

**Cogwheels of the fantastic: The mechanisms of medieval fantasy**

by

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The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this dissertation. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

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**DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, who were both pleased as peaches to hear that I found my passion in life and chose to pursue it at the graduate level. Hopefully this thesis makes them proud.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis critically analyzes the fundamental mechanics of the medieval fantasy genre, including its relationship with violence, environment, worldbuilding, and power dynamics. This thesis aims to help establish the start of a lexicon of shared terminology and fantasy novum to better facilitate criticism of medieval fantasy as a distinct genre. Fantasy, Tolkien, and science fiction scholars, amongst others, feature in this thesis to elucidate the current scholarly conversations surrounding fantasy. Said authors also help to illustrate the two primary, fundamental forces of medieval fantasy that this thesis posits are key to understanding the genre for the sake of further critical analysis and improvement of the craft. The two terms are of the authors' own creation: Culture and Commerce. Both terms are defined and explored in depth in this work. This thesis, furthermore, demonstrates Culture and Commerce in action by integrating a narrative structure to demonstrate how medieval fantasy writers in the past have used Culture and Commerce and how today's writers may use an understanding of those fundamental fantasy forces to evolve their craft.

## CHAPTER 1 THE APPROACH

Oh! Hello! No, no, this is the right place— provided you looked at the title of this work and thought it'd be something you'd enjoy. You can take a seat, if you wish. It's a beautiful spring day out: cool winds, warm sun, and an air of new life. Let's have a chat about fantasy, medieval fantasy. I invite you to come with me on a journey into the heart of medieval fantasy literature. Whether you are a writer or reader of fantasy, or if your forte is literary fiction or anything betwixt, I am confident we can reach new revelations about where and how medieval fantasy fits into the wider literary canon together. But, why spend our time with this genre at all?

Frankly, I believe the answer is a straightforward one. If we wish to study literature, we should only disregard works because of their quality, not their genre. Unfortunately, quality and genre, when it comes to speculative fiction, are often conflated. Now, if I may interrupt myself for a moment, I believe our ride is here: a medieval (meaning, no suspension system!) horse-drawn carriage. I don't believe that we can discuss a genre so in love with adventure, and so in-need of rigorous scholarly critique, if we are afraid to do some field work to study it firsthand. So, please watch your step as you head up into the carriage.

The light coming through these old, dusty windows is a sunny kind of gold, I always thought. No, they're not neglected, I just left them dirty like that. It gives a sense of history, I think. Oh— that jolt beneath us must mean we're on our way. No driver required. The horses know the way.

The road's rocky beneath us, as I'm sure you can already tell. Talking about medieval fantasy in a scholarly way is hardly ever smooth. Medieval fantasy, or just M. fantasy, is most often discussed by passionate fans in informal settings like forums or conventions.

Academia, meanwhile, keeps M. fantasy at arm's-length. In response, the genre has allowed itself to be walled in and become insular. We're heading, right now, towards the imposing city-state of medieval fantasy. Complete with high walls, mighty gates, and a self-sufficient economy, M. fantasy has been living comfortably while sequestered away from the rest of the literary world.

Lucie Armitt, in her book, *Fantasy Fiction, An Introduction*, paints a pessimistic picture of the wider literary world's perception of fantasy: "Summed up with the dismissive phrase 'castles in the air,' fantasy takes on a kind of verbal trajectory that must be flattened, smoothed out... we are encouraged, in life, to keep our feet on the ground..." (Armitt 1). Though the scholars actively talking about fantasy as a genre are rare enough, and those talking about M. fantasy even rarer, I believe that my own observations can break new ground for fantasy criticism. For instance, Armitt provides a nigh-exhaustive list about what fantasy includes: "Utopia, allegory, fable, myth, science fiction, the ghost story, space opera, travelogue, the Gothic, cyberpunk, magical realism..." (Armitt 1). I take issue with Armitt's inclusion of genres such as cyberpunk, space operas, and the supernatural. To cram fantasy in with so many other genres is to bury the unique elements of M. fantasy in an unnecessarily reductive way. Fantasy already has its own unique offshoots that should be studied as such. Furthermore, Armitt takes a stand against scholarship's attempts to break down and compartmentalize fantasy. She writes that, "the criticism written on fantasy has fallen short, categorizing, classifying, compartmentalizing literature into division and subdivision..." (Armitt 193). This piece of mine, however, seeks to do exactly what Armitt takes umbrage with. I hope to perform an autopsy on medieval fantasy to explore and categorize its inner mechanisms. I will demonstrate how the genre is unique amongst its literary colleagues

whilst also showing where and how the genre has fallen to a low state in academia's eyes. In all, I hope to suggest how M. fantasy can rise above and break out of its high, insular walls in order to bring its unique gifts to the wider literary world.

I fear that the forms of media in which M. fantasy most famously appears in today has not helped its blemished image. Wildly-popular videogames such as *The Elder Scrolls* and *World of Warcraft*, as well as television series like *Game of Thrones*, and the omnipresently-popular *Dungeons and Dragons* saturate everyday culture with swords, elves, and adventure. And yet, the health and reach of these works send a clear message that medieval fantasy is not going to simply vanish from the literary canon. Therefore, our only recourse is to accept its presence and study it deeply, ruthlessly.

My goals for this thesis are simple; I wish to do my part in creating a shared lexicon of terms and fundamental forces unique to the medieval fantasy genre to better facilitate future scholarship's discussion of the genre, as well as giving M. fantasy writers one lens, one of many possible ones, to examine the inner mechanisms of their own prose with. As for the outcome I desire, I wish for the medieval fantasy genre to be at its very best. Whatever grander philosophical or literary significance within medieval fantasy, I will largely leave to greater literary theorists to discuss. I aim to begin a serious conversation of reflection and refinement, hence why you and I are sitting here now, rattling towards the city-state of M. fantasy<sup>1</sup> and why I invite you to follow me on this adventurous autopsy.

To this end, I hope to offer critique and analysis which will lead to my fellow medieval fantasy writers in cultivating the unique elements of the genre, so as not to lose its

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<sup>1</sup> The physical manifestation of M. fantasy as a city meant to contain all that the genre is and can be, is meant to be demonstrative, a discussion-starter. I do not intend any greater metaphorical, nor allegorical, meaning in the city's creation or exploration.



literary identity. Consequently, this step will open the door for more readers and theorists otherwise off-put by the genre to examine it critically and scholarly. From there, medieval fantasy can achieve its own speculative fiction apotheosis, becoming accepted and respected in the eyes of scholars who have no vested interest or specialization in the genre.

To help facilitate this investigation, I will be invoking a number of voices from fantasy's literary theory community: Rosemary Jackson, Millicent Lenz, and Brian Attebery, to name a few. Alongside those voices, I'll be hoisting J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy up as a shining example of M. fantasy which preserves the unique elements of M. fantasy and utilizes them extremely well. Works from Brandon Sanderson, George R. R. Martin, and Brian McClellan will also be examined to see how they succeed and stumble. I choose to focus on those authors due to their popularity, success, and critical acclaim in the medieval fantasy genre. Finally, I will be invoking some of my own M. fantasy work; using my novel *Sound of the Storm*, I will show that what I preach can be practiced—of course, the way I actualize my thoughts on medieval fantasy is meant to be merely demonstrative, not prescriptive. Indeed, demonstrative will be the word of the day for this piece. I wish to offer tools, terms, and analysis; what writers and theorists do with my thesis' content rests entirely within their capable hands.

Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, in my mind, is the only true "classic" the medieval fantasy genre has to its name. The term "classic" is a highly-interpretative one, perhaps unsurprisingly. And yet, Italo Calvino's work, *Why Read the Classics?* offers some valuable insight into the anatomy of a classic. Calvino mentions attributes such as re-readability, an endless depth of meaning and potential interpretation, and a timelessness which, "constantly generates a pulviscular cloud of critical discourse around it" (Calvino 3-

8). In my mind, all of Calvino's attributes are legitimate, but for a work to gather that "pulviscular cloud of critical discourse," there must be serious readers of said work (Calvino 6). Furthermore, the readers must be numerous and willing to engage with the text at a deep, scholarly level. Part of what makes a classic, as Calvino hinted at, is its timelessness. A classic can be read generations after its publication; engagement with the text by scholarship helps a great deal in that respect. Therefore, the most important attribute of a classic, the attribute which precludes all others, is its wide readability, wide enough to reach readers not often affiliated with the work's genre. Furthermore, and this is my own analysis, being considered a "classic" is the result of greatness, not its cause. For medieval fantasy, only *The Lord of the Rings* occupies the gilded throne of a classic as a text which has both attracted critique and analysis while being notable for its literary quality.

As we look at the mechanisms running medieval fantasy, Tolkien's trilogy will serve as our north star. We will see how Tolkien's work artfully utilizes the essential M. fantasy mechanisms which I very soon will be unveiling. But, first, some grounding in the history of fantasy criticism will help place this thesis in the continuum of said criticism.

David Sandner, writing in the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* in the winter of 2006, explores what he calls the Six Stages of Fantasy Criticism. Sandner writes that fantasy criticism is in its Sixth Stage and that fantasy criticism emerged, "as a coherent discourse starting in the 1970s... The emergence of a coherent critical dialogue coincides, not incidentally, with the increased production of fantasy genre literature itself" (Page 21). Sandner partially credits Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, and the counterculture of the American and British 1960's which embraced it, as the genesis of this academic criticism of fantasy. In that, Sandner and I are in agreement. Tolkien's position as the M. fantasy gold

standard cannot be overstated when critically examining the genre today. However, the surge of interest in medieval fantasy that Tolkien's work created led to, by Sandner's observation, "room for good work that would have been unmarketable before and... the production of vast quantities of formulaic hackwork that still sells well, thus generating more attention, both good and bad..." (Page 21) Sandner's choice of "hackwork" is particularly telling here. The M. fantasy works which followed in Tolkien's footsteps, and I believe reverberations from Tolkien's works are still felt in today's M. fantasy, both embraced and snubbed elements of Tolkien's genius. Cathartic violence and castles came to replace measured, nuanced conflict and a deep, personal sense of place. Such is the state we find the genre in today: unwilling to draw inspiration from Tolkien's more subtle mastery of M. fantasy elements while drawing liberally from the now-stereotypical elements of the genre like monsters, castles, and swordplay.

Sandner finalizes his article, and its points, by saying, "As the critical discourse approaches the present, the amount of work produced expands exponentially, and it becomes difficult to say with any certainty how best to characterize current interests..." (Sandner 22) Afterwards, Sandner cites fantasy critics like Brian Attebery and Rosemary Jackson, well-known names in a genre starved of the robust scholarly interest of its bigger sibling, science fiction. To boot, Sandner even explores the role science fiction had in the splitting of the speculative genres after science fiction criticism began to emerge under the guidance of Damon Knight in the 1950's. While one genre marched on into the future, finding both critical and commercial success, fantasy must now evolve to what Sandner may acknowledge as a Seventh Stage of fantasy criticism.

Without the critiques and scrutiny of scholars, however, M. fantasy has become extremely insular, appealing to itself and its natives<sup>2</sup>. In his book, *Fantasy in Literature*, John Aquino states that, “Fantasy literature endures, although its position before the public, and consequently in education, has been erratic” (Aquino 8). And endure it does. Fantasy, particularly medieval fantasy, has been thriving over the past few decades. However, we can’t ignore Aquino’s point on the position of fantasy in the wider literary community: its perception to readers who have no history nor preexisting scholarly interest in the genre, is oftentimes extremely rocky. Brian Attebery continues by writing, “when applied to fiction, ‘genre’ can become a negative term... formulaic chaff from the literary wheat... indicate blindness to the conventionality of their favored forms...” (Attebery 32). Unfortunately, Attebery is frightfully correct when it comes to how medieval fantasy, the same as any other genre, can fall victim to its “conventionality” and “favored forms.” In fact, I believe M. fantasy is particularly-afflicted, owing in no small part to its insularity and tight community of genre-loyal readers.

To look at the literary niche which fantasy fulfills, we can continue working with Attebery’s book. He posits that “... if realistic fiction is primarily metonymic, fantasy is inescapably metaphorical; because the presence of the impossible blocks a literal reading, we are invited to look at Fred and his world as some sort of iconic stand-in for everyday life, rather than as an extension from it” (Attebery 21). While I cannot, and should not, dissuade any literary theorists or readers from interpreting whatever they’d like with regards to fantasy, I fear for the damage that such a stance would have on the independence of the fantasy genre. I that medieval fantasy should be its best self, while not losing what gives it its

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<sup>2</sup> Hence the walls around the city-state keeping the native people in and outsiders out.

individuality. So, I argue against the mindset that fantasy must ‘*mean something*.’ Fantasy should be allowed to be fantasy. After all, Tolkien himself was vitriolically against critics seeing his work as allegories (Carpenter 99). Medieval fantasy should not have to define itself through allegory and metaphor in order to be taken seriously scholarly. Taken alongside Armitt’s earlier meditation on what genres can be considered “fantasy,” I worry that without some sort of shared critical lexicon for this genre, fantasy, to say nothing of medieval fantasy, may lose its individuality a depth as scholarship pulls its identity in a dozen ways.

Millicent Lenz, in her book, *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Literature*, takes up a similar concern with this distillation of fantasy into something subservient to, rather than inspired by, reality and/or literary fiction. “Adult criticism,” she writes, “tends to resist [leaving “childishness” behind in literature]: invented worlds cannot be ‘merely’ places of wonder or delight: they must mean something else, morally, rather than inevitably, if they are to be interesting or valuable...” (Lenz 5). It’s a distressing thought, that an entire genre can be brushed off as ‘merely’ being a creation of imagination. Lenz continues, throughout her work, to show the conflation of children’s literature with fantasy, which “...winds back to the relatively low cultural status of fantasy for adults...” (Lenz 5). I fear, not unreasonably, that there are literary theorists who would gladly continue to disregard medieval fantasy (and perhaps even fantasy fiction in general) as “chaff.” So, I feel it prudent for this thesis to lay out what I believe the literary community will lose so long as it continues to shunt the genre.

The well-known fantasy critic Rosemary Jackson, in her book *Fantasy The Literature of Subversion*, states, “Fantasy’s role in alienation, estrangement, and making us confront the ‘real’ in ‘unreal’ ways” (Jackson 26). Whether or not a piece of fantasy is intending to work as allegory or metaphor, I think is irrelevant when examining what Jackson is saying here. I

believe Jackson is advocating that, regardless of how alien a fantasy world or scenario is, by giving proper weight to fundamental storytelling elements, fantasy allows a reader to detach themselves from the real world while still reading about real-world issues.

Unfortunately, at this point in the genre's life, few readers are *afraid* of fantasy. Think of a Shakespearian jester; he speaks truths to the powerful, but because he is a figure of entertainment and merriment, a great king or queen is unlikely to be offended by his truth-saying. Sometimes, these insights are Feste-like in that truth is spoken, heard, and summarily ignored. As such, narratives critiquing war, politics, religion, fanaticism, nationalism, mass hysteria, can slide under the radar when positioned in fantasy worlds with fantastical people. Brian Attebery, in his book *Stories About Stories* agrees that, "... Like a jester in a Shakespeare play, [fantasy] is free to speak forbidden truths because no one pays it any mind" (Attebery 21). Ideally, once academic scholarship comes to acknowledge M. fantasy as a literarily-significant genre, these subversive, jester-like critiques will not be the only method the genre possess to wrestle with real-world issues and bridge fantasy to reality.

On the subject of bridges, here I will finally arrive at the two fundamental elements which will compose the bedrock of our journey through the genre, are Culture and Commerce. These two terms are of my own creation, though I constructed them to function as common labels for essential mechanics which are largely-unique to M. fantasy. In a similar vein to how concepts such as gravity, temperature, and weight had to be standardized and labeled before the field of physics could be born, I hope that Culture and Commerce can help give critical theory on M. fantasy some bedrock to rest upon.

I think of Culture and Commerce functioning in M. fantasy like two different kinds of gears or cogwheels which compose the basic anatomy of a piece's machinery. Balance

between Culture and Commerce results in a lucidity and completeness in the secondary worlds<sup>3</sup> and characters of medieval fantasy. This lucidity is paramount in the search for medieval fantasy's place in the wider literary world. As previously-mentioned, elements such as the secondary worlds and systems of magic are unique to this genre. If these elements can be broken down, examined, compartmentalized, and appraised, medieval fantasy can deeply examine its own flaws and greatness, both potential and already-realized. Thus, the genre can then reach outside of its insular borders and involve the more scholarly, otherwise-skeptical, readers necessary for it to be critiqued at a higher literary level.

*Culture* is the currency of a society; it is the religion, laws, norms, mores, codes, creeds, and history which compose the many unconscious, often-unspoken rules of an M. fantasy secondary world.

*Commerce* is the application of those rules; it is the system of transactions between individuals and their Culture. A person can exchange personal freedom for societal security, lust for honor via temperance, and personal safety for praise via self-sacrifice.

Culture informs what kind of Commerce a character should or will engage in. In a Culture where obedience is exalted, for instance, the character will need to balance their personal desires with adhering to Cultural expectations. However, Commerce also informs Culture. A land in which fish is a primary source of food may result in the nickname "minnow" rising in popularity when describing adolescents in the area, for instance.

To distill these terms into a straightforward metaphor: Culture describes the stage, backdrop, and props of a play; Commerce describes the actors and scripts. The former constructs the bedrock upon which the action of the story takes place. The latter constructs

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<sup>3</sup> A term of Tolkien's to denote a fantastical or "faerie" world.

the moving pieces that interact with and stand atop the bedrock. All M. fantasy works, due to their shared genes of worldbuilding and character power dynamics (all of which will be subjects of attention in our adventure), can be broken down, for the sake of analysis and examination, into Commerce and Culture. I think of Commerce and Culture like a kind of genre binary: 0's and 1's. At its core, M. fantasy relies extensively on a balance between Commerce and Culture to be considered not only good fantasy, but good literature. Tolkien's work will demonstrate this balance quite capably. Unbalance in Commerce and Culture, unfortunately, typifies the state of the M. fantasy genre.

Over-reliance on Commerce results in a narrative that heavily favors action (both violent and non-violent) and motion while paying very little attention to the backdrop of the wider world or to characters who do not specialize in violence or action. This imbalance can look like a work that features a small band of heroes and their adventures to "save the world," even though what exactly constitutes "the world" is foggy, undetailed, or simply incomplete. Similarly, focus will rest entirely on these heroes and their larger-than-life quests while ignoring the smaller, less-heroic characters on the peripheries. Currently, M. fantasy is over-saturated with these Commerce-heavy works. Heroes, and their actions, take the forefront to such a degree that the Culture backdrop has largely faded or lost its resolution like a downsized digital image.

Alongside Culture and Commerce, a handful of other vital lenses will be utilized as we example how M. fantasy can improve itself to reach that apotheosis it desperately deserves as a genre worth scholarly investigation because of its yet-untapped potential.

We will, shortly after slipping through the city's walls, be examining how the portrayal of violence, and its effect on the minds and actions of medieval fantasy characters,



can create connections and disconnections between characters and readers. Violence portrayed unrealistically, without due psychological weight, can give the impression that M. fantasy is either children's literature or voyeuristic, bloodsoaked fluff. This genre adores violence, lavishing in battles and monster-slaying, so much so that we cannot separate the genre from violence. We will examine how the element of violence is so integral to this genre's identity, as well as how it has been realized well and poorly.

Violence, especially as we follow our Hero, will be a cornerstone to our discussion on the genre. So, before we properly approach the city, let us turn our discussion to *The Lord of the Rings* and how Tolkien drew inspiration from mythological heroes when building his characters. In Jared Lobdell's book on Tolkien's mythological and historical inspiration for his famous works of fantasy, *England and Always*, writes on how Tolkien feverishly pushed back against the forces of disenchantment peddled in academia of his time. Lobdell writes that, "For the Industrial Revolution and the myth of progress that spawned or was spawned by it, there is a counterrevolution and a myth of anti-progress" (Lobdell 87). Tolkien sought to re-mythologize his home country with modern legends, hence his turn to fantasy rooted in Classical and Medieval traditions. Tolkien's utilization of myth in his creation of the M. fantasy gold standard will be felt as reverberations throughout the many heroes of this genre, as we will see.

