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THE SHAPE OF FANTASY: INVESTIGATING THE STRUCTURE OF AMERICAN HEROIC EPIC FANTASY (2020) BY C. PALMER-PATEL

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Palmer-Patel, C. *The Shape of Fantasy: Investigating the Structure of American Heroic Epic Fantasy*. Routledge, 2020, 188 pp.

C. Palmer-Patel's thesis is neatly summed up in her concluding chapter: "Heroic Epic Fantasy is logical and contains real-world scientific and philosophical ideas which are embedded directly into its narrative structure" (179). What supports this thesis is a heady and challenging mix of scientific theories (about paradox, entropy, chaos, and other topics) and philosophical, literary, mythic, religious, and cultural concepts, all applied to a selected group of Fantasy novels published in the United States between 1990 and 2009 (the actual works discussed range far wider than those highlighted in the table of contents including, for example, J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) and N. K. Jemisin's *The Stone Sky* (2017)).

Why this particular term – Heroic Epic Fantasy – and what gives this genre its perennial appeal? Palmer-Patel elucidates this in her introductory chapter: "the Epic is a journey which results in fulfilling a world destiny; the Heroic journey is one where the hero achieves spiritual transcendence; and the Heroic Epic is where the two meet" (7). In the Heroic Epic, "the hero realises a messianic duty via a journey [...] which results in a spiritual transcendence [...] along with the salvation of the world" (6). The Epic Hero's destiny is self-sacrifice in order to restore the balance of the world. Their messianic mission combines their willing submission to death for the good of the community with their own more personal ascension to a state of higher consciousness or divinity; in fact, each element depends on willing consent to the other. This is the stuff of myth and the human psyche is practically hard-wired to respond to these stories; in fact, in Palmer-Patel's analysis, and as Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung might well agree, it is very nearly a law of nature that so many of our most enduring myths and stories fall into this pattern.

Palmer-Patel's insistence on Fantasy's logic, rationality, and adherence at story-level with scientific laws (4-5) echoes Tolkien's championing of the same concepts in "On Fairy-Stories" (1939), when he asserted that Fantasy "does not destroy or even insult Reason" and "neither blunt[s] the appetite for, nor obscure[s] the perception of, scientific verity. [...] The keener and clearer is the reason, the better fantasy it will make" and the better it will exhibit "the inner consistency of reality" (65, 59). The same applies at the meta-level of story as at the mundane level of setting; a clear understanding of the Epic Hero's path and purpose and their variations gives the writer great freedom within a timeless structure to tell a meaningful story.

Each chapter explores a central concept with the aid of one particular textual example. Taken in order, the chapters build logically from a relatively straightforward interpretation of Palmer Patel's thesis through variations and complications on the theme. The first half of the book focuses on character, and in these tales the hero must "begin the journey as a naïve character, the tarot Fool" (26). The interaction of fate, prophecy, destiny, and free will are investigated in the first chapter with the aid of one of my own favourite books, Lois McMaster Bujold's *The Curse of Chalion* (2001) and Bujold's Five Gods universe more generally; the Heroic Epic protagonist is shown to absolutely require the action of free will, an assertion bolstered by reference to classical Stoic philosophy. Chapter Two moves on to choice and paradox with Mercedes Lackey's *The Fairy Godmother* (2004). Chapter Three deals with the recursive and with the mutual influence of hero and story; Robert Jordan's *The Great Hunt* (1990) is the text here. The fourth chapter introduces the useful concept of the ou-hero: "the protagonist or antagonistic that demonstrates the potential to be a hero but fails to actualize the role," who makes inappropriate choices like refusing the call to adventure (67, original emphasis); this chapter uses David Farland's *The Wyrmling Horde* (2008). The ou-hero might be a precursor to the hero, or an antagonist, or, as in the case of Ursula K. Le Guin's Ged in the *Earthsea* books, one's own Shadow. This particular concept repays careful attention; I look forward to comparing it to a colleague's current project on the villain's journey. The final chapter in the character section focuses in closely on the hero's willing and messianic confrontation with death, using Gail Z. Martin's *The Summoner* (2007).

