study, and which fantasy authors increasingly draw on.

Or is it? Attebery illustrates his points with personal anecdotes, and he needs to, because the whole area is one of uncertainty. On the one hand, he points out, having

lived near a Native American reservation for the Bannock and Shoshone tribes, he is well aware of their stories about the spirits known as 'Water Babies'. But to him these are only remnants. Other people in the area know them too, but Attebery observes that they are often adapted to what we would call 'urban myths' or 'parked teenager' stories. Putting it another, useful, way, the 'fabulate' (the old legendary element) becomes fused with the 'memorate'. We all know memorates, personal accounts of some allegedly first-hand contact with the supernatural – in my case, thinking back, the poltergeist that stroked my wife's friend's hair, the disabled boy-suicide who reappeared as a ghost to a relative, and the very convincing and well-supported ghost-story set in an internment camp on the Isle of Man, told to me by the friend of a cousin. Memorates are perhaps as close to belief as most of us can get, but they are scattered, inexplicable, not part of a consistent belief-structure – and that is Attebery's definition of myth, a story which 'encapsulates a world-view and authorises belief'(2).

So we are outside the world of myth. It died, you might say, when people started to study it. (I'd add that a powerful boost to fantasy authors often comes from brooding on the scholarship of myth. One of Attebery's startling reminders is that Hope Mirrlees, author of the fantasy classic *Lud-in-the Mist*, was the lifelong companion of Jane Harrison, the great theorist of Classical myth, whose theory was prominent, if rejected, in the structure of clashing theories which animates C.S. Lewis's *Till We Have Faces*.)

But who are 'we'? That proud pronoun, which in critical discourse, as Tolkien once remarked, takes in all intelligent and educated people and shuts out the rest. In another anecdote, Attebery describes having trouble with his car, struggling at high altitude. A passerby stopped and suggested, maybe the car was possessed. Had he tried exorcism? It was a reminder to Attebery that what Kathryn Hume called 'consensus reality', which is always challenged by fantasy, may not have quite as much of a consensus as is thought by the inhabitants of the academy. There are plenty of people who believe in angels and demons. They are the ones, Attebery notes in one of his between-chapter 'Interludes', who burn Harry Potter books for preaching witchcraft. (Another personal anecdote: this reviewer, being interviewed on a talk-programme for a right-wing radio channel in Midwestern USA, took a call from someone who was advocating just that response to J.K. Rowling. I had got as far as saying "Sir, are you telling me you really believe in the existence of …" when the microphone was cut off, and I was replaced by cheerful canned music.) So there is more than one 'consensus reality', even if one fears that in the modern world some of them are personal philosophies constructed out of the broken fragments of old belief or, as Kurt Vonnegut more sadly put it, 'from things she found in gift shops'.[5]

Either way, whether one mixes fabulates with memorates, or constructs a new belief system from bits and pieces, there is a sense of loss. Is fantasy there to replace

that loss? Attebery notes T.S. Eliot's often-quoted 1923 review of *Ulysses*, in which he proclaimed the coming of 'mythical method' to replace 'narrative method', something which he himself aimed at and even achieved in his Grail-legend-derivative *The Waste Land*. Its novelistic counterpart, Attebery suggests, is Charles Williams's *War in Heaven* – also a Grail-story, with at its core the figure of Sir Giles Tumulty, scholar, folklorist and black magician, intent on using his occult knowledge for power. Both the novel and the poem use the remains of myth to help us 'cope with modernity … [M]yth offers a structure whereas history appears to offer only struggle and accident' (52). It also validates what Joyce called 'epiphanies', Tolkien 'eucatastrophe'. And, now detached from official belief, it introduces an element of personal play.

Fantasy as backlash against the modern world? This is tantamount to calling it a 'reactionary' genre, as many would. But the whole idea of 'reaction' depends on the assumption that one knows which way progress is going, as Marxist writers like Jameson, and also Raymond Williams, thought they did. Attebery picks up Williams's notion of three stages of culture, 'dominant, residual, and emergent', and notes that one may be quite wrong as to which is which. No-one could have looked more 'residual' than the Inklings in the 1930s, 'a besieged remnant fighting a rearguard action in the pubs and studies of Oxford'. After their record-shattering books and films, and, even more, the way they broke the mould of publishing, they do not look like that now. One might even say that their move from residual to emergent is part of what motivated Attebery to write his book, and others to write theirs. Speaking again from personal experience, the collapse of humanities enrolments across the USA, as arts departments backed their theories about 'emergent' culture only to find the students vanishing, has been a powerful if unwelcome motive for bringing fantasy and science fiction on to the course-listings if not into 'the power-structure of the academy'.