Lori M. Campbell demonstrates Tolkien's transition from myth to M. fantasy through her book *Portals of Power, Magical Agency and Transformation in Literary Fantasy*. Campbell refers to Tolkien's famous "On Fairy-Stories" speech from 1939. She writes that, as Tolkien discussed stories which use the fantastical elements in their settings, he says that, "These are not... 'stories *about* fairies and elves, but stories about *Faerie*, the realm or state

in which fairies have their being” (Campbell 149). When Tolkien made his work “about *Faerie*,” he brought myth out of the past and into a world of modern literature. This attention to a fantastical world rooted in mythological inspiration resulted in Tolkien’s oft-adored worldbuilding, its aura of history, myth, and general *fantasy-ness* (Campbell 149). Tolkien’s work was doubtlessly inspired by myth, thereby tying all M. fantasy, genealogically, to myth.

Clearly, myth and medieval fantasy are closely related. After all, the European mythological tradition experienced its heyday prior to the Renaissance and the advent of the Age of Reason. The general demythologization of European culture that the Age of Reason and rise of scientific empiricism lead to the now-distinct separation of fantasy and reality; Tolkien, as we have already seen, fought ardently to re-mythologize literature, too. Dean A. Miller, author of *The Epic Hero*, a work we will be referencing often throughout our adventure, has this to say on the status of mythology in today’s literature:

“...our images of heroism and of the hero are inescapably ours, as we form our intelligible thoughtworld, in that part of the historical continuum... Living in [the Age of Reason] commits us to the certainty of a rationally ordered universe, one in which magical powers and events, for instance, are not permitted, or must be subjected to alternative explanations demanded by rationality as unimpeachable. In this new view we must disallow much of the very substance of an older, outmoded heroism: setting aside the superhuman and especially the supernatural tints and taints; the crude interventions of gods and the friendship or, even more grotesque, the imagined kinship of the hero with human-like animals; the encounters with monsters, the magical flights and Otherworld adventures... (Miller 2)

I think, in that one mythic sweep, Miller encapsulates how myth has formed the foundation of modern medieval fantasy, as well as how fantasy had fallen out of favor in the

more orthodox strains of literary scholarship. Tolkien's innovations in fantasy writing with his *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy centered around the revival and integration of forgotten myth into an invented, pre-industrial world.

By invoking pre-Reason mythology, certain archetypes, such as the familiar hero, monster, king, and mentor bleed into modern M. fantasy works. Tolkien held a great love for British mythology. However, he feared that respect for mythology was vanishing. He wrote that, "England must be the most demythologised country in Europe, partly as a result of 1066... partly as a result of the early Industrial Revolution, which led to the extinction of what remained rather before the era of scholarly interest and folk-tale collectors like the Grimms" (Shippey 304). As such, he wished to use mythological inspiration to, "create a mythology for his country, a mythology that his fellow Englishmen would accept and adopt as their own rather than a mere personal mythology" (Fimi 51). Given the prevalence of Tolkienesque inspiration in M. fantasy today, we can accept mythology as a prominent root in the genre's advent.

On this subject of mythological integration, Millicent Lenz's observations about fantasy align with my own. She writes that, "The domain of modern fantasy is related to a long history of myth, legend, folk-tale and wonder tale, not to mention religion and the occult— forms of narrative which many have seen as expressions of, or as being closely related to, deep and universal human drives" (Lenz 8). Befitting Tolkien's position as the medieval fantasy gold standard, his works touch on the fundamental building blocks of fantastical characters, settings, and systems. And we will very soon be seeing these building blocks in action as we begin to investigate the fundamental character archetypes of medieval fantasy.

Beyond violence and myth, we will also be examining, woven throughout our journey, the integration of anthropology and worldbuilding in the genre. Furthermore, we will examine what has been written about fantasy worlds through the lens of anthropological studies for the sake of understanding how a well-realized M. fantasy world (which, as we'll see, is a taller order than most writers would readily believe) can speak to realistic anthropological points while preserving the vital element of secondary worlds. Ideally, given the near-absolute, though not unsurprising, dearth of such criticism, I hope that my own meditations on M. fantasy worldbuilding can fill in some of the scholarship gaps. Finally, I will briefly examine the aspect of the power structures between M. fantasy characters through the lens of Marxism.

You may be happy to know, in case you did not feel the rumbling beneath your feet slow to a stop, that we have arrived outside the walls of M. fantasy's insular state. Here, let me get the door for you. And there it is. Quite something, isn't it? Some of the spires, in all their haunting beauty, can be seen from where we stand, grasping at the sky from behind those dark walls. And there are battle scars, wounds against the stone and the field where we now stand, which tell of M. fantasy's besieged past.

We are going to slip inside of those high walls in order to see, before us and in motion, what M. fantasy looks like as it engages with Culture and Commerce. For the sake of our autopsy, as well as creating a foundational bedrock for M. fantasy criticism, we must vivify this genre which adores adventure. After slipping through the walls, we will be joined by a handful of characters native to medieval fantasy whom we will follow and observe. Think of me as Derek Jacobi in Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V*: part guide, part commentator, part cheering section. Inside those walls, there's trouble afoot. A nameless, timeless

corruption eats at the soul of the city, poisoning the water supply, eating through the very cobblestones and afflicting the populace, and spreading its lashing growths across the sewers. Powerful forces marshal to strike it down, however.

To that end, we will first follow the Hero as he attempts to root out the corruption, discussing how myth and violence are at work in the genre and how those elements are realized via Commerce. Secondly, we will follow in the footsteps of the good-hearted Peasant as she attempts to heal the wounds of others who have suffered from the corruption in order to see how Culture works to vivify the often-neglected protagonists who are far from the spotlight of most M. fantasy works. Thirdly, we will tail the altruistic Friar as he attempts to appraise the state of the city and find where the poisoned water has coalesced and how it may threaten the city, neighborhood by neighborhood; through him, we will see how Culture plays into worldbuilding at the street level. Finally, we will observe the mighty Monarch of the city as she considers what actions to take regarding the corruption, thus showing us the Commercial side of worldbuilding. I hope that, through our observations of a narrative in motion, we can come to understand that medieval fantasy is not a static genre, despite outward appearances that it only ever preaches to its own choir inside those tall city walls. I want to stress again that, if the genre is to be read and studied by those beyond its borders, it must improve. Again, I wish to provide the groundwork for future medieval fantasy criticism while offering insight into the inner mechanisms of fantasy so that future writers may improve on the craft.

So, walk alongside me as we near the true beginning of our journey. I know a particular passage way which will lead us smoothly into the heart of M. fantasy's city. We will first be examining the character archetypes most central to M. fantasy, the Hero and

Peasant. Our bridge from outside the walls to the inside is the bridge of myth. Myth and legend, namely the heroic tales of the Classical world and the chivalric narratives of European medieval times, provide context for the Hero and Peasant character archetypes in M. fantasy. As we already mentioned, J.R.R. Tolkien had a mind for the mythic when creating his famous world and characters. If we can find the roots of where Tolkien took inspiration, we can, as though we were studying a tree, trace the roots to see where the vitae withers away in other medieval fantasy works.

Our first destination is a tunnel, hidden nearby, which runs underneath the city and up onto those high walls which tower over us. So, step this way, we have quite the journey ahead of us, and something is rotten in the state of fantasy.

*As we slip underground, our tunnel of passage transitioning from dirt to meticulously-placed stone, the air seems to change to something warm and humid. M. fantasy is a busy place, rife with ambient energy. At the end of the tunnel lies a spiral stairwell that rises far, far into darkness. The smoky torchlight illuminates our path upwards just enough to walk by. The steps rise and rise until we exit through a trapdoor into the sunlight, atop the walls which ring this insular, self-sufficient city state.*

## CHAPTER 2 THE HERO

*Atop the walls of the sprawling Medieval Fantasy city-state, an anachronistic collage of gothic spires, grey walls, and open plains. At once, this city arrests the attention in its imagination and size, though its streets wander as if lost in thought. Its architecture is incoherent, if impressive in its diversity. From up here, one can feel very powerful, but also very alone. Perhaps the two are intrinsically linked. The Hero of this city has felt so powerful, yet so removed, many times. What made him special placed him apart from others. When he delves into darkness to root out evil, no matter how many companions he ventures with, his only companion is his own sword, a symbol for the bloodshed which rules his life.*

There's a sickness under the stones of this city. Don't worry, it's not contagious. Probably. Just don't drink the water and you should be fine. Paranoia and fear grips this city, but our Hero is on the case. As you can plainly hear, this is a man who knows how to inspire, how to lead. And, that attribute, being a *leader*, is what fundamentally separates Hero character from a Peasant character. Even the Hero's knight companions who shine in the sun, nearly as much as their leader, are still 'the Hero's knights.' Without him, they would collapse into irrelevancy. These knights, like many of the non-Heroes in this city, have placed their hopes and dreams onto our Hero's shoulder. They see him as their best selves, what they aspire to be, and the one who can cast out the darkness from their city. Our Hero's knights, by merit of them not being the magnet for peoples' hopes and wishes, are Peasants. A Hero cannot lead another Hero, for Heroes are monolithic. Our Hero must always stand alone in the end, standing as we are now, alone atop high walls, looking down on societies. The old saying of, "it's lonely at the top" fits well here, I think.

To further illustrate this, look no further than the streets upon which our Hero and his companion knights walk at this very moment. This corruption is keeping more and more people indoors these days. Most agree that the drinking water has been fouled by the nameless, tentacled monstrosity beneath the cobblestones, but, and our Friar will show us this in great detail, worried minds tend to wander and conspire. And yet, when our Hero comes marching through, armed with all his tools of war and murder, the people, Peasants, will turn up in droves. About a quarter mile away, our Hero and his knights are gathering to expunge the core of the corruption from the sewers, where it seems to have laid its roots. So, come along with me as we scale down these walls and perform an intimate autopsy on how M. fantasy's Heroes work; we will be joining our Hero just before he ventures below to defeat the heart of the corruption.

The Hero, in my mind, is the most egregiously abused archetype in today's M. fantasy works. A Hero is the character which, willingly (if they start the narrative as unwilling, a change to willingness will almost inevitably occur), exchanges some of their own personal safety for the safety of their loved ones, friends, companions, or the world itself. That exchange of selfhood for "the greater good," literally a sense of "selflessness" typifies the idealized, Commercial, Hero. Even anti-heroes in M. fantasy, a trope which is growing in popularity of late, maintain that basic exchange of personal safety for societal safety. A Hero, to use a succinct cliché, stands for more than him/herself. However, while the Hero is a character of Commerce, Culture must also be balanced if he wishes to present himself well. Yet, one may wonder what attracts the regular people, this includes us readers, to Heroes who would, otherwise, seem so removed from our small troubles. One argument stems from the connection between the forces of ancient myth and the modern fantastic.



Looking again at his book, *The Epic Hero*, Dean A. Miller illustrates the fundamental characteristics of mythical heroes. Let's revisit again what Miller says about heroism: "The point is that our images of heroism and of the hero are inescapably ours, as we form our intelligible thoughtworld, in that part of the historical continuum" (Miller 2). Even from early in his book, Miller observes that heroes have been part of the collective human psyche for a very, very long time. Similarly, given the connections between myth and fantasy, we should examine M. fantasy Heroes through a lens of shared humanity. A Hero is, despite the commanding view they may have from his lonely societal perch, still a vulnerable human being and should be handled as such.

That simple truth, to treat our Heroes as humans, not superhumans, is a vital one to understand if we wish to improve medieval fantasy's standing in the literary world. Our Heroes can captivate, lead, and battle, but too often are their resumes limited to just those Heroic traits. As a result, too many of M. fantasy's Heroes fall into the cliché of power fantasy and guides into voyeuristic bloodshed. I had mentioned previously how closely violence is entwined with M. fantasy, and our Hero will be the prime subject to see how violence works through characters.

Miller has this to say regarding the mythological hero and violence: "...for it is clear that heroic healing or life giving is too thoroughly contaminated by the chief and most dominant attribute of the hero to be of much real use: the hero's business is always to deal out death" (Miller 325-326). Miller writes that a hero acquiring "healing or curative" powers is an oddity all its own, and, in that, I agree with him (Miller 325). The mythological, and medieval fantasy, hero is a slayer of monsters and evil. Fundamentally, this kind of self-sufficiency, in which a Hero can defeat evil with their own powers and martial skill,

separates them from protagonists of other genres. Furthermore, once magic, and its potential to bestow supernatural strength, enters the fray, a Hero reaches levels of personal power and may become further alienated from the common person.

And there, the separation of the Heroes from the rest of us regular, non-heroic humans, is where the Hero can fail so disastrously. Heroes can, depending on their reaction to, **not their participation in**, violence, alienate readers by seemingly abandoning their human vulnerability to violence and trauma. When such an instinctual human aversion to violence is disregarded, and when violence is so ubiquitous in the genre, it is really no wonder that the medieval fantasy is brushed off as formulaic or weightless childish entertainment.

Medieval fantasy's connection with violence, similar to its connection with myth, is a storied one. George Slusser and Eric S. Rabkin write that, "When the casual reader thinks of... fantasy, the image of warfare comes to mind at once. [Fantasy appears] to have kept alive the "epic" strain in literature— feats of arms in the service of great causes... Both forms sing of arms and the man in vistas that are not just national or eschatological but cosmic and evolutionary as well" (1). Slusser and Rabkin's observation that the violence, which most commonly works through our Hero, within fantasy narratives is a vital, nigh-inescapable, element of the genre's identity. Similarly, Slusser and Rabkin also touch on the scale and importance of violence in M. fantasy's plots. The genre's violence is indeed often "epic" and "in the service of great causes," because our Hero embodies that old, epic tradition and stands apart from more common people, above all others in service of an ideal or idea beyond himself (1). M. fantasy is, by its very nature, brushing shoulders with

violence. So, in our attempts to better the genre, we must examine the way in which fantasy treats its violence, what kind of weight it gives violence and its traumas.

I'll be using two more terms of my creation, Positive and Negative Tension, to facilitate our discussion about the weight of violence and how it plays on the mind of M. fantasy's characters. When a work's protagonist appears invulnerable, physically and mentally-emotionally, then the work's primary Tension becomes Positive. As a result, the audience is held in rapt attention during moments of violence, not to see if the protagonist will survive their endeavors but to see just *how* the Hero will find success. Positive Tension thrives on awe and spectacle, rather than fear and anxiety.

Before we go on further, I wish to stress that I do not believe that medieval fantasy reformation must extend to *all* of its works. Yes, we can just stop here at the bottom of the stairs; we are nearly where the Hero and his men are gathering, anyway. My thoughts on violence and Positive and Negative Tension should be taken seriously, of course, but I do not expect, nor would I want, the entire genre to radically shift to favor Negative Tension violence. The great diversity of imagination in M. fantasy is a major factor in why this genre continues to endure, much like science fiction before it. Sometimes, and I can plainly admit this, I don't mind reading a high-flying fantasy adventure story of Heroes, monsters, and swordfights. And yet, we must still strive to add more M. fantasy classics to the canon so that the genre may receive that all-important outside critical eye.

With that out of the way, we can now continue down these shadowy city streets. I believe I hear our Hero and his knights preparing for their excursion beneath the city streets; their voices cut through the low, haunting ringing of distant windchimes. Despite the façades of red brick and white stone, these streets will always be inescapably tied to the medieval

times which inspired them. The veneer of cleanliness and progress on these homes and shops cannot mask the rough, violent roots of this place. Something to consider: for every untouchably-beautiful elf which Tolkien wrote into Middle-Earth, that elf has likely seen more war and killed more than any person in our real-world human history has. Beneath any fantasy glamor exists a bloodstained soul.

Intense and conspicuous violence oftentimes take center-stage in M. fantasy, which is hardly surprising given the connection that the genre has with swords, knights, wars, assassinations, and monsters. Such attention to violence isn't an inherently bad thing, surely, but when the genre carved out its niche thanks in large parts to fireballs, severed heads, and swordfights, violence should be treated with a measure of realistic weightiness. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in combat veterans is a well-known psychological disorder these days, but even the Ancient Greeks possessed knowledge of the damage which violence, especially the visceral and personal melee combat of the day, can inflict on a warrior's mind.

What an M. fantasy author would convey to their audience, if violence in their works were treated, mostly, as events filled with Negative Tension, is that violence and conflict in their work is not merely for entertainment. Violence in a work can threaten a character's life, or, even more cruelly, their mind. Scars need not just be on the body; this mature potentiality for scars, physical and mental, and death creates Negative Tension in an M. fantasy work. An author's respectful treatment of violence and trauma communicates their greater importance to the reader, thereby bringing the audience in here, inside of M. fantasy's walls. Rather than keeping them outside, as observers of mere light, noise, and Positive Tension.

Violence in this genre fills the two complimentary vessels of character and plot. A decisive battle scene could radically alter the power dynamics of two nations, thereby

rocketing the plot forward. Conversely, if our point-of-view character is not noticeably changed by such a weighty, pivotal experience, then said decisive battle scene would only be living up to half of its potential.

Look out to the city streets we walk down, from where we stand. Our Hero will have studied streets not unlike these as potential battlefields, as collections of assets, dangers, and potential chokepoints. So, if he were to lay siege to this city, overthrow its defenders, and cast its leader down low, there would, no doubt, be celebrations, parades, all with the Hero at their centerpiece. Unfortunately, that personal valor and empowering of the Hero oftentimes is all that results from such carnage.

Rarely is the Hero faced with the civilians caught in the conflict, or the many orphans he helped to create. And, if he is confronted with such consequences, it is treated as a learning experience, a chance for the Hero to grow (sometimes neatly tied up and defined as *character development*, when so rarely do these events significantly change the *modus operandi* of a character's mind or actions) and then swiftly forget about. Rarely are real soldiers so swiftly absolved of their bloody deeds. M. fantasy is uniquely blessed in its predilection for brutal, visceral melee combat. George R.R. Martin's Eddard Stark, a man we will come to know much better soon enough, demonstrates how Heroes in blockbuster M. fantasy works can both dispatch their foes with typical Heroic skill as well as carry the weight of their violent pasts with them into the present. How dreadful is it, then, that so few authors give death and destruction its proper weight? Positive Tension is safe, comfortable, and convenient to readers more interested in the adventure than the ramifications. However, that focus will not sell M. fantasy to the wider literary world; it has not thus far.

Here, stand off to the side of the street with me, our Hero and his knights are set up ahead, in the center of this quiet cul-de-sac. Note the tightly-closed shutters. Until our Hero can purge this darkness, the common folk are too frightened to stick their necks out. While our Hero's knights are luminescent with pride, ecstatic to fight alongside a man who they, unrealistically, see as invincible. But, our Hero stands apart from his men, armed in his personal set of gleaming steel that he trusts more than anything else. Those regular people, hidden behind their shutters, must be thinking that their brave Hero would, of course, be at the head of the knights. But, after so many years of war and death, the Hero is skeptical of victory and disillusioned with glory. Still, he will do his duty to this city and its people. Satisfied as he can be with his preparations, he now leads his knights belowground, into the tunnels and sewers beneath the streets to root out the living, monstrous heart of the corruption. So, let's follow him, but let's maybe stay back ten or twelve paces.

Slusser and Rabkin provide us with another telling quote about the emotional weight of violence, saying, "Even horror, the most private and intimate of the forms attendant on science fiction and fantasy, is invariably associated with violent, even armed, conflict" (3). The authors' conflation of violence with horror is well-placed. M. fantasy is soaked with violence, though the many Commerce-centric Heroes currently inhabiting the genre treat violence as though it were merely a means to an end, a way to advance plot events and dispense with monsters. However, Slusser and Rabkin's operative words are *private* and *intimate*. To deny the weight of that violence, the kind we see our Hero marching bravely towards as we speak, does not become deeply personal, is to deny reality. The authors continue by saying, "However, we must invoke Hobbesian sense of 'war...' the violent anarchy of man against man, which results in nasty and brutish acts and short lives within the

community that has fallen prey to it” (3). Slusser and Rabkin’s attention to the “short lives” associated with this intense violence reinforces how separate the Hero is from us regular humans. He stands apart in the field of violence. Here, I would like to bring in a special breed of M. fantasy authors which so rarely see the light of day: short story authors. I fear that the endless trilogies and such works from already-prolific M. fantasy authors have buried the talents of these more experimental writers. So, this conversation will benefit from a few independent, adventurous voices.