The second half of the book deals with a series of ways in which plots can be constructed in the Heroic Epic universe; each chapter builds on the previous in a satisfying progression. Chapter Six considers increasing entropy as a precipitating motif, using Terry Goodkind's *Stone of Tears* (1995). James Clemens's *Shadowfall* (2006) is the focalising text for Chapter Seven, in which Palmer Patel contends that "the hero's role is to reverse the system of entropy, restoring the balance, while simultaneously re-establishing a closed system" (15). In Chapter Eight, the issue is heroically and deliberately rebelling *against* a closed system or stagnant equilibrium; the utopia/anti-utopia cycle in Brandon Sanderson's *Hero of Ages* (2008) provides the illustration. And in Chapter Nine, the broader meta-cycles of long-running Fantasy series are shown to reinforce these themes at each fractal level. David and Leigh Eddings' *The Seeress of Kell* (1991) is a fitting source to use, but it would be fascinating to apply these insights about "recursive symmetries between scale levels" to a long-running Science Fiction or Fantasy television series with strong season- or series-long storytelling arcs (Hayles, quoted 164). The conclusion ties all this together with a discussion of Anne McCaffrey's *All the Weyrs of Pern* (1991) and the permeable borders between Science Fiction and Fantasy.

As useful and interesting as all this is, what really makes this book stand out is the scaffolding of scientific and philosophic theory used to support and explain these concepts, going well beyond the highly competent and concise but expected summary of definitions and theories of Fantasy (Brian Attebery, John Clute, Darko Suvin, Tzvetan Todorov, and so on) that leads off the book. Stephen Hawking's explications of quantum time form a basis for a discussion of choice and forking paths and his discussions of entropy undergird the chapters on fighting entropy and breaking

stagnation. The “strange attractor” of James Gleick’s work on chaos makes sense of how a hero both influences and is influenced by events. The chapter on the ou-hero uses the Zen concept of balance to problematise right/wrong binaries and choices, settling instead on the *appropriateness* of the hero’s choices to the balance of their world. I found particularly compelling how, in unifying Richard Mathews’ vertical and horizontal hero types in the person of the messianic hero, Palmer-Patel draws on Aristotle’s *Poetics* and Northrup Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), and then later goes on to apply Frye, Joseph Campbell, Sir James George Frazer, and M. M. Bakhtin to the mythic death and transcendence of the epic hero.

While Palmer-Patel relates this model to Fantasy and the sort of Science Fiction that veers towards Fantasy, it might also profitably be applied to works in any genre or medium that are redolent of the mythic and feature a call to heroic self-sacrifice. I think there would be very interesting resonances to be discovered between this book and John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett’s *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002), which re-examines Campbell’s hero-journey in its peculiarly American expression in the Western movie and other genres.

In “uncovering its mechanics,” Palmer-Patel reminds us, “a reader may gain further pleasure in the text” (175). Indeed, I look forward to reading the next Heroic Epic Fantasy on my to-be-read pile with this book close to hand. And I am particularly eager to engage with the sections of Chapter Three on recursion, repetition, and layering in my own research.

The book is marred slightly by poor proofreading, as so many academic books are currently in this age of cutting staff and production costs. Recommended for Science Fiction, Fantasy, and mythology library collections and scholars in particular; the hardback price puts it somewhat out of individual reach, but a Kindle edition is available, and a paperback edition was released this summer.

WORKS CITED

Tolkien, J. R. R. “On Fairy-Stories.” *Tolkien on Fairy-Stories*, edited by Douglas A. Anderson and Verlyn Flieger, HarperCollins, 2008, pp. 27-84.

BIONOTE

Janet Brennan Croft is Associate University Librarian at the University of Northern Iowa, USA. She is the author of *War in the Works of J. R. R. Tolkien* (Praeger, 2004). She has also written on Terry Pratchett, Lois McMaster Bujold, Joss Whedon, and other authors, TV shows, and movies, and is editor or co-editor of many collections of literary essays; forthcoming in 2021 from Mythopoeic Press is *Loresmasters and Libraries in Fantasy and Science Fiction: A Gedenkschrift for David Oberhelman*, co-edited with Jason Fisher. She edits the refereed scholarly journal *Mythlore* and is Chair of the Mythopoeic Society for 2021.