There is a great deal, then, to praise about Brian Attebery's latest. He points out the fruitful but uneasy relationship between fantasy and myth. His chapter on 'The Other Mythic Method' (Eliot and Williams) is an excellent one. He goes on to George MacDonald and Lewis, arguing that MacDonald was the major innovator in the history of modern fantasy. His chapter on 'Romance and Formula, Myth and Memorate' provides many of the examples and ideas discussed above. And in the second half of the book he widens his scope very much to bring in, first, those in the modern world with a different 'consensus reality', like the believers in angels (four categories of them, from Thomist, or Aquinean, to the more frequent 'Hallmarkians', who get their ideas from the iconography of greetings cards); and then the much more vexed question of 'ownership' of myths. Is it right that dominant culture can just take over Native American or Aboriginal Australian myths, and make stories out of them? Is it disrespectful, even colonialist? Chapters on 'The Postcolonial Fantastic' and 'Situated

Fantasy' bring in many relatively unfamiliar authors, and consider, once more, what one might call the problem of second-order belief.

A further virtue in Attebery's work is what one might call his 'jackdaw' quality, though the jackdaw is really this reviewer, who found himself frequently seizing on a new idea, a new phrase foregrounded by Attebery: memorates, yes, three categories of culture, 'psychonarration' as a mark of the realistic novel and the need for 'viewpoint characters' in fantasy novels, all valuable ideas concisely expressed. Some of these immediately recognisable concepts, however, make one wonder whether there is not, after all, a case against fantasy, which its critical enemies could make if they were prepared to do the reading, and of which fantasy fans are at least jocularly aware.

Take the idea of 'extruded fantasy product' – the Dark Lord stories which seem to roll off the assembly line like so many links of sausage, to be consumed and replaced, one fears, in the same spirit. How many of these are – another useful phrase from fan culture, borrowed by Attebery – 'Mary-Sues'? A 'Mary-Sue' is a work in which 'an idealized version of the author is inserted into an existent science fictional [or fantastic] world' (108): Mary-Sue on the bridge of Starship Enterprise, or (and here I am adding my own examples to that of Attebery) the heroine, obviously a nice well-brought-up Midwest girl, who finds that she is really the queen of some imagined country and goes about turning it into a more glamorous version of suburban America. Part of the success of 'Game of Thrones', I'd suggest, is that it has never had a trace of the Mary-Sue in it. Harry Potter finds that he is really not a nobody but a celebrity, which is what Mary-Sues yearn for, true, but as we all know, the world in which he is a celebrity immediately took on a life of its own. At the end of the Harry Potter cycle, one might feel that the 'deathly hallows' have started to look like what Attebery calls 'plot coupons' – things you have to collect to keep the story going until it reaches finality – but the verve of the writing and (as with Garner) the surprisingly mimetic teenage quality prevent a sag into formula.

Still, as Attebery says, fantasy and its ancestor romance are formulaic. Where does the power of formula come from, if not from the buried myths, the unconscious archetypes, which perhaps we cannot do without? It's not an attractive idea, but perhaps something could be learned by taking a clutch of 'Mary-Sues', or 'extruded fantasy products', and setting them against Garner, or Tolkien, or Stephen Donaldson, or J.K. Rowling, to see what the difference is. It is not, as I have often heard people lazily say, just, 'oh, they don't know how to *write*'.

To end with another anecdote, the greatest put-down I ever heard, in defence of fantasy and against the expectations of conventional literary criticism, was made by Ursula Le Guin (whose latest novel *Lavinia* is discussed by Attebery near the end of this new book). On a talk-show radio programme in the USA once again, I found myself connected by phone with Ms Le Guin and a rent-a-critic from an English

department whose name I forget. The talk-show host invited the latter to say what he thought about Tolkien, and got the predictable splutter (see Attebery on Jackson and Brooke-Rose in paragraph two above), 'oh, he just can't write, he can't write *sentences*'. After this had gone on for a while, the host turned to Le Guin and asked her if she would like to debate that. She replied, with immense *hauteur*, 'Oh no. You cannot debate with *incapacity*.'

There has been too much incapacity in literary criticism over the last fifty years, which is one reason why the students are not enrolling any more. Only one third of those with American PhDs in literature will find a teaching post even in the 4,000+ colleges and universities of America. Critics like Attebery give some hope of reversing that trend. I do not agree with him when he writes of 'a general awareness of the constructedness and contingency of all cultural narratives, including myth' (169), for there is an often explicit sense in science fiction, fantasy's modern twin, that some things are not contingent at all (like 'the cold equations' or, in another famous story, the table of the elements): criticism has been unable to cope with that challenge to its comfortable consensus. But such issues can be debated, and such debates are necessary and revealing ones. *Stories about Stories* digs deep into the heart of mythopoesis, and the imaginative literature of our age.

Author: Brian Attebery.
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References

1. Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Indiana University Press, 1992), 27.
2. Ibid., 31.
3. Ibid., 38.
4. Ibid., 56.
5. Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, ch.2, writing of Billy Pilgrim's mother.