At this junction of violence and repercussions, we’ll turn to Paul Finch’s 2011 short story, published in the 2012 edition of *The Year's Best Dark Fantasy and Horror*, “King Death.” Finch’s narrative follows Rodric, a traveling knight somehow spared the ravages of the Black Death. Indeed, Rodric even adopts the moniker and appearance of King Death, robbing the few people who remain alive and wearing a suit of all black armor. While the Black Death in Europe suggests that “King Death” should be considered more of a historical fiction, Finch’s portrayal of the Black Death is almost supernaturally powerful, nearly exterminating all of England. The level of devastation borders on post-apocalyptic. Towards the story’s conclusion, Rodric reveals his face, and thus, his true identity, to the young lone survivor at the castle of Sir Richard. Rodric’s face is described as being, “pock-marked, criss-crossed with old scars— very human, very mortal” and Rodric thinks that it was, “never pleasant to reveal that you were a fraud” (143). Finch’s Rodric inverts the Heroic Commercial ideal for sacrifice and selflessness while maintaining his skill at arms and affinity with death. Rodric’s many scars also speak of his violent history and many close shaves with death. Rodric is a man who carries the Tension of his previous scuffles physically and mentally, via his marauding charlatanism by impersonating Death itself.

Even though our Hero and his companions go to fight a nameless corruption, not unlike Finch's amplified Black Death, it is merely a monster by any other name. The lack of humanity in a Hero's opponent does not preclude a lessening of the "nasty" or "brutish" nature of the oncoming violence. With that, we can turn to our Hero's own plight, as he comes to challenge the monster he hunts.

Speak of the devil— take a look just ahead of us. At the end of this tunnel is... well, it's some kind of tentacle, certainly. I may have been too literal in the previous chapter when I mentioned that we can trace the roots of fantasy to find its source of failures and strengths. Now, these literal fantastical roots are certainly monstrous to our Hero and his companions. Consider for a moment, the personal ramifications of this encounter. It's dark down here, as well as wet, cramped, sickening lukewarm, and the mossy stone walls seemed to trap all sound, forcing the echoes back into your ears ad nauseam. With so much riding on the shoulders of our Hero and so much trouble around him, how can we possibly expect him to remain dauntless? How can we expect him to leave this encounter unscathed?

Certainly, I don't advocate for M. fantasy narratives to hang a character's potential death or trauma over their heads like a Sword of Damocles. Making every intense encounter heavily scar its participants' bodies and minds can quickly anesthetize an audience, meaning even the most terrible ramifications feel limp to a reader.

And yet, to return to "King Death" briefly, Finch explores a nuanced, subtle kind of Negative Tension with Rodric. As he approaches the desolate castle of Sir Richard, Rodric, shortly before his death, is unnerved by the ghastly scene of desolation before him. Here, Rodric is "unnerved [for long moments] and he reflects that, "even in the Valley of Death it was a difficult thing for a low-born like he to overcome the age-old strictures that forbade



him to approach the houses of the mighty... He knew it was nonsense to think that way... but instincts, it seemed, died harder than men” (141). Finch succeeds in anchoring Rodric’s mental stress resulting from the violence and death all around him by playing on Rodric’s common birth; Rodric fears to approach this symbol of societal power since it speaks to the unnatural power of this plague which he has survived through a mixture of luck and brutality. For all of the horrors that Rodric has already seen, he still experiences Negative Tension when he sees a symbol of power he once feared brought low by the plague he had previously felt invincible against. Finch’s Negative Tension plays on something deeper, more personal, than a constant fear of death or bodily harm.

To turn our attention back to our own Hero, to see how he will contend with violence and the threat of death, We can see our Hero currently embroiled in battle against some of the corruption’s many whip-like roots. Apologies for the spoilers, but our Hero will survive this encounter, and the heart of the corruption lies further down this dark tunnel. So, how can we expect Negative and Positive Tension to manifest themselves in our Hero? If our Hero, whether he be wounded in battle or not, carries the weight of this violence in his mind *after* this battle has ended, we will witness Negative Tension. Alternatively, our Hero could carry the weight of this violence *before* his next battle, possibly in the form of anxiety or doubt. This Tension can manifest in something more explicit, something analogous to post-traumatic-stress-disorder, but it can also manifest in subtle feelings of regret, unease, or a general anxiety about those future battles. Positive Tension, conversely, would create a disconnect between plot progression and character development. If our Hero was to walk away from this battle both mentally and physically unburdened, the plot would march on (the monster is slain, the country is saved) at a macro-Commerce level. However, at a personal, or

Cultural, level, our Hero's growth would appear stunted, as if he had been physically immersed in the terrible violence, yet he was mentally unconscious for it all.

Positive Tension has been a blight on the reputation of M. fantasy since its inception, in fact. During the late 1960's and early 1970's, as Tolkien's texts were being adopted by American countercultures, psychologists grew concerned about how fantasy was portraying violence, especially where children's developing minds were concerned. John Aquino, in *Fantasy in Literature*, writes that, "As there were negative reactions to fantasy as an activity of the mind, there have also been objections to the unreality of fantasy literature... Some writers and researchers [Aquino references A. M. Tausch] have objected to fantasy literature because of the effect its violence and amorality can have on children" (Aquino 14). That "amorality" which Aquino references has its roots in fantasy's predilection to place morally-pure and righteous Heroes against simplistically-evil villains. We can still feel echoes Tausch's critique today as we see how the weightless violence of Positive Tension harms the genre's reputation. Furthermore, Joseph P. Laycock, in his book on the creation and tumultuous first years of Dungeons and Dragons, explores the moral hand-wringing which afflicted the game in the 1980's, as M. fantasy began to branch off of Tolkien's monolith and become more accessible and intractable. He writes, "Child psychologists Dorothy and Jerome Singer suggest that violent fantasy is most likely to translate into overt action when the fantasy comes with no senses of consequences or moral implications and when there is no possibility of suffering for the victim or punishment for the fantasizer" (Laycock 193). Again, we see references to concerns about a lack of "punishment," "consequences," and "suffering." From M. fantasy's inception, to its climb into popularity, it has weathered assaults from all manner of outsiders who looked at the genre and saw its violence as a bad

influence, particularly on children (meaning, not only was M. fantasy seen as worryingly violent, but it was also a genre made for children!). Therefore, once again, we must acknowledge that violence is part of the genre's gene pool. So, we must examine the mechanisms of Positive and Negative Tension, to help give fantasy violence its due weight.

In fact, just below, I've included a graph of how I perceive character and plot development building in relation to Positive and Negative Tension. I hope to use this graphic to help lay further bedrock upon which new medieval fantasy works and criticism can be constructed atop of by elucidating the inner workings of M. fantasy. Of course, I also desire a continued conversation. What I posit with this graphic and others elsewhere in this thesis should be part of a greater genre conversation.

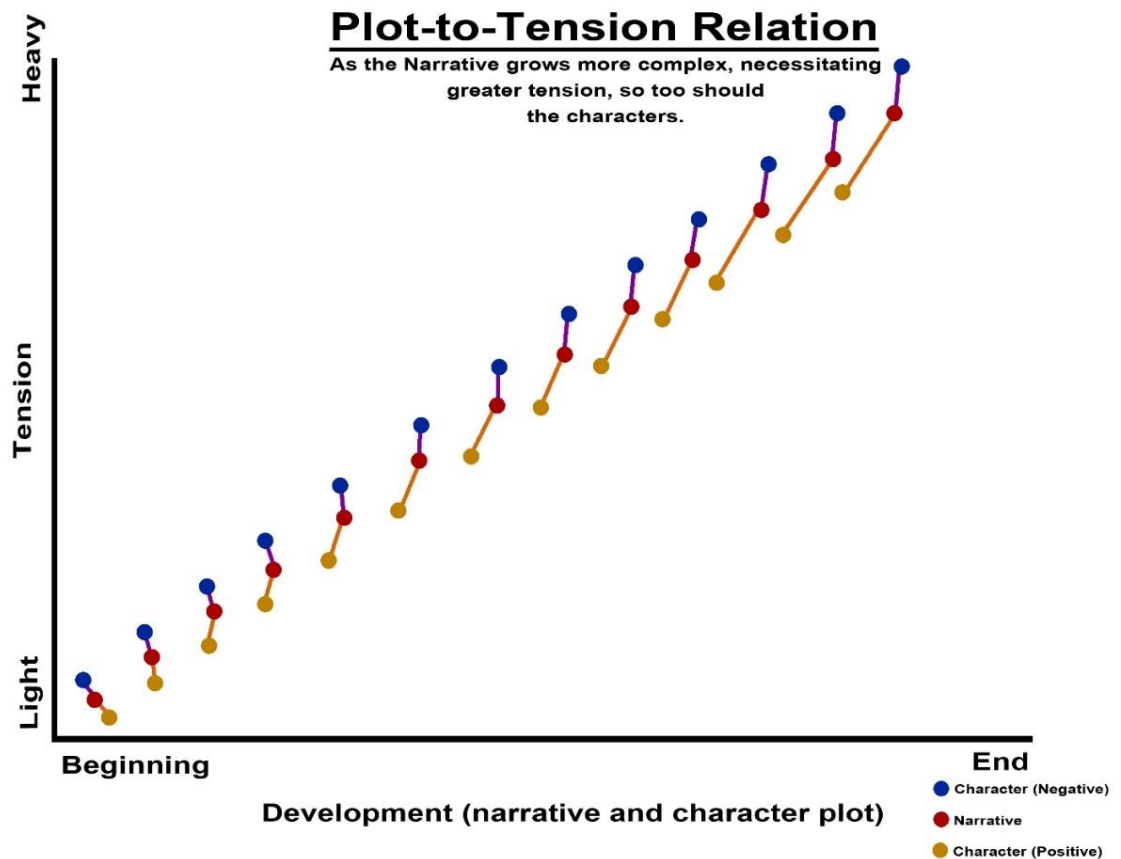


Figure 1: Positive/Negative Tension in Plot and Character

As the graph shows, Positive Tension occurs when, as a result of a narratively-significant violent confrontation, the plot develops and its Hero does not. A disparity begins to grow between plot and character. This disparity results in a disconnect between the gravity of violent situations and the emotional response of the Hero. A numbness sets into the Hero, removing them from that all-important human element that keeps them, in Miller's term, "inescapably ours." Intense violence, either material or magical, will always be endemic to M. fantasy, so when authors mishandle the violence, a central pillar of the genre is knocked out. Only natives of this genre could enjoy this kind of voyeuristic Positive Tension violence. It can be no wonder that scholars pass over M. fantasy when they see the violent cornerstone of the genre being poorly handled.

Medieval melee violence is intense, visceral, and personal. I doubt it needs any elaboration that a decapitation or disembowelment would be a chaotic, bloody, and thoroughly repulsive affair. But, when separated from Negative Tension, a decapitation becomes a glee-inspiring exercise in gore instead of something much more visceral. Our Hero and his men are making progress against these roots, so much so that they have approached the writing, pulsating heart of the corruption. And, good heavens, it's quite the beast. Removed from modern conveniences of firearms and long-distance warfare, death's threshold exists a sword-swing away from where our Hero stands. However, we can't forget the valuable lesson we learned when examining Finch's "King Death" about how Negative Tension can come from something mental-emotional, rather than purely physical.

Here again, I'll shine a well-deserved spotlight on another non-orthodox M. fantasy short story. Garth Nix's "Holly and Iron," a magic-filled retelling of the Norman Conquest of

England, tackles a very mental-emotional kind of Negative Tension within the opening pages. “Holly and Iron” opens on outcast princess Merewyn, heir to the English throne around the time of the Norman Conquest. Merewyn and her sister, Robin, coordinate an attack on a Norman caravan, which ends in disaster. Merewyn is killed by the iron magic of a Norman sorcerer, and Robin escapes with her life. Shortly after Merewyn’s death, Robin laments her participation in the botched raid: “Merewyn was dead, and it was all Robin’s fault. She had got her own sister killed. The fact that none of the band had returned to the camp indicated that they thought so too, perhaps coupled with the distrust of her Norman heritage...” (Nix 31). Here, Nix creates a heavy shroud of Negative Tension over Robin’s head, despite the fact that Robin had escaped the botched robbery physically unharmed; this lack of physical harm separates her from Eddard Stark, a warrior and leader accustomed to wounds and war. Robin’s emotional strain proves to be a greater weight than any physical scars or other expected results of harsh medieval violence.

But, look there! An opening has been revealed in the creature’s vine-like carapace— And with one, final righteous charge, there we have it; the beast is slain! A thrust through the heart from our Hero has done the creature in. Its roots wither and drop off, shriveled and lifeless, into the plagued water. The Hero’s men are roaring in approval. Unfortunately, our Hero did not escape unscathed. Oh, on a physical level, he has taken some cuts and bruises, some things he’ll be feeling tomorrow, but the damage goes deeper than that. One of the Hero’s knights has fallen... to be honest, I can’t even recall his name, but our Hero seems to know it very well. While his men celebrate, he’s kneeling into the muck and carrying his fallen companion in his arms. The damage to our Hero’s body is minimal, like Nix’ Robin, yet the mental-emotional damage is already etching deep scars which will heal much less

smoothly. Only one man fell in that entire battle. A victory for this city and its people, by any stretch of the imagination, surely. But, as we've already examined, a narrative overly-concerned with this macro and Commercial thinking misses out the visceral, personal tragedy at the individual level.

Our Hero is hoisting his fallen man's body and is bringing him back above ground, braving the long dark in these tunnels, and in his mind, by walking well ahead of his men, shouldering this burden of violence on his own. Meanwhile, his knights are high on the rush of victory, reveling in their glory and the thought of the affection that the townspeople will shower them with.

Negative Tension has, however, been handled very well in the past by M. fantasy writers in the past. George R. R. Martin's wildly-successful series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, will serve us well as a window into the genre's treatment of its Heroes. Now, I will preface my discussions of Martin's series by saying that I believe, wholeheartedly, that *A Song of Ice and Fire* has the potential, once the author has finished it, to take the position of a classic in medieval fantasy alongside *The Lord of the Rings*. So, it certainly warrants our attention here.

Eddard Stark, the main character of the series' first book, *A Game of Thrones*, demonstrates Martin's impressive control of Negative Tension of his Hero. The Negative Tension of Eddard Stark resonates through the scars he bears from his long past with violence. Eddard typifies the grim, obstinate North, from which he hails and rules over, with his dour personality and prickly stubbornness. Typical of his Hero archetype, he is also (very) skilled at arms. He also acts, as head of a powerful noble house, in the interests of countless people beyond his immediate control and concern. Eddard's most significant character trait, however, is his extremely strict code of honor. In short, Eddard Stark is a real

Hero's hero: an honorable protector of the weak. And yet, his character is fraught with Negative Tension, meaning that, despite his adherence to typical Hero ideals, he displays a very human emotional depth because of his past with violence.

Decades before the events of *A Game of Thrones*, Eddard Stark helped to overthrow Aerys Targaryen II, otherwise known as the Mad King, after the Mad King's son, the crown prince of Westeros, abducted Eddard's sister and took her for his wife. The Mad King and crown prince did fall in a war spearheaded by Eddard and his friend, Robert Baratheon. Robert's Rebellion, as it came to be called, shattered a once-stable country into bloody war on the pretext of righteous vengeance and punishing abuses of royal power. As the Rebellion was nearing its end, Eddard personally slew the royal guards set to guard his sister in a faraway tower. However, Eddard found his sister, Lyanna, on her deathbed. Early in *A Game of Thrones*, Eddard remembers how, "He could hear her still at times. *Promise me*, she had cried, in a room that smelled of blood and roses. *Promise me, Ned*" (Martin 43). Though this tragic event, framed by violence and war, occurred decades ago, Eddard still clearly bears deep emotional scars. Eddard's vow of silence helped create his unflinching loyalty to honor and truth.

Eddard's Negative Tension manifests through this code of honor, which he wears as a suit of armor. He wears the armor at all times, and it drastically affects how he sees the world and which actions he allows himself to make. Near the climax of *A Game of Thrones*, as Eddard conspires, an action he is deeply uncomfortable with, to arrest Queen Cersei and her illegitimate son before they can wrestle the throne away from the legitimate son of Eddard's friend, the previous king, he turns to Petyr Baelish for assistance. Petyr, a man with no honor and even fewer scruples, glibly ribs Eddard for his armor of honor. He says, "You wear your

honor like a suit of armor, Stark. You think it keeps you safe, but all it does is weigh you down and make it hard for you to move” (Martin 512-513). Unfortunately for Eddard, his trust in Baelish is rewarded with treachery as Eddard is betrayed after offering Queen Cersei a chance to peacefully surrender her position, rather than forcibly arresting her as Baelish had recommended.

What I’m really trying to say here is:

Eddard Stark sees and judges his potential future actions through a psychological lens forged out of traumatic experiences he weathered in the service of sacrificing his personal safety in exchange for the safety of others by way of his skill at military matters and swordsmanship. Already accustomed to losing his beloved sister as a result of courtly intrigue and abuses of power from Westeros’ royalty, Eddard finds himself caught between wanting to punish the dishonorable Queen Cersei while being hesitant to engage in bloodshed which could spark another war to rival Robert’s Rebellion (which is exactly what happens, unfortunately). He is a Hero who carries Negative Tension by way of balancing his Commercial obligations and Cultural, personal, reactions to the violence that has come from said obligations.

Our Hero, by comparison, is understanding Negative Tension very well now, too. His men congratulate him, praising his heroism and skills which led to the monster’s defeat. These tunnels are long, and the traces of corruption are slowly fleeing from the stone walls and the water which runs underfoot. His men say how many people he has saved, how perhaps even the city itself was saved by his leadership. Our Hero’s knights believe that their leader’s mind is one of pure Commerce, always focused on the big picture and society at large. Meanwhile, our Hero can barely look into the deep darkness of the tunnel before him,



let alone beyond it to the city he fights for. Our Hero has recontextualized the significance and consequences of his actions on a personal level. He has reached a balance between Commerce and Culture. Like Eddard Stark, our Hero is experiencing Negative Tension, including all of the mental-emotional burdens resulting from violence. This response to violence, both the loss of life and the loss of his peace of mind, makes our Hero feel more human, more realized, and more worth the attention of an audience not impressed by weightless, voyeuristic violence.

It may surprise you that I chose not to focus on Tolkien's Heroes as my first example of a well-handled Hero. And, perhaps surprisingly, that is because I don't believe Tolkien's Heroes are his strong suit. Aragorn, the Commerce-minded Hero of *The Lord of the Rings*, is shockingly underdeveloped concerning matters of violence. Tolkien's more distant, omniscient style of writing rarely allows readers to inhabit his character's minds and the moment-to-moment grotesqueness of battle<sup>4</sup>. Speaking of which, we have returned aboveground, and our Hero is still holding the body of his fallen companion, though his face betrays little of the conflict within; the return of the Hero and his knights is signaling to the people waiting in their homes. Soon, they will know that their Hero has saved them from the horrible monster.

While Aragorn certainly embodies the commander-warrior that a Hero often is, his personal relationship with violence is lacking in development. His most personal collision with violence comes from when he meets with the Mouth of Sauron outside of the Black

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<sup>4</sup> Consider the distant, highly-theatrical way in which Tolkien describes the action of the hectic Battle of the Hornburg, "Charging from the side, [Eomer and Aragorn] hurled themselves upon the wild men. Anduril rose and fell, gleaming with white fire. A shout went up from wall and tower: 'Anduril! Anduril goes to war. The Blade that was Broken shines again!'" (149). This more omniscient narrator style separates a reader from the visceral horrors of melee battle.

Gate. After being goaded by the Mouth, who insults Aragorn's ability to lead and inspire his men, Aragorn, "said naught in answer, but he took the other's eye and held it, and for a moment they strove thus; but soon, though Aragorn did not stir nor move hand to weapon, the other quailed and gave back as if menaced with a blow" (Tolkien 172). Gandalf then goes to say that the Mouth, who was intimidated by Aragorn's wordless display of power, is still given the same diplomatic immunity under the law as anybody else. So, the only time in which Tolkien employs some modicum of Negative Tension is towards the end of his trilogy, and his Hero only wrestles with the ethics of violence because of law and morality, two macro-sized societal elements, rather than personal qualms<sup>5</sup>.

Robert T. Tally Jr. also wrote on this Positive Tension (though, he did not use my terminology, of course) phenomena in *The Lord of the Rings* in his article, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Orcs: Simple Humanity in Tolkien's Inhuman Creatures*. As the title would suggest, Tally Jr. focuses closely on the dynamics of Tolkien's orcs, a fantasy race which has undergone countless mutations and iterations after it was popularized by Tolkien's work, and their relationship with the trilogy's Heroes. Tally Jr. writes that Tolkien's bestowal of human qualities to his orcs, "makes it a bit disturbing, then, that Tolkien's heroes, without the least pang of conscience, dispatch Orcs by the thousands... Tolkien himself struggled with the metaphysical and moral problems he had set up by inventing and using Orcs as he does" (Tally Jr. 17). That pang of conscience, or the lack of it, hints at the Positive Tension which results from *The Lord of the Ring's* violence. Furthermore, Tally Jr. writes that, "no Orcs are taken prisoner at all, even for the purposes of learning of enemy plans. They are killed unceremoniously and without remorse. Simply recall Legolas and Gimli's Orc-killing game"

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<sup>5</sup> Not to mention that Aragorn must be reminded of the concept of diplomatic immunity by a third party.

(Tally Jr. 25). Tally Jr.'s observation about the weightlessness of the violence, especially the famous orc-killing game at the Battle of the Hornburg in *The Two Towers*, illustrates how violence, when not given its proper weight, can inspire, in the reader, feelings of unease, even revulsion, at the actions of a Hero. The excitement, even glee, that a reader is intended to feel when violence is so weightless as to be little more than bloodstained fireworks, creates a disconnect with the more discerning scholars who may be eager to examine M. fantasy's intimate relationship with intense violence.

However, before we move on to what I believe is a prime example of a Positive Tension Hero, I would like you to take a look around us. These streets, which were abandoned for weeks, are suddenly surging with life again. There's applause in the air from the dozens of grateful townspeople, all of whom were convinced (for the most part, anyway) that our Hero was always destined for success. But, look how he cannot meet their eyes. He holds his fallen companion like a dead albatross. Meanwhile, the people clap wildly on. Too often does medieval fantasy place us readers in the position of these applauding, starry-eyed townspeople.

While I believe that Aragorn is a bit half-cooked when it comes to Tension, I take issue with Tolkien's writing mainly because Aragorn shows a lack of Tension. This absence is radically different than a character who has their Tensions all in a tangle and full of logical contradictions. Enter: Vin, from Brandon Sanderson's *Mistborn: The Final Empire*.

Vin, pulled off of the street and convinced to join Kelsier's uprising against the Final Empire's seemingly-immortal Lord Ruler, spends most of Sanderson's novel infiltrating parties thrown by the nobility who, largely, support the Lord Ruler. Vin is a Mistborn, a gifted individual who can use allomancy, the control of metals in the human body allowing

for supernatural powers, and she is largely-unassociated with violence throughout the novel. Kelsier, for the vast majority of *The Final Empire*, is far more concerned with violence. He is older and more skilled at violence, while also leading armies of skaa, the lower class of the Final Empire, in his uprising. And yet, Kelsier's position as Vin's mentor, as well as his death in the novel's climax, puts him a rung lower than Vin on the Hero ladder (plus, as the primary protagonist of all three books in the original *Mistborn* trilogy, Vin is the overall hero of the series). Vin's first encounter with fatal violence in *The Final Empire* is at the ball of the powerful Venture family in the final third of the novel.

The battle utilizes nearly all of Vin's allomancy powers, resulting in some, admittedly, fun high-flying action. Most of the battle takes place atop the roofs and spires of the Venture manor while deep, swirling mists stuff up the sky. Vin, who has been training as a Mistborn for barely eight months, fights with the noblewoman, and fully-trained Mistborn, Shan Elariel. The battle ends after Vin empowers herself with atium, a very rare and powerful metal, and kills Shan with an arrow. We see Vin's first experience with violence proceed as thus: "This time, Shan dropped. She tried to rise, but one of the shafts must have done some serious damage to her heart, for her face paled. She struggled for a moment, then fell lifeless to the stones... Vin glanced back towards the keep, bidding farewell to Elend, then Pushed herself out into the night" (Sanderson 513). Unperturbed by Shan, as well as her henchmen, that she just killed with her own hands and powers, Vin's mind quickly turns to Elend, a nobleman she had developed feelings for recently. Note that Shan Elariel was betrothed to Elend, making her and Vin competitors for Elend's affections. And yet, rather bafflingly, the reader's first glimpse into Vin's state of mind after committing fatal violence for the first time comes in the form of a conversation between Kelsier and Vin on the rooftop

of Kelsier's old hideout wherein Vin, distraught, tells Kelsier that Elend, "doesn't want to be with [her] anymore" (Sanderson 519). The full exchange follows:

"What happened tonight?" he asked. "What *really* happened?"

"Elend told me that he didn't want to be with me anymore."

"Ah," Kelsier said, moving over to sit beside her. "Was this before or after you killed his former fiancée?"

"Before," Vin said (Sanderson 518-519).

One would be forgiven for completely forgetting that Vin had just ended another human life for the first time just a few hours prior. Unfortunately, because Sanderson invested so much time and space in *The Final Empire* to constructing Vin's allomancy powers, the reader could not logically expect Vin to be in any real danger during her battle with Shan. The voyeuristic violence, and this appears just as often in chapters from Kelsier's perspective, infuses Positive Tension so deeply into Vin's character that the reader feels no connection to the weight and responsibility of her powers over life and death. Recall Finch and Nix's previous portrayals of violence and Tension; both authors played on their characters' psyche, as well as their bodies. Unfortunately, even in lesser-known M. fantasy works, Vin's first-time-violence situation rarely receives much attention.

Our Hero, meanwhile... well, look at him. Listen to the depths of his silence. He managed to walk away from that battle, which was, by all rights, a victory. Thanks to his skill with a sword, our Hero is largely unscathed physically. But, the human mind is a more prodigious factory of monsters than anything else. To return back to Slusser and Rabkin,

“The internalization of the zone of combat, [Rabkin asserts], may be fortunate in that it offers us a means of confronting warfare not as a necessary condition for humanity but as an idea of concept we ourselves have created and elaborated over the ages” (Slusser and Rabkin 3).

Warfare always springs from the human mind as a product of anything from anger to fear to desperation. Fittingly then, warfare always ends in the mind.

Our Hero understands the real weight of violence, the Negative Tension which, even now, strains his mind and heart. The people of this city are still cheering for him, they’re absolutely ecstatic at their Hero’s victory. And why shouldn’t they be? They only wish to see their Hero succeed in ever-more death-defying ways; they view the Hero as a man filled with Positive Tension, part savior and part entertainer. Readers of M. fantasy are all-too-often asked to adopt a similar mindset because the Heroes that they, we, observe, is constructed to be highly-resistant to Negative Tension, inhumanly so. While we can expect Aragorn or Vin to despair if one of their fellow main characters were to fall<sup>6</sup>, the nameless many which they strike down or have struck down in their defense go unsung for heroes filled with Positive Tension.

As Slusser and Rabkin laid out for us earlier, to approach a mental landscape pockmarked by violence is to brush shoulders with horror. And, M. fantasy, tied to its medieval roots, cannot, and should not, attempt to distance itself from the brutal violence it soaks itself in. However, for M. fantasy’s Heroes to reach their potential and contribute to their genre’s apotheosis and migration to the wider literary world, Negative Tension must, in part if not in whole, be fostered and nurtured with the attention and maturity a trauma councilor would handle a shell-shocked veteran. Negative Tension should not be cheapened

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<sup>6</sup> And, we see this reaction when Aragorn learns of the “death” of Frodo late in *Return of the King*. Similarly, Vin despairs when Kelsier falls to the Lord Ruler at the end of *The Final Empire*.

by using death or trauma as “shock value,” nor can it be carelessly wielded like a flail, battering characters into submission with little confidence given to the tenacity and endurance of the human mind. Our Heroes must be made, again, “inescapably ours” like the mythical inspirations which helped to birth the modern fantasy Heroes. Mishandling Tension and violence will only reinforce the unfortunate assertion that M. fantasy is the childish, formulaic chaff which current scholarship so often disparages it as.

*The Hero has endured worse than this. Perhaps that fact makes his current plight all the more tragic; it is just one more battle for the man. But, our journey’s path continues onward, further down these tight and shadowed streets. The story continues through the regular people of this city. So often ignored, these common folk, who often desire nothing more than safety, sustenance, and stability, are the lifeblood of this fantastical city and genre. We should ignore their stories no longer.*

### CHAPTER 3 THE PEASANT

*The noise of the adoring public, still fawning over their Hero, echoes through the tight streets of the city. These streets are mostly empty, on account of all of the townsfolk wanting to see their savior. The wind seems to cut through these streets. Things are colder, harsher, rougher here. The world of the regular man or woman, always kept at arms-length, or further, from their Hero, is tactile with its hardships. Heroism is a distant thought, a balm for the stresses everyday trials of regular people.*

Well, that solves that, right? The monster is defeated, the city is saved. The Hero has, personal losses notwithstanding, achieved an impressive victory. So, shouldn't our story be over? Thematically, the corruption represented the Aquino-brand "formulaic chaff" eating at M. fantasy's bones. So, where do we go from here? Well, we can go right over here, down this street—the folk that would usually be clogging it up are too enamored with their victorious Hero at the moment. So, while we walk, consider this: I had mentioned previously that Culture composed the "currency" of a medieval fantasy society: the social mores, taboos, expectations, shared anthropological histories, and the like. Once the Hero has succeeded in his mission, life must carry on. After all, Heroes often fight to protect their societies and people, giving them the chance to *continue* living. In direct contrast to the spotlight that our Hero occupies, I believe that, without the Peasant characters composing the world he fights for, there would be no need for a Hero, because there would be nobody worth protecting.

Despite how important Peasants are to the identity of our Hero, Peasant characters are extremely rare in M. fantasy works. Considering that M. fantasy is a genre so closely tied to violence, a reader would likely be off-put if they read an M. fantasy work which focused on



the weak and vulnerable characters. So, when these “have not” characters exist in M. fantasy works, they are oftentimes relegated into background roles or, by some contrivance in the narrative itself, the Peasant is allowed to become a Hero, thus becoming worth more time and attention in the narrative.

As much as I believe that Martins’ *Song of Ice and Fire* will one day sit alongside *The Lord of the Rings* as a classic of M. fantasy, I always find myself struck at the supreme dearth of Peasant characters in a series known for its outrageously-large character roster. Absolutely *zero* consistent (meaning, characters which have more than one or two chapters of their own viewpoints) point-of-view characters are either non-noble or non-Heroic. Sir Davos Seaworth was a smuggler before being knighted by Lord Stannis Baratheon, so he does bring a degree of Cultural humility to the narrative. And yet, Davos is still wrapped up in the Commercial political and military concerns of his lord, Stannis. While I certainly concede that *A Song of Ice and Fire* is a story chiefly concerned with the wars and squabbles of noble houses, Martin oftentimes seems to forget that, despite all of his point-of-view character perspectives, the everyday Peasant was as much involved with the games played by the realm’s high lords. Only, the Peasants oftentimes didn’t have a say in the matter and gained nothing from the squabbles and wars.

Tolkien’s hobbits, however, demonstrate just how much the genre will lose when devising its characters without Culture and Peasants in mind. Namely, the genre would lose (and has lost) a vital connection to “home<sup>7</sup>,” the sensation of stasis and connectability. Peasant characters, with their ties to “home” and down-to-earth living, function as

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<sup>7</sup> “Home,” can apply to a literal dwelling of significant importance to a character, as well as a hometown, village, or city. The most important aspect of the concept of “home” when thinking about the Peasant is to think of “home” as a place of comfort, safety, and stasis. In that sense, “home” is more of a state of mind than anything.

intermediaries between fantastical worldbuilding and characters. While we discussed previously that our Heroes must feel “inescapably ours,” we fantasy writers can approach the task of writing strong fantasy characters from two angles, a writerly two-pronged attack towards the genre’s apotheosis.

With that, we can move to examining our Peasant and how she embodies the often-shunned Cultural aspect of M. fantasy characters. With the fighting done, we will see our Peasant lending her skills, humble though they may be, to healing those who were hurt or displaced by the corruption. To facilitate the discussion on this particular archetype, especially since our Peasant occupies the rung below the Hero on the M. fantasy power ladder, we will be examining what little could be found on Marxist theory regarding fantasy. Unfortunately, I may have had pick up some scholarly slack while discussing our Peasant. Honestly, when I had set out on this autopsy of the genre, I had no idea I would be doing so with so little backup. In a way, I hope to pull my weight in the scholarship of M. fantasy, much like in the way that our Peasant does what she can, in whatever small way, to help better her own land. Look ahead, at the end of the road. The city gives way to a rolling green countryside pockmarked with fields and crops— I did tell you this place was self-sufficient, didn’t I?

Before I turn to Marxist theory, and before we see our Peasant in person, I must clear something vital up about what exactly defines a Peasant. On the surface, the name “Peasant,” especially when combined with this idea of Marxist theory, seems to suggest that our Peasant is, well, a peasant, somebody in the lower socioeconomic class. Actually, I—

On your right, quickly come here. Whew. I got lost in my thoughts and didn’t hear that carriage approaching. It’s really burning a trail out into the fields, isn’t it? That’s our

Peasant for you, always in a hurry to do good. Hmm? Oh, yes, that carriage is our Peasant's. Yes, she was in the driver's seat, but she also owns the carriage. She owns a large number of them, actually. Our Peasant is one of the wealthiest women in this city. And yet, consider what I said earlier about our Hero and how Commerce functions in M. fantasy works. For M. fantasy, Commerce very often is what moves the plot along, and the Hero is at the center of that plot. Wars, armageddons, and city-wide monster infestations are the high-stakes events which are emblematic of M. fantasy plots. And, our Hero is the one who will solve those problems, thereby being responsible for most large-scale society change. Consider too the position of peasants in true medieval societies. Medieval France, which is the clearest, most consistent source of inspiration for the chivalry and knights which appear in M. fantasy works, used the *Ancien Régime* system of socioeconomic organization until the French Revolution. The *Régime* imposed the familiar three-estates: the clergy, nobility, and peasantry. So, with this real-world parallel, we can see how a Peasant, even one as wealthy and successful as our own, can still be very much stratified and on a lower tier entirely from our Hero.

Yes, this relationship, and our invoked Marxist scholar will agree with this, as we'll see, is unlike our own in the real world. We have no such larger-than-life, monster-slaying Heroes and no such monumental problems these days which can be solved by individual Heroes. Conversely, M. fantasy still maintains very clear power hierarchies. Namely, a character is either a Hero or they are a Peasant, regardless of social class or economic situation.

To reiterate what I said in the previous section: A Hero *changes, leads, and rallies*, a Peasant *maintains, follows or dissents*, and *is rallied*. Heroes are the “haves” of M. fantasy,

molding the world to their liking through their actions. Peasants are the “have nots,” being molded and trying to maintain what they have and hold dear on a personal, Cultural level. As we’ll examine, Tolkien’s hobbits are the most famous and prominent Peasants in M. fantasy, and their journey centers around a desire to return home, to return to normalcy, not to cast out evil.

Speaking of normalcy, after following our Peasant’s wild ride out into this rural countryside, we come upon a very normal-looking village. From the thatched roofs to the low cobblestone walls, this place is the most medieval of medieval communities. But, there are some surprises here and there. In the center of the village is an effigy of sorts made out of straw. The people here burn it at the beginning of each season, each effigy representing the harshness of the season just past: winter’s cold, spring’s two-faced-ness, summer’s droughts, and autumn’s storms. But, its people are the most noteworthy elements. All of this city’s agriculture is managed by this place’s residents, so they exist anonymously, working for urban appetites while maintaining a unique, yet simple, culture born out of its simple, Peasant, people. Unfortunately, the corruption beneath the city made some people out here very ill. The water hauled in from wells in the city seem to be the cause. And, though the people within the city are fawning over their brave Hero, these afflicted nobodies languish in unsung agony. But, our Peasant has arrived to help assuage their suffering.

To cement the transition from the great mythical Hero to the ignorable, ignoble Peasant, I offer another quote from Miller. In regards to the “blacksmith” archetype seen in the mythological tradition, he writes, “It is not just the dangerous uses that will be made of the metal weapons he forges, but the ambient field of forbidden conjunctions around them that impresses and disturbs humankind, for the weapons forged must be and often are

invested with more than merely technical force and utility: they are all made by and through what are perceived as magical transformations, and so implicitly are inclined to magical ends” (Miller 263). Craftsmen characters are certainly Peasants by nature, as their birthright (to contrast with the Hero’s birthrights of violence and independence) necessitates an integration within larger societies and economies. So, a craftsman is tied to Culture in that his creations, whether they be swords or horseshoes or door-handles, are determined by societal supply-and-demand. Consequently, they interact with Culture at street level. This interdependence of the Peasant fundamentally separates them from the independent Heroes.

If a man or woman were set to become a Hero later in their lives but chose instead to live a smaller life, one here with us at the street level, they would be a Peasant. A Peasant can embody courage, honor, and other heroic traits, but because of their limited power and Heroic *presence*, they lead simpler lives more clearly tied to Culture elements like family, economic security, and peaceful living. I have already talked at length about how much a Hero can alienate us regular readers, so if a Hero were to make that intimate personal connection with us, what niche does that allow for the Peasant to fill?

Well, while the Hero allows us to observe the grand, adventurous aspects of the author’s secondary world, the Peasant gives us this street view. Here, through the shops, squares, and everyday life, we can see a *living and breathing* secondary world. Instead of viewing the world from way up on those walls, we can see the inner workings and anatomy of the world and how it goes to effect individual citizens of the world. Worldbuilding is another absolutely vital aspect of M. fantasy. Having a Peasant character to view the world from a Cultural, street-level integrates a reader much more deeply into the Culture of a world, allowing the readers a chance to examine a society’s inner mechanisms. Because M.

fantasy devotes so much time and attention to its worlds, Peasants are the ideal characters to vitalize said worlds.

Really, I think Gabrielle Lissauer does a fine job of establishing just who the Peasants are in most Genre narratives. She writes in her aptly-named book, *The Tropes of Fantasy Fiction*, "... the people they see on the street, the farmers that grow the food they eat in the inns. They are the crowds in the crowd scenes, the people who boo or make up the armies. The nameless... Why are they important? Because they show what kind of person the protagonist is when dealing with non-important people. People that aren't important to the plot. People like the readers themselves" (Lissauer 132).

Where to begin?

I'll start with my favorite, the most egregious sin that Hero-centric narratives inflict on the poor Peasants: "Why are they important? Because they show what kind of person the protagonist is when dealing with non-important people. People that aren't important to the plot" (Lissauer 132). Oh, but they *are* important to the plot! They're the entire reason why a *plot* is happening at all! If there was no idyllic towns or pristine natural places to defend from the forces of evil, the Hero wouldn't just be bereft of a reason to get out of bed in the morning, he'd not have a reason to be written into a story at all!

Apologies, I get excited when vouching for us Peasants. Lissauer certainly did hit the nail just right when she said that us readers are just like the Peasants. Perhaps that's another reason why the idea of the "Hero" has endured so long in various mythologies, why we long for them to become "inescapably ours." Sometimes, we just like to feel like we're witnessing, even taking part in, something grander and greater than ourselves.

To turn our attentions back to more unsung M. fantasy authors, consider Tobias S. Buckell's "The Eve of the Fall of Habesh." Remarkably, within a short story, Buckell paints a vivid picture for his Habesh, yet his point-of-view character, Jazim, remains always at the street level, as a Peasant. Because Habesh is a city where magic is extremely common, Jazim's own magical skills do not set him far apart from his countrymen. While we will be revisiting Jazim and Habesh again soon when we visit our Friar, Jazim's brand of magic (sealing off other peoples' magic) warrants investigation into how Peasants can explore agency and power typically-reserved for Heroes. As we've already seen with our own Peasant, a character like Jazim is still allowed to express agency and exercise power, but Buckell writes Jazim as a Peasant confined to the streets of Habesh, only ever using his magic to threaten, coerce, or extort those afraid of losing their powers. Jazim merely survives, rather than thrives, because of his powers. Fittingly, towards the beginning of "Fall of Habesh," Jazim notes that, "Our greatest villains are often out daily habits" (Buckell 38). By starting his narrative on a note of the everyday, Buckell colors his world of magic and war through the lens of a Peasant. Jazim demonstrates that a Peasant can wield a variety of powers and skills, but by keeping a characters' life and desires at a street level, they remain Peasants. Meanwhile, we can see Culture and Commerce play out in this very village. Our Peasant's carriage wasn't carrying the sick. Instead, she's decided to use her wealth to pay for the services of half a dozen of the city's best doctors. Our Hero contended with the macro-sized Commerce of a city-corrupting monster, and now it falls to our Peasant to deal with the fallout at a personal, Cultural level. Commerce and Culture are cyclical; our Peasant employs six doctors to heal perhaps a score of sick farmers, thus keeping this village alive and health. Consequently, the village and its farmers will continue to support the city on a

macro level. So, let's head inside the town hall, which has become converted into an impromptu hospital, and observe our Peasant at work, adapting to the micro consequences of macro actions. It wasn't chance that brought our Peasant and her carriages here; she has a special affection for these folks. So, the sight of these people falling ill and their homes falling into neglect weighs heavy on our Peasants' mind, not unlike Negative Tension.

I have another graphic for us, this one to demonstrate the cyclicity of Culture and Commerce. Similar to our first graph on Tension, I hope that this visual aid helps to lay some groundwork for potential scholarship around M. fantasy, as well as refinement of the genre's craft. By putting a name and appearance to these fundamental mechanisms of this genre, a shared understanding of the genre's operation will be reached. But, I still certainly encourage engagement and wrestling with this visualization. It need not be taken as hard dogma.

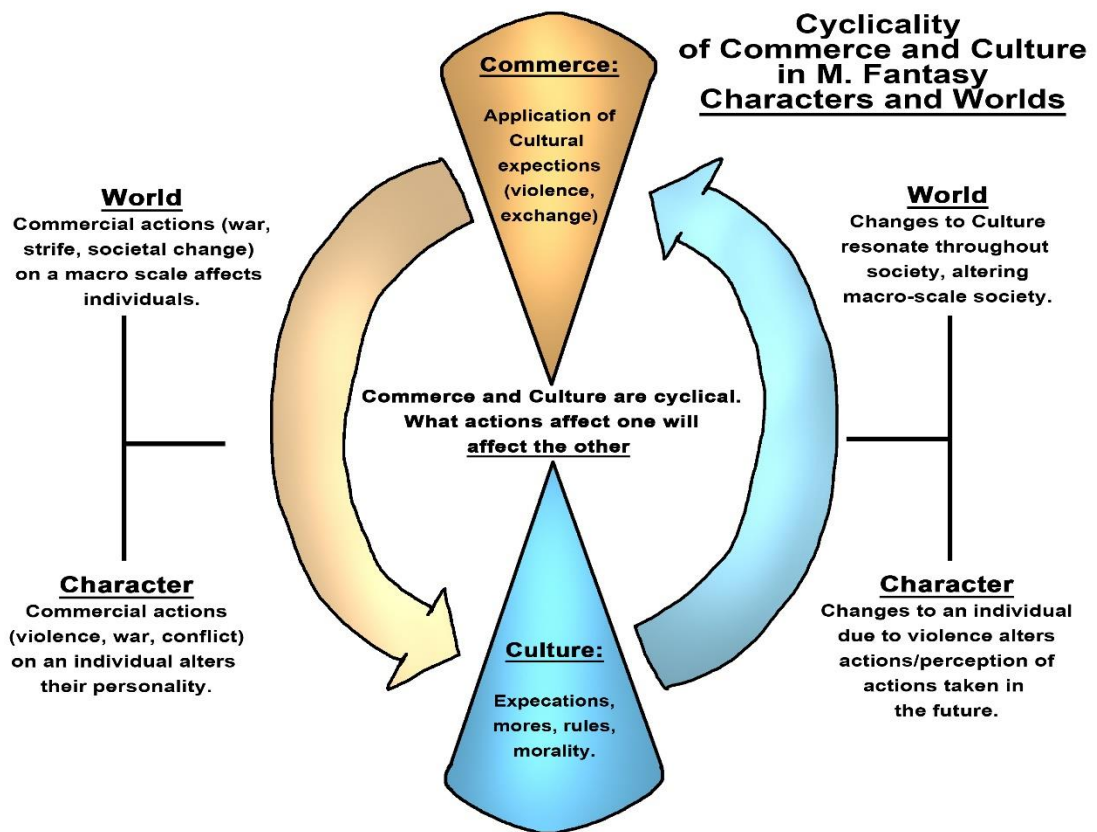


Figure 2: The Cyclicity of Commerce and Culture



This all being said, and as we do our best to give our Peasant the space and peace to do what she needs to, we can turn to Carl Freedman's article, "A Note on Marxism and Fantasy." I had thought to approach the Peasant-Hero relationship in fantasy through a lens of power structures, especially considering the proletariat position that real-world medieval peasants often occupied, but Freedman's stance on fantasy has complicated that plan. Considering that he is one of the only scholars to approach fantasy from a Marxist perspective, I feel as though we must take what little we have to work with.

Freedman accepts what he calls the "Suvinian concept of science fiction as literature of cognitive estrangement" while also maintaining that fantasy is distinguished from science fiction because of its "irrationalist estrangements of... ahistorical modes," supposedly inherent in fantasy (Freedman 2). Freedman's stance on fantasy echoes some of the criticism already leveled against the genre. His belief that fantasy is irrational and removed from reality certainly echoes the comments about "formulaic chaff" being the mainstay of the genre. Freedman continues by explaining that fantasy, "may secretly work to ratify the mundane status quo by presenting no alternative to the latter other than inexplicable discontinuities," and thus begins his exploration of the genre as irresponsibly neglecting power structures which he, from a Marxist outlook, sees as vital to estrangement fiction like science fiction (Freedman 2). And, while Freedman does cite Tolkien as being one of the most influential modern authors of fantasy, he finds Tolkien's world, "thin and impoverished... it is miles wide but only inches deep" (Freedman 3). Freedman's frustration stems from Tolkien neglecting class conflict. He states that, "Through three thick volumes, there is... hardly a single importance instance of... class conflict," and then he continues on to mention that the only instances of social division, one which he calls, "embarrassingly

paternalistic” is between Frodo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee (Freedman 3). On the surface, I think that Freedman’s argument has a place in our discussions about M. fantasy. As I previously mentioned, the Peasant is a criminally-missing archetype in most M. fantasy works, precisely because the Hero is such an attention-demanding figure, both for the reader and for the people of the Hero’s world.

So, to an extent, I can follow Freedman’s thinking when he mentions that, “Middle-earth leaves out most of what makes us real human beings living in a real historical society,” and taking umbrage with the lack of attention given to class and labor relations in Tolkien’s work (Freedman 3). However, I attest that Tolkien’s hobbits, in direct to what Freedman argues, remain the most fully-realized Peasants in M. fantasy, and Tolkien still expertly handles the unique elements of Culture which they bring to his work and the genre. And yet, I believe Freedman completely misses the deeper connections between Culture and “home” which Tolkien creates. To demonstrate, Freedman goes on to say that, “Tolkien’s world is one in which the great majority of the actual material interests— economic, political, ideological, sexual— that drive individuals and societies are silently erased, to be replaced by the dominant obsession of the entire trilogy, namely, the abstract and essentially vacuous metaphysical battle between good and evil” (Freedman 3-4). All elements of economics, politics, ideologies, and familial relations are centered around the “home” and its successfully-maintained health and stasis. This domestic stasis, and the intimate details which comprise a home, is directly comparable to the Cultural elements of an M. fantasy secondary world.

Whether “home” denotes a community, a physical building or house, an entire country, or a state of mind, it represents the Cultural elements of a character in their

environment. Freedman is correct in that those elements are what anchor us as “real human beings,” but he mistakes for *causes* what are actually the *effects* of “home.” “Home” directly implies stasis, order and reliability enough to construct concrete morality, family structures, and economic health. Whereas our Hero thrived on the battlefield, our Peasant is the master of the home.

To further elucidate the Cultural importance of home to the Peasant, consider the “so what” behind the battle between good and evil in *Lord of the Rings*. What will be lost in Middle-Earth, should evil triumph? The Peasant hobbits wish to preserve their homes (in contrast to the Heroes such as Aragorn or Gandalf, which seek to go on the offensive and destroy Sauron). Once their home is saved and stasis restored, Sam Gamgee can marry Rosie Cotton, Frodo can retire to the Grey Havens, and Pippin can become the 32<sup>nd</sup> Thain, ruling the Shire and presiding over its restored landscape and egalitarian, pastoral society. The triumph of the hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings* is a chiefly Cultural one. As Freedman, if accidentally, observes, the hobbits’ Culture forms the spiritual heart of the series. Home is the precursor to all elements of family, economy, and power. Therefore, home lies at the center of the hobbits’ motivation to destroy evil, which they ultimately succeed at.

Our Peasant, and her desires for stasis and peace, in contrast to the Heroes’ predilection and aptitude for change and transformative conflict give off the impression that they are wan in the Commerce department, thereby running into the same deficiencies as M. fantasy Heroes who may lack Culture. However, recall the previous infographic about the cyclicity of Commerce and Culture. While our Hero effects Commerce at a macro-level, the reverberations of our Heroes’ actions are felt at a more intimate, Cultural level, changing the lives of the people at ground level. Recall how the people had gathered around our Hero

after his victory against the corruption. Their lives will forever be changed by our Hero's action. And now, consider that the sick people which our Peasant is helping to heal now would not be the last of the sick had the Hero not struck down the heart of the corruption.

To demonstrate the Commercial powers of a Peasant, Tolkien, again, provides. Susan Jeffers, in her book *Arda Inhabited*, argues, "For the hobbits, the 'treasure' is 'lasting security for the idyll of the Shire... Frodo's actions... are motivated... by a deep love for their home, a love that is rooted in a relationship with the Earth..." (Jeffers 35). Between the songs, cooking, and morality deeply rooted in the Shire, the hobbits carry their Culture with them through their journey across Middle-Earth. Ultimately, the hobbits in the Fellowship wish to save Middle-Earth, but their hearts always belong to the Shire. To the hobbits, the Shire *is* Middle-Earth, it is their entire world, the home they wish to protect. To see this cyclical relationship between Culture and Commerce work through the hobbits, we can examine the Scouring of the Shire. Throughout Tolkien's trilogy, nearly all of the Heroic violence was enacted by non-hobbit characters, but the Scouring demonstrates how a Peasant would handle society-changing violence, that most Commercial of character actions.

Even when faced with death and defilement in their own shattered home during the Scouring of the Shire late in *The Return of the King*, the hobbits show restraint in their application of violence, thereby again showing their desire for a return to normalcy, not the destruction of evil. The hobbits' undying love for the familiar, peaceful of their home, the Shire, results in both a military and moral victory over Saruman and his forces. Frodo instructs his allies that, "There is to be no slaying of hobbits, not even if they have gone over to the other side... No hobbit has ever killed another on purpose in the Shire, and it is not to begin now" (Tolkien 310). Even when betrayed by their own people and forced to take up

arms, an action virtually unheard of in the Shire, the hobbits' violence is colored by their love of home and peace. Ultimately, Saruman and his ilk are cast out of the Shire and the hobbits keep their moral high ground, reflecting their strong Cultural ties, despite the very Heroic action they just undertook to keep their homes safe.

Unfortunately, beyond Tolkien's works, Peasants so rarely appear in M. fantasy. When a character begins as a Peasant, they very oftentimes become a Hero in both action and mindset at some point in the narrative. Meaning, they adopt a leadership, Commercial role while downplaying their focus on Culture. Brian McClellan's *Powder Mage* trilogy, despite its attention to gunpowder and "flintlock fantasy" still fits into my earlier-established definition of M. fantasy because of its attention to Commerce and Culture, worldbuilding, and violence, displays one of the few visible Peasants I see in popular modern M. fantasy.

McClellan's trilogy depicts a military coup to overthrow the monarch of the nation of Adro, and the Adran military's struggle, spearheaded by the venerable Field Marshal Tamas, to retain control over its newly-democratized country. As the series' name implies, a cadre of magic users skilled at manipulating gunpowder are prominently featured, and many of the protagonist characters exhibit great skill with this gunpowder magic. However, here I want to look at Adamat, one of the very few protagonists in McClellan's series that boasts neither an impressive military career nor magical powers. Thus, Adamat is the only point-of-view characters to fit into the Peasant archetype. Adamat serves as a hired inspector for Field Marshal Tamas; though tasked with investigating a vague curse that seems poised to punish Tamas for overthrowing the Adran monarchy, Adamat spends much of the trilogy working for Tamas, though he always views Tamas as a means to an end. Although Adamat is often actively trying to change the world around him, both in his investigations and in various

swordfights throughout the series, his ultimate goal always remains a return to stasis and a preservation of home. Adamat is always a follower, as a proper Peasant should be, and he is more concerned with protecting his family and home, instead of fighting to remake and protect Adro like Field Marshal Tamas, a proper Hero.

While Adamat is afforded a kind of diplomatic immunity from his connection to Tamas, he oftentimes finds himself far over his head when confronted with more well-connected and physically-skilled opponents. More importantly to his role as a Peasant, his interests stay at street-level, centered around individuals dear to him, such as his wife and family. As Adamat succinctly tells his wife, shortly after the Adran monarchy was destroyed and civil unrest seemed imminent, “I’m an investigator, my dear. Other people’s business *is* my business... I want you and the children out of the city within the hour” (McClellan 41). Adamat’s attention, in all books in the trilogy, are centered around his family and their well-being, even holding them in higher regard than the country and man he works for. As I mentioned, his affinity for Culture is heavily influenced by his occupation and his adherence to common, decent human values, like the safety of his dear family and the preservation of stasis in his home.

Even as Adamat dabbles briefly in politics later in the series, his mind is always turned towards home and family, much like Tolkien’s Hobbits. And, it’s through Adamat’s eyes that Adro becomes a *living, breathing* world (quibbles with McClellan’s relatively light worldbuilding notwithstanding for now). His lens is vital to involving readers in the Culture of the sphere of society he occupies. Similarly, Adamat spends much of the first book in the series literally prowling the streets and integrating himself with the culture which makes up small parts of Adopest. As the royalist forces attempt to oust Field Marshal Tamas, Adamat

notes that, “It was a damned nightmare... Two of the Nine’s most celebrated commanders fighting off in a city of a million people... Yet life went on. People still needed to work, to eat” (McClellan 103). In order to protect himself as he carries on his investigation, Adamat also recruits his old friend, a boxer named SouSmith from an underground fighting pit. So, although Adamat is working, officially, for Field Marshal Tamas, he relies on his fellow Peasants, his street-level connections, to support him. Peasants are, by their nature, pack creatures. While Heroes stand apart from the common folk, Peasants cluster together, for protection against the forces which often rage around them which are out of their control to control, fix, or even avoid.

Our meditations on how Culture and Commerce can help define how medieval fantasy uniquely approaches change and war, preservation and home, will be one of the genre’s unique contributions to the wider literary world. Then, once the genre has its own caste of Marxist, anthropologist, and ecocritical critics (amongst others), we fantasy writers can be assured that our genre is on its way to bringing down its high walls.

Here, we should consider what Susan M. Bernardo writes in her introduction to *Environments in Science Fiction, Essays on Alternative Spaces*: “Both the unforeseen consequences of place attachment, and our ideas about place itself, can be complex... A sense of place, then, is not necessarily a static concept, despite our notion that it offers us grounding and stability” (Bernardo 3). Such an observation poignantly defends the importance of Culture in speculative worlds, as well as the people that live in them. M. fantasy is unique poised to imagine completely alien worlds (even more alien than science fiction) with races, magic, and histories completely detached from any and all historical roots (what Freedman would call “ahistorical modes,” no doubt). Even the “medieval” aspect of

M. fantasy is flexible. More and more often now, we can see M. fantasy works integrating elements of magitech, steampunk, and science fiction in its worldbuilding<sup>8</sup>. However, because of those works' continuing contrast between violence and home, Culture and Commerce, they can still be defined as medieval fantasy due to the mechanisms which actuate them.

While the chance to explore such exotic lands and people is intoxication for the imagination, we fantasy writers must try to remember what all the people and places we write into existence must depend upon: Culture at a micro level, attaching the everyday people to a sense of home and stasis, and Commerce at a macro level, attaching the exemplary Hero to a sense of society and paradigm shifts. When these two work together harmoniously, the genre can begin to reach the heights of good writing, within the unique genre parameters of M. fantasy, which is a prerequisite for any significant scholarly work to be done with this genre.

Our Peasant exemplifies much of the Cultural, down-to-earth desires for preservation and healing that Tolkien displayed with his hobbits. Unfortunately, our Peasant has very little experience with physical injury or treating sickness. She built her carriage empire from the ground up after apprenticing under her humble wheelmaker father. And yet, she's in the thick of the sickness with the doctors she had brought with her. Sleeves rolled up, fine silks stained bodily reds and greens, our Peasant displays the soul of her archetype. Our Peasant is willing to wield temporary power to alter the Culture of a place or people, focusing on individuals, home, and street-level problems. Our Peasant is not going to be saving this city, nor even will her actions save more than a few dozen lives, but her commitment to healing, stability, and a

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<sup>8</sup> Novels in the *Warcraft*, *Discworld*, *Wheel of Time*, *Dungeons and Dragons*, and *Power Mage* series are notable for blending elements of magic-fueled technology and/or Industrial Revolution-esque steam machinery while allowing monsters, magic, and swordfights to remain in the limelight.



return to a harmonious stasis of the home makes her actions just as heroic (just not as clearly Hero-ic) as our Hero.

Here is where I would like to bring in my own writing from my novel *The Sound of the Storm* to explore just one of the many shapes that these meditations on the Peasant and Culture can manifest outside of Tolkien's work. Of course, my implementation of Culture and the Peasant are not to be taken as a new gold standard, but my writing is merely one of many paths that can help bring M. fantasy out from its insular walls and out into the wider literary world. Plus, I'd like to show that I can walk the path that I'm laying out. And I will happily be the canary that goes down into the mine first. Similar to observing our Hero and Peasant, my writing in *The Sound of the Storm* is meant to be demonstrative, rather than prescription. I have merely applied my own thoughts on Commerce and Culture, purposefully, to a work of M. fantasy.

William, *Sound's* primary protagonist, is a Peasant. William is physically weak, plagued with fear about those more powerful than him, and wields no magical powers. However, what William possesses is a talent for connecting with his fellow Peasant and having a close connection to the morals and stasis which composes "home." I began *Sound* with William resolving to construct a pair of coffins for a mother and child who, ominously, drifted into his city's bay a few days prior. I decided to begin William's journey by giving him the chance to sacrifice some of what he owned: money, time, and comfort in order to do a service to the greater good— a very Commercial action. I also ensured that William's actions did not shift societal paradigms, as a true Hero's would. By remaining concerned with home and the individual, William balances Commerce and Culture, allowing the reader to see the secondary world through an everyman's eyes while still affording him agency.

Early in that first chapter, William finds the corpses of a mother and child drifting into Harbiton's bay. He hauls them from the water and hands their corpses over to the Faithful, the clergy of the city. I write, "The Faithful had taken the mother and child from William after he found them, but without a proper burial, meaning a coffin and funerary resignation pyre to immolate their close personal possessions, their souls would never be able to float up to heaven" (Wettengel 2). With the Culture of Harbiton informing William's decision, he is compelled to act, to justify and exercise his morals. Meanwhile, come the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter, Alistair Steinholt, a young and impetuous lord, comes to rule Harbiton in his aging father's stead and lead the city into a war that had previously stagnated. Alistair is the primary antagonist of *Sound*, though not because he opposes William. In fact, Alistair considers William an ally, even a friend. However, William's strict code of non-violence and his fear of the nobility keeps him constantly at odds with Alistair's predilection for heavy-handed justice and bloodshed (such as the public execution he conducts in chapter 8). So, William's quest forces him to fight, in his own ways, to preserve the home and Culture which he holds so dear. The potential for a Peasant to take the reins of Commerce has already been documented and discussed in Tolkien's work, as well.

Thomas Kullmann writes in his article, "Metaphorical and Metonymical Meaning in *The Lord of the Rings*" that, "Frodo's quest could not be undertaken by any of our friends or neighbors, but it is certainly in many ways similar to ambitions, enterprises or tasks we may have set ourselves and which have resulted, or may result, in success or failure" (Kullmann 55). As we've seen with our Peasant, anybody can possibly take up the mantle of responsibility, even at this individual level. So, no, as Kullmann points out, our friends or neighbors will likely not be a Frodo Baggins or William of Harbiton (forgive me for how

heretical it is to even compare the two like that), but the *potential* still exists. I could imagine that M. fantasy writers would be remiss to push some of their Heroes to the sidelines in favor of Peasant characters. However, as we saw with Frodo, an engaging balance between Culture and Commerce can exist to bridge character and world. In order for medieval fantasy to achieve its apotheosis, this balance, as well as the cyclicity of Commerce and Culture should be maintained to best emphasize M. fantasy's unique characters and worldbuilding elements.

Our Peasant seems to think that she's done her part. Not by her own admission; the people of this village are shooing her away, as politely as possible, and telling her to get some rest before she joins the sick on their beds. On any ordinary day, our Peasant wouldn't give the time of day to these farmers. Running her business occupies much of her time, and from her manor in the Gilded Front, a wealthy neighborhood, she has not crossed the paths of people like this since she was a young woman. This interaction before your very eyes is as extraordinary, if not even more so, than the corruption beneath the cobblestones. These stories at the ground level, where survival and home form the crux of the drama, are so rarely told. The people of this city do love their Heroes, as they should. Such magnetic people are almost impossible to ignore. But, when the stories of these little people go untold, it can make an outsider believe that this city is built on the back of hedonistic violence and adventure. Just because these stories are smaller does not mean that they are any less powerful.

Exhausted from her long day of working, with another day possibly before her, our Peasant is heading back home. I don't think she'll mind much if we hitched a ride back to the city on her carriage. We are on a tight schedule to meet with the Friar, the next person we

will be observing. Like our Peasant, the Friar is a person of Culture. With him, we can examine how M. fantasy constructs its imagined worlds, another cornerstone of the genre.

*From the back of the carriage, the city streets still seem cold and unkind. The people are healing, but the corruption will not just vanish with the monster's fall. Though the streets around the carriage are empty by choice, the streets that the Friar stalks were abandoned out of necessity. The corruption has damage to the city beyond just its citizens. Whole neighborhoods are destitute and corpse-like.*

## CHAPTER 4 THE FRIAR

*The corruption beneath the streets has been worming around this city for some years. So, while our Peasant, among others, assists the afflicted people of this city, it falls to men and women tied to the land, our Friar and Monarch, to maintain the health of the city itself. Economy, politics, culture, and history must be preserved if the people of this city, or anybody who ventures through the high walls, wishes to feel grounded and part of a living, breathing world.*

Come, come, things are developing in the streets. Heaven only knows if the people are still fawning over their Hero, but, for now, we have time and space to roam the streets unopposed. Now, we will have the perfect opportunity to see the Friar in action as he tries to stymie this mysterious corruption. The Friar works for the Monarch— they have much in common. He and his ruler are connected to their land. By extension, as we observe our Friar and Monarch in action, we should look at them as embodying the worldbuilding aspect of M. fantasy. While the Friar patrols the streets, helping to craft the Culture of this place on a micro level, the Monarch rules from her fortress on high, more concerned with the larger scale macro Commerce which can shape entire peoples and nations. It's only natural that we pivot off of the Hero and Peasant, individuals in larger systems, to the creators of these larger systems. And our Friar, like the Monarch he works with, is a living embodiment of the world and environment. This element of personifying and characterizing an environment is a vital element of M. fantasy realizing its literary potential through its worldbuilding.

I briefly spoke about this particular matter earlier in my work, but I feel it prudent to

bring up once again. M. fantasy's worldbuilding style is completely unique. Only science fiction could possibly hold a candle to the extent which M. fantasy writers must construct their worlds. However, science fiction worlds are very often either in the future or in an alternate past. Either option still relies on some grounding in historical reality. Even works like Le Guin's aforementioned *Left Hand of Darkness* hints at how humanity as we know it has evolved to take the shapes it does in the novel. Medieval fantasy, however, must invent entirely new realities. Even when inspiration is taken from our own medieval times, the elements of castles, swords, and knights are all recontextualized to fit the historical continuity of the invented world. M. fantasy, therefore, needs to accept its talent for worldbuilding like it needs to accept its talent for violence. And yet, similar to M. fantasy's violence, its worldbuilding is often over-Commercialized; the world is often viewed through the lens of the Hero and their very Commercial actions. Recall how our Peasant was trying to cope with the consequences of the Hero's actions. These street-level Cultural elements of worldbuilding often go unsung in the same way that the Peasant characters do. Our Friar will help illuminate the mechanics and importance of this element of M. fantasy worldbuilding.

More specifically, our Friar will show that in order for M. fantasy to reach its apotheosis, to be the best version of itself that it can be, it must embrace all dimensions of its worldbuilding uniqueness. Medieval fantasy worlds are, in a sense, entirely new realities; they are complete with fictional people, creatures, fundamental forces of the universe (magic), and history. The sheer depth of worldbuilding achievable through M. fantasy is unparalleled. However, demonstrating that fact to readers requires attention to the Cultural.

As per usual, our observations of the Friar and Monarch will be demonstrative, while my own points will be elaborative. I'd like to return to what Susan M. Bernardo writes in her

introduction, that “Both the unforeseen consequences of place attachment, and our ideas about place itself, can be complex... A sense of place, then, is not necessarily a static concept, despite our notion that it offers us grounding and stability” (Bernardo 3). This ‘sense of place,’ if it wasn’t already evident from the title of the book I drew the quote from, is rarely examined by critical scholarship when it comes to fantasy (to say nothing of M. fantasy). Tolkien’s work, unsurprisingly, has some attention given to scholarly environmental studies, however. And yet, I believe that Bernardo’s point still lends itself to our current discussion of fantasy. As our Friar will show us, the Culture aspect of M. fantasy, the myriad of small details which compose much larger places, is indeed one of the primary grounding and stabilizing elements in the genre. And, as we saw with the Peasant, Culture is oftentimes disregarded in M. fantasy works in favor of a Hero’s Commerce, relegating worlds to mere backdrops. The end result, similar to the weightlessness of Positive Tension, is a lack of grounding in a place and time, a fatal mistake for a genre known for its imagined worlds and worldbuilding depth. This weightlessness and lack of attachment to place may be the root of the unfortunate perception of M. fantasy worlds being cookie-cutter 13<sup>th</sup> century Europe caricatures. However, like fantasy’s violence, great potential lies largely-untapped. By examining and defining the mechanisms at work in fantasy worldbuilding, hopefully we can elucidate a path forward for the genre.

With that preamble, let us pass through this gate, moving right into the troubled streets beyond. This area here is one of the most afflicted neighborhoods of the city, as you can plainly see through the lightless windows and open doors. But, the abandonment of a human dwelling goes beyond simple sight, doesn’t it? Listen to the furtive footsteps that haunt the thoroughfares and that haunting clanging of distant windchimes. The corruption

has not simply redefined what this place looks like, but the people themselves have reflected their environments. Recall the graphic I showed when we were visiting our Peasant. Culture and Commerce are cyclical. What affects one *must* affect the other. Medieval fantasy is uniquely gifted in that it can go further than any other genre to create entirely new places, histories, and people. However, when this integral part of M. fantasy becomes relegated to background information, the worlds do not feel fully-alive because they are not vivified through the lives of a character. And, if the windows into a fantasy world are flawed, so too is the reader's understanding of that world. Consequently, damning audience apathy results from a lack of understanding.

We have already seen the balm to this potential apathy when we examined our Hero. A sense of Tension should permeate a place's Culture. After all, it is remarkably hard to lose something if you never possessed it in the first place. So, by constructing a full Culture in a place, that place will be at risk of tremendous loss. Tolkien's work, as we will soon examine, establishes both a depth of Culture as well as a strong sense of Tension and potential loss in his famous Shire.

But, here comes our Friar now. His garb is certainly non-traditional, eschewing long, dour-colored robes for more athletic, colorful attire. Why the shift? Well, since the corruption, the clergy of this land have become weekend scientists (notice also our Friar's many flasks and jars hanging from his belt). The colors serve to lighten the dark scenes they travel to. They don't want to appear as deacons of death, after all. Bad for city morale. Stay close, he's going up to one of the few lit houses on this street. He knocks and a healthy-looking couple answer the door; you can imagine how happy that must make our Friar. Notice the cluster of what seems to be windchimes just to the right of the door. But, like a



bouquet of flowers, they're all tied up, barely making a sound in the breeze. That's a good sign, as we can see on the Friar's face. He thanks the couple for their time, wishes them well, and off he goes again. Let's follow him for a time, just keeping an eye out as he passes through the streets. Oh, notice right there— the windchimes are unbound and are clanging mournfully against that unlit home to our left. It's a sad, lonely sound, isn't it?

Tolkien understood the importance of weaving true life into a place to make it feel, for lack of better terms, *real* and *lived in*. When Tolkien constructed his iconic Shire, he did not craft it entirely out of what a visitor would see or read about. Early in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tolkien writes that, as Bilbo Baggins' auspicious birthday approaches, "One morning the hobbits woke to find the large field, south of Bilbo's front door, covered with ropes and poles for tents and pavilions... The three hobbit families of Bagshot Row... were intensely interested and generally envied. Old Gaffer Gamgee stopped even pretending to work in his garden" (Tolkien 27). Tolkien's Shire pulses with life in a way that speaks to the many unspoken machinations (trade, goings-ons of the day, friendships between neighbors, culinary tastes) which transform "place" from a static picture to a breathing organism. Tolkien's contextualization of an event so tied to hobbit Culture (the throwing of elaborate, food-filled parties) through the eyes of the individuals within that Culture, Gaffer Gamgee in this case, shows how subtly, yet purposefully, a place's Culture can change. The Shire's stasis is disrupted slightly because of Bilbo's party. As readers, to echo what we examined from Lissauer's work earlier, these small changes to place and people resonate more easily with regular people like us than it would with any Hero. This connection between fictional place and reader requires this Cultural legwork to function in M. fantasy.

Inspired by Tolkien, I constructed Harbiton, the central metropolis of *Sound of the*

*Storm*, with a similar place-centric *modus operandi* in mind. Here's an excerpt from the very first chapter of *Sound*: "William lifted his face and nose to the sky. From his home's balcony, all of the city could flow into him. The last day of spring felt much like the first: sunny, warm, and filled with seagulls and the scent of salt from the ocean. The earthy scents of thyme and fresh pasta hung like mist off the shore. Not two streets down, the first pewter bells were being strung outside of shop doors. Harbiton was a banquet which fed people's souls" (Wettengel 3). The point-of-view character here is nearly-blind, so I chose to rely on less-conventional methods of constructing place. I was inspired by Tolkien to actuate Culture by painting a place with smells, motion, and people. I also elected to construct a world which has its Culture contextualized through its primary characters; William's likes and dislikes play into what is observed about the world. His personal goals, inspired by the Culture around him, will dictate how he navigates through the world and how the plot progresses.<sup>9</sup> In that way, I aimed to construct a narrative that utilized the characters and plot events together to make the greatest use out of M. fantasy's unique worldbuilding elements.

Every story has its focus, but I don't believe that any medieval fantasy narrative can ignore the element of worldbuilding, an element so intrinsic to its literary identity. We, here and now, are following this brave, altruistic Friar. He works at the street level with individuals, for the sake of simple ideals of human decency, health, and safety. As a man of Culture, the Friar's world reflects his goals and desires, much like our Peasant.

Ah, now our Friar's leaving the tight streets and passing out into the neighborhood

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<sup>9</sup> Samwise Gamgee's Cultural desires color the way he moves through the plot of his narrative, too. Even as he and Frodo exhaustedly drag their way up Mount Doom in *The Return of the King*, Sam reflects on his home, imagining, "[paddling] in the Pool at Bywater with Jolly cotton and Tom and Nibs, and their sister Rosie" (Tolkien 231). Culture, in this way, is not a static collection of facts to be absorbed passively by the reader. Characters within the Culture actively move throughout it and, because Culture and Commerce are cyclical, the society the character lives in acts upon them as well.

square. Not too many people are around, though their hard gazes soften when they fall upon our friend, the Friar. The Monarch's royal spire casts a shadow here, as you can see at your feet, and it seems to fall the darkest over the well in the middle of the square. The water wells here, and this is true for every area afflicted with the mysterious corruption, are all locked up with iron grating and locks. People even seem to avert their eyes when they walk past them. While people across the city have likely heard of their Hero's victory by now, the corruption lingers on. In the previous chapter, I mentioned that some readers may find it strange that the story of his corruption continues after the monster has been slain. Once a secondary world is constructed, it must be interacted with, actively, by a character. Samwise Gamgee and William both viewed the places dear to them in such a way that readers can see the character and world developing simultaneously. This bonding of character and place alleviates the bothersome Positive Tension-esque weightlessness of a world. When a prominent character remains so tied to a place that their actions and personalities are radically changed as a result, the reader has an easy passage into a secondary world through the eyes of a character fully immersed within it.

I believe that a reason why medieval fantasy authors do not often develop their worlds at a Cultural level is because doing so would slow down the narrative. Thus far, we have seen the Friar inspect small windchimes (we have heard their baleful ringing, too), and how the wells are all guarded by locked iron gates. Along with the gates, recall those windchimes outside of peoples' homes; a reader may question which of details of a world are "worth paying attention to." A reader may assume, incorrectly in my eyes, that some worldbuilding details are simply "less important" than others.

A medieval fantasy world's Culture should be written in such a way that *every* detail

given is important. The role of building a world alongside a character to live in said world is to not only craft a place, but to give it purpose for being. Our Friar, who we see toiling against this nameless corruption, transforms a collection of details into an expression of his individuality. We see what our Friar values, based on what we see him paying attention to. We see his empathy, his commitment to health and home, and we see his inner strength which allows him to put on such a brave face in these dark times.

A reader should be able to read the intentions and values of a character in the world around them. George P. Landow writes, “Whereas the artist working with visual fantasy usually must place us immediately inside a fantastic kingdom, the creator of literary fantasy, who works with a narrative, sequential mode, has immersing us in his new world...” (Landow 125). Landow’s observation plays smoothly into my positions about Culture in medieval fantasy’s worlds. A world must be “immediate” with its connections in order to invite readers, both readers and non-readers of fantasy, in. And that world is contextualized through those who actively partake in it, creating a bridge between character and world.

Look again at the wells locked up with iron. While most passersby and residents, as we’ve already seen, are content to ignore the wells, our Friar made special note of them. The monster beneath the streets spread its corruption through the water supply. While most people of this neighborhood are content to ignore the wells, ‘see no evil’ and all that, our Friar actively looks at them as a symbol of the conflict. Also, when a building’s windchimes are neatly tied up, it means that the family living within is healthy and corruption-free. But, when a family is ‘*clanged*,’ so the regional saying goes, it means that, accidentally or otherwise, they drank from the diseased water and need to be evicted for the sake of public health. Most hope for the afflicted families’ recoveries, though some aren’t so hopeful. The

more folk who are ‘*clanged*,’ the louder the wind chimes toll and the worse folk seem to feel.

This setting has taken on a character, an agency and sense of self all its own. It is symbiotic and cyclical with our Friar. Stefan Ekman writes in his book, *Here be Dragons*, “It is not uncommon for critics to draw attention to the importance of the natural environment in fantasy. Some even go so far as to suggest that in fantasy, or in some kinds of fantasy, or in some fantasy works, the landscape can function as a character on one level or another” (Ekman 1). Ekman pays a tremendous amount of attention to Tolkien’s worldbuilding and his construction of maps as anthropological artifacts. Fittingly, then, here we can examine more of what Tolkien thought about the character of location.

Tolkien, thankfully, has had a wealth of scholarship written about his real-world inspirations for his secondary worlds. Tolkien has been very open about the source of inspiration for his *Hobbits* and the Shire. Humphrey Carpenter’s biography on J.R.R. Tolkien elucidates the connection between the *Hobbits* and Tolkien himself, as well as Tolkien’s love of England’s mythological tradition. Carpenter writes that, “[Tolkien] did feel, or hope, that his stories were in some sense an embodiment of a profound truth. This is not to say that he was writing an allegory: far from it” (Carpenter 99). Tolkien’s desire to create the Shire as an extension of his real-world beliefs and observations is an action of re-imagination, rather than allegory. Carpenter writes, “Tolkien himself was well aware of the similarity between real world and Secondary World. ‘I am in fact a hobbit,’ Tolkien once wrote...” and yet, the connection between Tolkien’s personal beliefs and his *Hobbits* goes deeper (Carpenter 179). Carpenter illustrates how, over the course of an interview, Tolkien reveals that the *Hobbits* were “‘just rustic English people, made small in size because it reflects the general reach of their imagination...’” (Carpenter 180). The importance of Tolkien’s admission cannot be

overstated here. Tolkien internalized the creation of his secondary world, elevating it from being a simple fantastical setting to a place deeply and intimately known to the author.

Consequently, when Frodo, Sam, or Bilbo move through the Shire, the undeniable liveliness seen and felt in the environment recalls the personal connection which the author had with the place. Additionally, while Tolkien's inspiration for the Shire was clearly rooted in the real world, he still wove an entirely new continuity for Middle-Earth. The Shire is not a hermit kingdom; the hobbits once roamed the northwestern reaches of the world, weathered the famine of the Long Winter and even aided in the war against the Witch-King of Angmar in the middle of the Third Age (Tolkien 3-5). Tolkien still constructed the Shire as a distinct place with genealogical lore, history, and Culture, despite its real-world inspiration.

Even Tolkien's elves, a race meant to be distant and alien from the rest Middle-Earth, are given life through the eyes of Tolkien's hobbits. The reader relies on these familiar characters to view an alien place in an understandable way. Upon reaching *Lothlórien* in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Samwise remarks to Frodo that, "[Elves are] all elvish enough, but they're not all the same. These folks aren't wanderers or homeless, and seem a bit nearer to the likes of us: they seem to belong here, more even than Hobbits do in their Shire. Whether they've made the land, or the land's made them, it's hard to say... If there's any magic about it, it's right down deep, where I can't lay my hands on it" (Tolkien 404-405). Sam's comment carries more weight than he knows. The land in Tolkien's world shapes its people, and the people, in turn, are shaped by the land. We have seen this demonstrated already in our Friar. A place's Culture, if it is to be fully-imagined, should be reciprocal. A bridge between reality and fantasy, as we saw with Tolkien's inspirations for his Shire, can be built.

This bridge facilitates a deeper connection with the imagined place. This connection, similar to the connection of a Hero to the weight of his violence, is key in demonstrating to readers that medieval fantasy worldbuilding represents a unique literary element which should be brought to light for the greater literary world to seriously examine; Tolkien's works have already started the trend, and now the trend must be continued and expanded.

Look back at the Friar again. The sun is being swallowed up by ominous clouds, but his eyes are always on the streets. This neighborhood he's just entered is certainly more well-to-do. The gardens are nearly palatial. Our Friar knows he isn't welcome here. How dare he intrude on the privacy and serenity of this well-kempt example of this city's societal best? As if the people here could ever, not even accidentally, partake in the corrupted water. Still, the chimes are outside their doors. And, unfortunately, after checking this most recent home, he solemnly unties the chimes, letting them blow freely in the cold wind. *Stay away*, the chimes say. *Only sorrow lives here now*. Our Friar walks to the next home, the waning optimism in his face swirling like oil on water. Like Tolkien's Hobbits and Elves, this location functions as a mirror onto the individuals who live in it. The Culture of this city reflects the Culture, in this case the hopes, social power, and fears, of the people within the city. Tolkien doesn't just build worlds, he *vivifies* them. But, let us continue to follow our Friar while we examine where our other writers have taken these worldbuilding ideas, and what a secondary world looks like when it is not Culturally vivified.

Brian McClellan's city of Adopest, the capital of Adro, functions as the center of *The Powder Mage Trilogy's* political and military conflict. Unfortunately, the city never receives a full profile in the same vein as Tolkien's Shire. At various points in their narratives, each point-of-view character in the trilogy will spend a significant amount of time in the

metropolis, though the city never displays that cyclical Cultural relationship that Samwise Gamgee hinted at when he reached *Lothlórien*. Instead, the city is highly Commercial, with its streets, shops, and, history going largely undeveloped and Culture of the city is given virtually never developed.

Field Marshal Tamas' antimonarchical rebellion crescendos early in *Promise of Blood*, Adopest becomes a war zone, with streets being converted into barricades or reduced rubble. Unlike Tolkien's Scouring of the Shire, Adopest's ruination does not connect firmly with its characters, neither the Heroes nor the Peasants. Early in *Promise of Blood*, during Tamas' revolution, Tamas' son, Taniel, visits the Samalian District, what is called, simply, a "nice part of town," by one of Taniel's associates, Gothen (McClellan 88). Even though Gothen is foreign to Adopest, he lacks the same place-based engagement as Samwise Gamgee. While it is true that Samwise is a Peasant through and through, Gothen's comment remains one of the very few elements of Cultural development which Adopest receives in three books.

Though Adamat, the series' resident Peasant, oftentimes stalks through individual streets in Adopest, the city's Culture, on the whole, lacks life. Naturally, its Culture does not play on the characters in any tangible ways. Although nearly half of *The Autumn Republic's* primary plot revolves around the first free election in Adran history, an event which would certainly alter a place's Culture, the narrative focus remains shockingly nearsighted. Intrigue, assassinations, violence saturate the city in the final book's climax, yet "the city" remains a foggy backdrop. A Hero or Peasant without a place to ground them feels lost, weightless.

Compare that feeling of weightlessness with the Tolkien's Hobbits again, which Tolkien described as being outwardly cynical of outsiders since well before *The Fellowship*



*of the Ring*. Tolkien writes that the Hobbits... “Even in ancient days [Hobbits] were, as a rule, shy of ‘the Big Folk’” (Tolkien 1). The isolationist, peaceful nature of the Shire only logically follows, given the various wars and conflicts the peaceful hobbits had been subjected to before settling the Shire. Even at a historical level, the Shire and its people feel grounded in place and history. I believe our Friar is going to head down that alley up ahead. Where he is going next will help demonstrate my point.

Contrast that feeling of life within a place with this long-forgotten section of the city we are walking through now. The roads are still cobblestone, the homes are still... present. But, the noise of the windchimes don’t reach here. This street was an abandoned construction project from some years past. So, see how the Friar simply walks down these streets, his goal clear in his mind and eyes straight ahead. The cobbles below him are just stones to facilitate his travel. The empty homes are just walls by any other name. This street is not a *place*, because it was never lived in. It exists to expedite our Friar’s journey. He will never look back after he passed through this place. A world like this feels forgotten, unformed. McClellan’s Adopest feels much the same way.

In his 318R lecture series on writing fantasy, posted on YouTube, Brandon Sanderson mentions the tried-and-true “iceberg theory” is the cornerstone of a realized secondary world. The depth in which the author understands their world should surpass what exists on the page. In that same lecture, Sanderson draws a wildly-askew iceberg, one which has almost no ice below the water, while at the same time stretching high into the air. Sanderson says that an iceberg like that would get “real boring, real fast in a fantasy novel” (Sanderson). And yet, I argue that this iceberg design recreates my earlier point that the problem of extraneous worldbuilding details lies in their application; this is a matter of degrees, not binaries.

I believe that Sanderson implies that overburdening the audience with worldbuilding details would distract their focus from the forward motion of the plot. And, perhaps shockingly, I disagree with Sanderson's iceberg. I have another graphic for you, the final one for our journey. My intentions for this piece remain the same as the previous ones. I wish to carve definition and mechanisms into a shared medieval fantasy discourse.

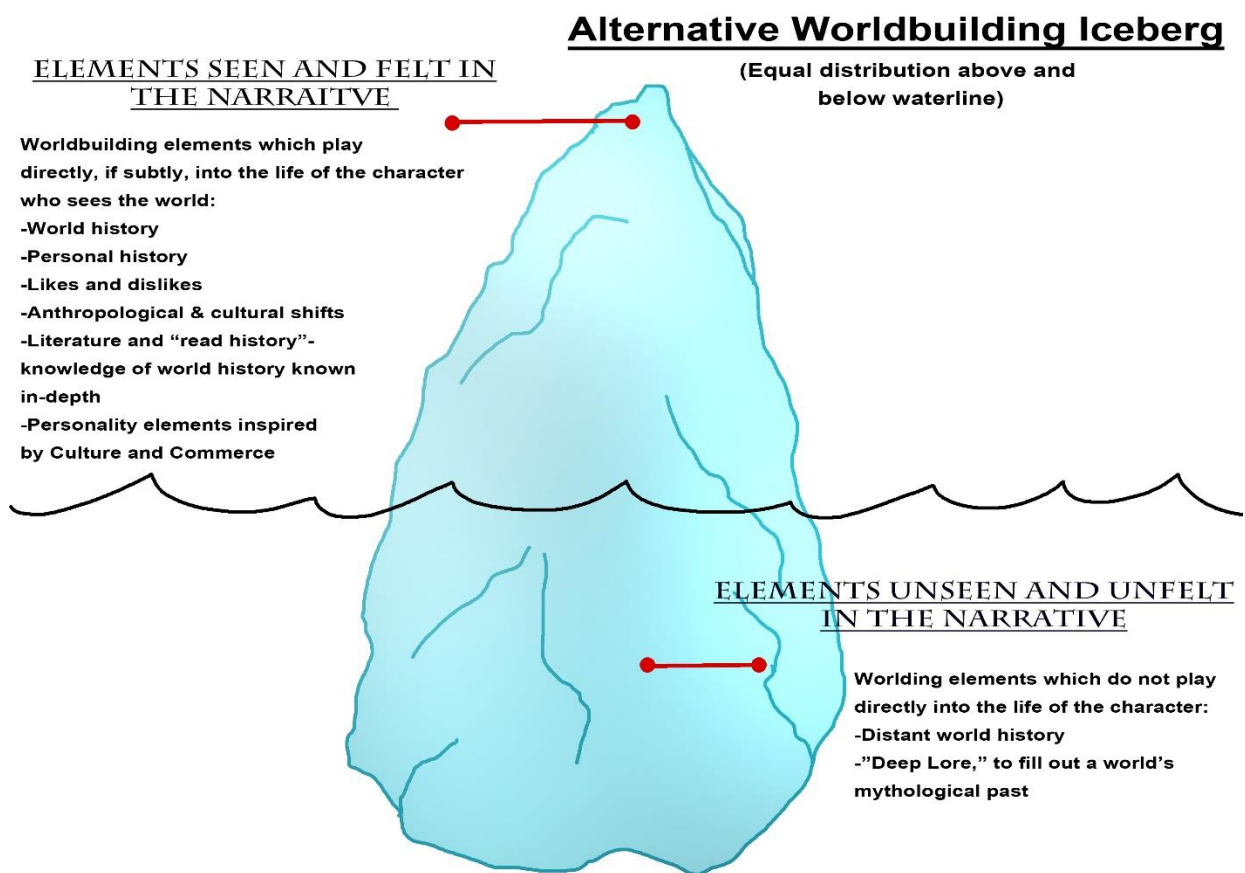


Figure 3: An alternative to the traditional iceberg model of worldbuilding

You see, I argue that the depths of the details need to be constructed in an iceberg manner to hint at their depth, all while exposing the audience, as often as possible, to the minor elements which compose the Culture and Commerce of a society's climate. The effect,

when done effectively, should be smooth and natural, as second-nature as glancing at a new sight and drawing conclusions about it automatically in that way that looking at worn stairs will make you believe that the stairs have seen years of use. We've already seen this idea in action, and we will see it more again right here.

Buckell's Habesh bears revisiting to see how a Culture, especially a tangled urban one, can be vitalized through a character as well as its environment, even in a short story. Recall how Samwise Gamgee was tied closely to the Shire, taking the Culture of his home with him during his journey; a character can vitalize a world through their perspective and attention, and vice-versa. Consider that Jazim spends the vast majority of the time in "The Eve of the Fall of Habesh" avoiding involving himself in the problems of others and trying to evade the politics from the consignorii and the approaching invasion of the mighty Sea People. However, Jazim's perspective betrays his apathy. He describes Habesh as, "The city is like a man who takes his last meal the night before his execution. People are dancing in the streets, drunk and fearful" (54). Combined with brusque, yet intimate descriptions of Habesh (particularly its Tannery district), Jazim's true love of his city appears through the details he can't help but pay attention to. This love of the city culminates in him standing alongside his fellow citizens in defense against the Sea People. Despite his earlier apathy towards the conflict, Jazim reflects that, "The ground shakes with [the Sea People's] march, and the impact of their projectiles... This glorious city, this citadel on the coast where you can find anything you wish, buy anything you want. Here is where destinies are made, and stories created" (58). Jazim, as a Peasant, is tied closely to his city's Culture. So, as we see with our Friar, a Culture can and should be vivified to the point where it takes on an agency powerful enough to act on the people who live within it. Such cyclicity instills a realness in which an

individual moves to the rhythm of their environment and vice versa.

Now, we can turn back to our Friar to see his own adventure through a city in distress. He's Friar arrived at what was once a particularly-afflicted part of the city (though the corruption has already begun to recede thanks to our Hero), now nicknamed Banshee Row from all of that infernal noise. There's a frame of old timber over the well in the center of the neighborhood. See how our Friar, who has been frantic and energized this whole time, now approaches the structure with a quiet reverence? Before the corruption was identified and measures were undertaken to contain it, vigilante justice reigned. A Banshee's Brace is what that gallows-liked structure is called— the first and only of its kind. Afflicted people were dropped into the well, ropes around their waists and stones around their feet, to return their sickness from whence it came.

Even if I hadn't unpacked all that history for you, anybody could see that the way the Friar's uncharacteristic solemnity at the sight of the structure would speak of its profound, troubled history. Dozens of lives and deaths are tied to that pile of timber, and the inhumanity associated with it has helped to make our Friar the sympathetic, altruistic man he is today. Our iceberg is jutting far above the water here, yet none of the details are obtrusive or obfuscating. Naturally, even more history and Culture exists below the water. If our Monarch were to come walking down these streets, she would see details that would have gone wholly unnoticed by our Friar. The same could be said for our Hero or our Peasant, too. Our Friar contextualizes the Culture and Commerce of this place. I believe we can contrast this with the lands of the Final Empire Sanderson's own *Mistborn: The Final Empire*.

Sanderson uses his world as an unmoving stage, rather than a fully-realized world that squirms with life. Certainly, *The Final Empire's* focus is much more on its Heroes, but with

no Peasant characters to operate at street-level, Sanderson's world is nearly always addressed through the eyes of its Heroes. Sanderson's *Final Empire*, the setting of his series, is seen through the macro-level eyes of its Heroes who see cities and manors as exclusively as military objectives and potential sites of political intrigue. Kelsier, the more active of the Heroes in *The Final Empire*, for instance, views Luthadel, the capitol of the Final Empire, as a battlefield to be conquered, and the narrative is wholly unconcerned with the street-level Culture of the city<sup>10</sup>.

When given the chance to explore the Culture of the Final Empire, beyond just Luthadel, Vin again views the worldbuilding details only as fuel for the greater narrative. When attending a noble ball as a spy, the very first which Vin had ever been to, Vin notices that stained-glass window in the host's mansion depicting the primordial evil force, the Deepness. She wonders to herself, when examining the Deepness' shape, "*What was it?... Why depict it so formlessly— why not what it really was? ...* Her instincts whispered scam. The Lord Ruler had invented some terrible menace that he'd been able to destroy in the past, therefore 'earning' his place as emperor... What if something like that *had* existed?" (Sanderson 222). Naturally, the Deepness, Lord Ruler, and his questionable rise to power are all vital elements of *The Final Empire*'s plot. This art could have played multiple rolls, of worldbuilding and plot, Culture and Commerce, becomes instead a vessel of simple foreshadowing. Not a soul in this ball, nor any other in the entire narrative, seems to

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<sup>10</sup> What little the reader learns about the city is, again, seen through the eyes of the Hero for the sake of the Hero's journey. Take Vin's reaction to hearing about Kelsier's plan to overthrow the Final Empire and free the skaa slaves: "*I've bound myself to a madman*, Vin thought... But that didn't really matter— not as long as he taught her Allomancy" (Sanderson 83). To Vin, the conflict between the skaa and their noble rulers is just a means to a selfish end. She has virtually no connections to the place or people central to the conflict; those same people, the same Cultures, which will be affected by the Commercial actions of the rebellion. Contrast Vin's outsider-looking-in perspective of the skaa to Samwise's or Frodo's perspective of their dearly-beloved Shire. The former looks in on a Culture while the latter live and breathe theirs.

acknowledge the profundity of a world-ending shapeless evil which once haunted the world. A savvy reader knows to read this window as foreshadowing, though a reader should have also felt the ripples of history and Culture resonating out from such art as well.

Even when Vin is given the chance to contextualize the world with her personal likes and dislikes, as we saw with our Friar earlier, the focus of the scene is quickly reclaimed by the demands of the plot's forward momentum. Vin, when arriving at the Renoux family mansion midway through *The Final Empire*, notes that, "[she] had never seen a cultivated garden... they were marvelous... The air felt cool, and the rustling of branches in the wind was soothing. Almost soothing enough, in fact, to make [her] forget how annoyed she was" (Sanderson 276). From there, Vin's attention returns immediately to the plot at hand, and the shift here between Vin's inner thoughts and her obligation to press on with the plot is jarring. Vin is catapulted out whatever spaces she occupies, and she isn't allowed to display her own Cultural values, ideals, and history in relation to the Culture around her. Sanderson's medieval fantasy works, as well as his writings on the genre, are prolific and influential. To a native of this land, Sanderson's magic and battles can be engaging and enjoyable. But, to readers outside of these walls, the missing Landow-ian "immediacy" in a fantasy world can be a death knell for a genre which desires and deserves to be taken seriously at a scholarly and academic level. This genre is inescapably tied to worldbuilding, as it is also tied to violence. It must innovate in its worlds to balance Culture and Commerce, character and place, plot and environment, if one of its foundational pillars of identity is to be strong and respected.

It's fortuitous that we come to this point of maps and macro-level political history now, as our Friar seems to have come to a kind of revelation— this corruption is far too large

of a task for him to conquer on his own, regardless of his skills and good intentions. He is making for the Monarch's fortress, where he can find a woman whose specialty lies in the managing of large-scale details and the Commerce of whole nations. She will prove an invaluable ally to him, and to us as well. So, let's follow our Friar closely and see what transpires.

*Far over the needle spires of this closed city, storm clouds gather like armies at the gates. The Monarch's royal spire stands lonely and defiant against the oncoming chaos. As much a symbol as a structure, only one in ten windows are lit. As the city wavers, so too does its leader. Tied to no particular street, the Monarch's heart beats for all of the city, all of its people. And as the city is racked with sickness, so is its ruler. The step-smoothed stairs leading up to the front doors carry the lonely echoes of a lone Friar as he ascends to meet with the lonely leader of nations.*

## CHAPTER 5 THE MONARCH

*The sky-rending tower of the Monarch cuts cleanly through the rare places where the sun shines through the clouds overhead. Luckily, the Monarch has kept her center of government on the ground floor of the citadel, but the shadow the tower casts is impossible to ignore. The weight of this entire world rests on the shoulders of the woman enthroned within. If there was ever a person with a Commercial mindset, somebody who sees a place as a system of large-scale machines working together to form a cohesive whole, it is the mighty Monarch.*

For a man of the cloth, our Friar is certainly athletic. The trials of the times really change one's paradigms, don't they? Luckily, our Friar left the door open to the Monarch's tower. Perhaps it's a security threat, so if you could just get the door behind you— ah, thank you. Yes, these mighty, imperial halls are more than a little empty these days. So much wasted space and potential. Perhaps the Monarch can do something about the interior design once this crisis is over. The Friar would be a good man to ask, he seems like the kind of person who would appreciate the small details of things.

For now, let's head up these stairs so we can observe our Monarch. She is the final archetype we will be observing, though she is, by no means, the end of this conversation on M. fantasy. Even if I had the space and time to write all my thoughts about this genre, I would not wish my voice to be the only one to arbitrate the terms and borders of M. fantasy criticism. Our Monarch is an expert when discussing borders and the conflicts which arise from them. And while our Monarch is more concerned with the pragmatic, practical application of borders, whereas we are more concerned with the intellectual defining of



borders as they relate to the unique elements of M. fantasy and its criticism, plenty of parallels may still be drawn.

The Monarch has, pragmatically, transformed her throne room into a war room. She cannot afford to waste time with this crisis at hand, so she has wed her place of governance with a place of war. A city like this, often besieged and menaced by hostile outside forces, certainly has a history that is steeped in conflict. Our Friar and Monarch have already gathered around the war map, a map of this city complete with markers to show the extent of the seeping corruption. Our Friar informs our Monarch that this city is far from being out of the woods just yet. There is a subtler war to fight now, one of quarantines and evacuations. And yet, what would planning for a war, that most Commercial of actions, be without the presence of— ah, here comes out Hero now.

Our focus for this section will be on the maps and history of place which compose the macro, Commercial aspects of M. fantasy worldbuilding. Like we saw with our Friar, worldbuilding is a defining trait of M. fantasy. However, the Friar showed that M. fantasy could, and should, attempt to explore every small-detail aspect of worldbuilding, our Monarch will show us that M. fantasy writers must also consider how they handle the ramifications of the wars and <sup>11</sup>large-scale events which often compose the background history of works in this genre. Therefore, our Hero's arrival is fortuitous. Think of our Monarch as the representative of an M. fantasy world undergoing change thanks, in large part, to the Commercial, oftentimes violent, actions a Hero. \Inasmuch as M. fantasy worlds must craft entirely alien Cultural continuities for their worlds, they must also create Commercial continuities. History, maps, wars, and large-scale forces of societal change must

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<sup>11</sup> Past wars/conflicts and military history, fitting for a genre inescapably tied to violence, are oftentimes the most common world-shaping events in M. fantasy.

be handled with Tension in mind. A place, when viewed from afar, like the map resting on the Monarch's table, which does not carry the weight of history feels positively Positive. A Hero who fights to defend their home country, for instance, can be rendered unbelievable if a reader does not see that country somehow vivified or actuated. I think it bears repeating, once again, that M. fantasy cannot escape its legacy of worldbuilding. Utilizing its maps to create nations at a macro level is as important, though oftentimes more common, as creating a place at the micro, Cultural level. Thus, an examination of these maps is still prudent to understanding the mechanisms of the genre.

Before us, on the war map at the center of the room, the problem at hand presents itself. The Gilded Front, where our Peasant lives with the other wealthiest members of the city, is the most-affliction section of the city. We actually passed through this section of the city earlier, with the Friar. It was the neighborhood with the palatial gardens. But, our Friar was unconcerned with the opulence and storied legacy of the Gilded Front, focusing more on its people. Consequently, we, as reader and observers, did not pay much attention to those details, either. I did mention that character and environment could defined and developed through perception, didn't it? Now, whether through the corruption's semi-sentient malice or simple happenstance, that district seems unnaturally afflicted. Regardless of the cause, the Monarch must choose her next steps very carefully. A military-enforced quarantine and evacuation of the area will be quick, if messy. A voluntary evacuation could result in avoidable causalities.

Maps, both the illustrations often found at the beginning of fantasy books, as well as the invoked maps<sup>12</sup> in the proper narrative, form the backbone of Commercial worldbuilding

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<sup>12</sup> These manifest themselves as the military, political, economical, or social decisions, at a national or international level, which characters in a narrative must consider. A clear example would be the invaluable

in M. fantasy works. Stefan Ekman suggests that we must consider the maps, either those included as full illustrations, or those invoked within the narrative, as being an integral part of the greater textual body. As he explains, “thinking of the fantasy map as a docume puts a stronger emphasis on the relationship between the narrative (text) and map. Rather than offering a threshold between fiction and reader, the map is part of the total fantasy document” (Ekman 21). Ekman’s assertion that a map in a fantasy text composes part of the greater narrative plays neatly into our discussions on Tension. Though, I admit, critically analyzing a fantasy novel’s map, especially when their detail level ranges from photorealistic to minimalist, can be an extremely difficult task on its own. However, if we consider maps as just a part of the greater narrative, we must hold it to the same standards of Tension. A fantasy map, both the physical and invoked, should carry a weight of history. As our Monarch is learning, an area on her map, one that she had largely overlooked for years, is suddenly in danger of great harm; either the corruption will deal great harm to the Front’s people, or the Monarch will irreparably damage the Culture of the place.

Tolkien’s maps did a wonderful job in creating the grounded-ness and weight of place that we previously examined alongside the Friar. Chris Brawley, a professor of humanities, religion, and English at Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, North Carolina, writes that Tolkien believed that, “there is nothing outside the sheer enactment of the game which holds the spectator there. This is what happens in a successful piece of fantasy. Enchantment takes over, and there is no questioning of the motivation for the work. One who is not an enthusiast for the game, Tolkien argues, has to be held by some other motivation for being there” (Brawley 97). The importance of Tolkien’s enchantment woven through his

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military position of Minas Tirith in *The Lord of the Rings*. The city acts as a shield against Mordor, so when it is besieged in the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, the potential ramifications of its falling are

worlds cannot be understated; Tolkien's enchantment comes from a fulfilled agreement he shares with his reader. Tolkien constructs his worlds, and we have already seen this in micro through the Culture of the Shire and Lothlórien, with the promise that he will weave the weight of history into his new reality. After combining the Commerce of Middle-Earth's history<sup>13</sup> with the street-level, individual Culture of Middle-Earth's societies, Tolkien illustrates the mechanisms in fantasy that allow a world to feel fully-realized. He infuses the weight of history, not dissimilar from the weight of violence that we saw happening when we examined our Hero, into his world so the worldbuilding choices feel grounded and purposeful.

Ekman further elaborates on the depth of history portrayed in his maps of Middle-Earth and how even hinting at the history of a place helps to realize a world. He writes of Tolkien's map of Middle-Earth in this way, "Even if nothing is known about [Middle-Earth], the location of a 'Lost Realm' gives the map temporal thickness. Along with the note stating that 'Here was of old the Witch-realm of Angmar' in norther Eriador, the references to the old kingdom actually cover the history from the founding of Arnor in the year 3320 of the Second Age, through its division into three realms in the year 861 of the Third Age, the establishing of Angmar..." (Ekman 61) As Ekman demonstrates, the history of Middle-Earth, as it appears in *The Lord of the Rings*' maps, can be traced back thousands of years, creating a temporal and historical depth to a place. With how ubiquitous maps, both physical and invoked (the geopolitical maps which characters reference in-narrative), are in M. fantasy, Tolkien's intimate understanding of his own place and history, including how the

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<sup>13</sup> Invented history in secondary worlds is inherently Commercial. Even when individuals, rather than wars and other events of tremendous societal change, become historical figures, their actions affect society at such a large scale that they too become a Commercial, nearly Hero-like.

macro goes to influence the micro, should be acknowledged and, to an extent, emulated in order to support realistic fantastical histories.

In support of this world depth, Ekman continues to say that, “the maps in *Lord of the Rings*... serve to provide the secondary world with the width, depth, and height that Tolkien sought” (Ekman 14-15). Ekman’s allusion to dimensionality hints at the importance of Commerce in worldbuilding. Tolkien’s attention to home, Culture, and the micro-level worldbuilding elements only represents half of the required parts for a successful vitalization of a secondary world. Ekman continues by saying that, “Whether provided for authentication, understanding, inner consistency, or world expansion, maps are expected to be supplied in high-fantasy novels today” (Ekman 15). Tolkien’s invoked maps in his prose mobilize the extensive living history of his world, again demonstrating how an M. fantasy author can connect a wholly-fictional environment to an audience by actuating history through the people tied to it. This essential tying of an individual to history is key in making an M. fantasy world’s macro-scale worldbuilding into something beyond a static image of countries and cities. A work’s map can come alive through its characters.

Consider the Witch-King of Angmar, Sauron’s chief lieutenant and a major antagonist in *The Return of the King*. Angmar, an ancient and ruined kingdom in the far north of Middle-Earth, is unseen for the entirety of *The Lord of the Rings*. Angmar was a kingdom created by Sauron’s decree, to weaken the northern kingdom of Arnor, until, well into the Third Age, the kingdom fell to the might of the last King of Gondor. Such details are tertiary, at best, for the progression of the *Lord of the Rings*’ plot, but Tolkien wraps one of his chief antagonist figures in an air of history, so when the Witch-King arrives on the Pelennor Fields, he does not arrive only wielding mighty weapons or armies; the Witch-King comes

wielding the weight of history, demonstrating the power to actuate worldbuilding through characters, of invoked maps. The final effect is one of overwhelming weight as he descends upon Théoden on the battlefield. The Witch-King arrives riding his dark, winged steed, described as, “a creature of an older world maybe it was, whose kind, lingering in forgotten mountains cold beneath the Moon” (Tolkien 113). The Witch-King’s arrival to the battlefield recalls the depth of Angmar’s dark history. Tolkien uses an invoked map to empower one of his characters, thereby respecting the cyclicity of Culture and Commerce, the personal and global, in his worldbuilding. Middle-Earth’s history does not remain sequestered in his map nor in scene-setting exposition. Characters (and we saw this a bit a Cultural level in Samwise already) can wear history. Ekman again supports this reading by saying that, “Middle-earth’s history and the tension between past and present is a theme as clearly visible in the general map as is the secondary world’s topography. The label of the map ensures that the reader comes to this map with a historical awareness” (Ekman 60). Forgive me for potentially belaboring these points on Tolkien’s worldbuilding, but Tolkien’s maps are currently the only maps in m. fantasy to warrant this depth of scholarly attention. Perhaps tellingly, scholarship is silent, but not derogatory, towards the rest of M. fantasy’s use of maps and spinning of fictional histories. Oftentimes, the history of an M. fantasy narrative helps only to motivate the plot, again contextualizing a world’s history through the eyes of its Heroes.<sup>14</sup>

So now, our Monarch must consider how the entire identity of this city will change as a result of her reaction to the corruption. If the storied Gilded Front becomes a military

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<sup>14</sup> Even Martins’ work, which we will examine in just a moment, has this problem with its map-making. Castles and towns in Martins’ Westeros (and lands beyond) are treated more like pieces on a game board, all tied to complex lineages and familial backgrounds which are of less-than-tertiary importance until a character from one of those families enters the narrative. Martins’ fusion of Culture and Commerce in his city’s worldbuilding, however, is another matter entirely.

protectorate, will anxiety claim the rest of the city? The most prominent merchants and nobility of the city require the Gilded Front to remain solvent, too. Why, the entire power structure of the city may have to be redrawn because of one change which snowballs into a radical restructuring. And, as a living embodiment of her city, these changes will even affect the Monarch at a personal level. Recall again our cyclical graphic from when we followed our Peasant.

Our Hero, rightly, points out that the people of the Gilded Front won't just be peacefully pushed off their lucrative land. They're a stubborn lot, made confident by years of success and overflowing bank accounts. Their Culture has grown, like the roots of a burgeoning tree, to color the whole city's Commerce. Since the rise to societal prominence of the Gilded Front, all the wealthy sections of this city followed in its example, down to their style of dress and the color of their curtains<sup>15</sup>. A change to the Gilded Front would, no doubt, change the Culture of the rest of this city. Our Monarch, Hero, and Friar must consider how best to interact with the cyclicity of these fundamental medieval fantasy forces. Between our Friar and our Hero, the Monarch must achieve a balance in her world that preserves the neighborhoods' Culture while preserving the large-scale Commercial forces of urban history and city-wide stability.

We talked briefly before about the trickiness of thinking of an M. fantasy map as part of the greater textual body when it was sequestered to the front of the book. Well, Tolkien demonstrated that there *are* ways to take that map with us through invoked maps. By recontextualizing the ramifications of macro-level worldbuilding and the fate of nations into the lives of individuals, he anchors the importance of military and political history in a way

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<sup>15</sup> Tyrian purple, obviously.

that we, as individuals, can connect in more immediate way than if we just read about the history of a place. The history is vivified through the present.

Take our war council, for instance. Our Hero, as it happens, was born in the Gilded Front. Not to one of the wealthy merchants, mind you, but to one of their scullery maids. He grew up underneath the heels of society's elite and I can tell you that he's finding it hard to restrain himself from advocating everything short of an armed invasion of the Front— for the good of the city at large, of course. Our Hero would redraw the map of this city if it meant dissolving those that kept him and his family under their boots for years. Our Monarch, however, is still unconvinced. The lost taxes, the potential chaos and paranoia that would spread throughout the city... would all the consequences be worth an expedient evacuation? Is the life of the city more important than the individuals within it? Can the two forces, Commercial and Cultural, even be separated? I believe we both know the answer to that by now. M. fantasy often integrates its characters deeply into their environments; lords, ladies and monarchs had direct, authoritarian, control over much of historical medieval life, so M. fantasy is uniquely poised to conflate person and environment. Our Monarch *is* her city. Again, I leave more intelligent literary theorists (Stefan Ekman seems to have one foot in this worldbuilding door already) the task of discerning what revelations can be spun from well-realized M. fantasy worlds; quality must still precede the scholarship necessary for this genre's apotheosis and admittance into the wider literary world.

On the note of the personal reflecting the global, Colleen Donnelly notes in her article, "Feudal Values, Vassalage, and Fealty in *The Lord of the Rings*," that, "By embracing the societal structure of England in the High Middle Ages, Tolkien definitely chooses to portray a... society, where the needs of the 'common good' of the whole society... far exceed the



significance of an individual's needs and accomplishment" (Donnelly 18). Donnelly's analysis coincides smoothly with my thoughts on Commerce in worldbuilding. Medieval fantasy works, given the diversity of worlds and imagination in the genre, is not always beholden to historical medieval values of chivalry, nobility, and feudalism. And yet, such deviations are the exception, not the norm. Lords, kings, and knights enforce a societal, Commercial, hierarchy which creates a familiar "have" and "have not" power dynamic in M. fantasy's worlds. Our Monarch, for instance, stands above our Hero, regardless of how many times he has saved this city. Our Hero can alter the Commerce of a place by slaying monsters, but our Monarch needs no antagonist to enact great change upon a place. This is a fact that she is more-than-happy to remind him of as he tests the limits of his freedom of free speech. His vitriol for the Gilded Front is naked for all to see at this point. Our Monarch suggests that the Hero sit himself down before he does something foolish with that, "silly sword of his." The Hero retorts that the Monarch should consider, "the power of a sword, compared to [her] endless talking." Our Monarch is less-than-enthused at that.

Our Hero is a superior swordsman compared to our Monarch, and in many M. fantasy works, the Hero likely possesses some sort of unique skill or magical power. If it ever came to blows between the Hero and Monarch, the Hero would have little contest. And yet, the rules of this society dictate that the Hero bows to the Monarch because the Monarch is the one with the political power, shiny crown, and fancy chair. Here, Donnelly continues to weave the Commerce of character and world together when she says, "what is particularly interesting is the role that those who are not fated or chosen to be leaders play in such a society. The role of the man who willingly chooses to accept his place below his lord or leader, and who embraces and executes that duty... is a defining character in Tolkien's

world” (Donnelly 18). Donnelly continues to say that the stewards and seconds of Tolkien’s world either rise or fall based on their ability to accept their strata in their world. The successful stewards, Sam, Pippin, and the like, are content in their positions and are difficult to corrupt. Denethor, the steward of Gondor, however, fails spectacularly due to his dissatisfaction at his position in society compared to the soon-to-return King Aragorn.

Donnelly’s analysis places the Cultural Peasants firmly, but not uncomfortably, below the Commercial Heroes and Monarchs. This dynamic of power translates equally into worldbuilding as well as character. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien demonstrates how a characters’ societal position, especially in a traditional medieval feudal society, inform which expectations a character is supposed to fulfill, another cornerstone of Commerce in a society.

Our Monarch signals for the Friar to come with her over to the throne, out of earshot. This leaves our Hero brooding over the table, his mind all full of iron and fury. Our Hero sees this map as a battlefield, not a place where people live. The years of war and bloodshed have seeped violent thoughts into his brain like a toxin. His vision is narrow, blind to wider ramifications of his actions.

I’ll pull again from Susan M. Bernardo’s introduction to *Environments in Science Fiction* to help illustrate the importance of the environment coming to life through characters— something our Hero could desperately use to connect better with a land he is quick to condemn. She writes that, “Though a sense of place or place-attachment through time comes through people’s perceptions, it is also a force that reflects back on us... the experience of place is a multi-directional dynamic that our perception and desire recognize, rather than a one-way transaction” (Bernardo 3-4). Bernardo elaborates that science fiction narratives inherently use space as “a reflection of character,” rather than, “just an envelope

for action” (Bernardo 4). Again, I am forced to borrow from science fiction to find scholarly meditations still applicable fantasy. Still, Bernardo’s observations serve my attention to Commerce-Culture and character-world cyclicalities well. Plus, I believe that Bernardo’s observation has a beautiful simplicity to it, and we can return to the earlier idea in which genre fiction is oftentimes expected to be allegorical in order to be literarily significant. Bernardo hints at an inclusive simplicity wherein environment and character play off one another within the author’s imagined space. Larger “meaning” need not appear, should an author not desire it.

Famously, Ursula Le Guin stated in the introduction to her groundbreaking work of science fiction, *The Left Hand of Darkness* that, “Yes, indeed [the Gethenians] in [the novel] are androgynous, but that doesn’t mean that I’m predicting that... we all damned well ought to be androgynous. I’m merely observing... that if you look at us in certain odd times in certain weathers, we already are” (Le Guin vx). Le Guin held a Bernardo-esque stance on the nature of “meaning” in speculative worlds; she prefers the readers to extrapolate whatever meaning speaks to them, which I see as an important stance to take as M. fantasy works towards acceptance in the wider literary world. If the genre falls into the allegory trap, of forcing real-world meaning into its secondary worlds to appease the literary fiction theorists,<sup>16</sup> it will lose one of its primary pillars of individuality. As I have been suggesting this entire adventure, if M. fantasy manages to realize its unique traits well, scholarship and wider literary acceptance will follow. Like Le Guin explained, an M. fantasy writer, so long as the connections between Culture-Commerce and people-environment are fully-realized, the genre can thrive.

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<sup>16</sup> Recall the excerpt from Carpenter’s book in the previous section about criticism’s predilection to find allegorical meaning in fantastical secondary worlds (Tolkien’s, in Carpenter’s case).

To see how a prolific M. fantasy writer can implement a cyclicity of Commerce and Culture into their world while simultaneously animating the weight of history through its characters while *also* avoiding and potential allegorical readers, we can consider how George R. R. Martin constructed the large-scale ramifications of an M. fantasy world in political and societal flux. In *A Feast for Crows*, the fourth book in his *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, after the cataclysmic War of the Five Kings had ended in a tentative peace, King's Landing, the largest city in Westeros and seat of the Seven Kingdoms' government, has been a battleground in more than once. Stannis Baratheon's disastrous foray against the city in the Battle of Blackwater, as well as the starvation that wartime resource shortages inflicted on the city, resulted in the death of thousands. During one of the most tumultuous moments for King's Landing in *A Clash of Kings*, the ponderous High Septon, the head of the Faith of the Seven, is torn to pieces by an angry, hungry mob. As Tyrion notes, "*Starving men take a hard view of priests too fat to walk*" (Martin 599-600). As the poor and hungry get poorer and hungrier because of their monarch's war, the Faith's clergy are either attacked or made a mockery of. In response, the Faith Militant, an order of armed faithful which had not been allowed to gather for over two-hundred years, rises once again. Seeing the potential to create a useful pawn to wield against her enemies, Queen Regent Cersei Lannister arms the order of fanatics, radically altering the Commerce of King's Landing and the Seven Kingdoms.

Before the reintroduction of the Faith Militant, the Faith of the Seven maintained a very distant, yet dignified relationship with the common people of Westeros. However, the newest High Septon of the Faith, sometimes called the High Sparrow in reference to his common birth, immediately begins to alter the Commerce throughout King's Landing. First, this High Sparrow and his followers achieved power through military force. In an effort to

expose the nepotism, corruption, and cronyism in the Faith, violently seize control of the Faith's electorates as they debate on who should become the new High Septon (Martin 587). While it had been long-outlawed for members of the Faith to take up arms, the High Sparrow crowns himself through violence, already heralding a change in the Faiths' relation with the population at large.

When Cersei first ventures to meet this newly-crowned High Sparrow in the holy Sept of Baelor, she notices that the statue of the venerable Baelor the Beloved, a well-loved and pious king of Westeros, has been festooned with skulls and scraps of flesh. As one of the many ragged followers of the High Sparrow who have camped out around the Sept tells Cersei, the bones and flesh are from, "holy men and women, murdered for their faith..." in various horrific ways (Martin 593). Cersei notes the depth of hostility in the faithful following the High Sparrow, another radical difference from the old clergy. Even before he appears in a proper scene in the narrative, the High Sparrow has already radically altered the influence that the Faith imposes on King's Landing. The War of the Five Kings was the enormous socio-economic-military upheaval which accelerates the rise of the Faith Militant in King's Landing. War, whether it be a literal clashing of armies or a more metaphorical conflict of minds, oftentimes galvanizes individuals. As a result, people may fall in line behind the ideologies or leaders they support with greater militancy and rage. So, a fully-realized secondary world will need to accommodate for this reality.

As if on cue, a guest has invited herself into the Monarch's keep. Why yes, that is our Peasant. And, yes, she looks very unhappy. She claims that these discussions of forced evacuations, somehow, she caught wind of this development, was made without consideration of the people who live in the Gilded Front. Our Peasant argues that the

Monarch moved without heeding the importance of Culture at a personal, street level. In much the way that Cersei disregarded the effect that the War of the Five Kings and the rise of the Faith Militant would have in King's Landing, the Monarch seems to have ignored the very real consequences of her actions. When these large-scale, Commercial, changes occur in the narrative yet do not affect the street-level Culture of a place, the plot's motions become weightless. The end result is a secondary world afflicted with Positive Tension. Consider *Return of the King's* Scouring of the Shire; large-scale, Commercial changes to the world by Heroes leads to ramifications at the street, Cultural level. Saruman is forced to eke out an existence by oppressing the peaceful Shirefolk only because of his defeat at the hands of the Ents during Battle of Isengard in *The Two Towers*. When this cyclicity is ignored... well, look no further than our now red-faced Peasant.

Our Peasant claims that the people of the Gilded Front have lived there for generations. The streets are glittering with beautiful metalwork and masonry commissioned decades ago to bring beauty to a once-desolate corner of the city. Our Peasant is accusing the Monarch of acting without humanity, without seeing the cobblestones and shop windows which would irreparably change if she forced the people out by military intervention. George R. R. Martin's works again provide a window into what an M. fantasy world would look like in the midst of Commercial change bleeding into the Cultural sphere.

Shortly after arming the Faith Militant, Cersei begins to hear of the Faith's interference with the day-to-day lives of the regular folk in King's Landing. The Sparrows begin to harass the citizens who visit and work at the infamous Street of Silk, a lane famous for its promiscuity, which harms the area's business. Cersei, taking issue with the Faith's lawless vigilantism, claims that, "These sinners fed the royal coffers... and their pennies help

pay the wages of my gold cloaks and build galleys to defend our shores... His Holiness promised me peace in my streets. Whoring helps to keep that peace” (Martin 765). Martin established a clash in Commerce by pitting the fundamentally-different Monarchs against one another. Like the exchange we just witnessed between the Hero and Monarch, two strong personalities struggling to control the soul of an entire city, Martin actuates the Seven Kingdoms’ wars and the history of the Faith through his characters. In that way, the invoked maps of Martins’ work show through his characters, tying them to their place and history.

Commercial forces can, as Martin displays, result in an M. fantasy world which feels not only alive but semi-sentient. Without the historical consequences of earlier spats between our Monarch and the Gilded Front, tensions from the corruption would not have boiled over in the way we just witnessed. Without the Culture deep in the cobblestones of the Peasant’s home, there would be no stakes for this city— it would stand to lose nothing in the shuffling of populations and forced evacuations. Drastic action, dramatic consequence. Negative Tension.

After weathering a storm of shouting, debate, and barely-concealed hostility, our Monarch calls for silence. She has made her decision. Like a proper ruler, all eyes fall upon her as she takes up her position at the head of the war map. She adjusts her crown, her cloak, and her sword of office. And she hands down her decision: the evacuation of the Gilded Front is to be voluntary, yet encouraged. Citizens of the Front may remain to preserve their cultural history. Those who fall ill with the sickness from the corruption are to be treated in Banshee Row, owing to that neighborhood’s receding corruption and still-abandoned state. The Monarch commands the Hero to oversee a parameter around the Front while the Peasant’s carriages will be used to ferry refugees and the afflicted. Neither Hero nor Peasant

looks particularly happy, nor unhappy, about this outcome. Balance, doled out between Culture and Commerce, is preserved in this city. The culture of the Front will survive and the sickness will be kept from spreading to the more-occupied parts of the city. Our Monarch *is* her city, as Bernardo mentioned before. She could not, with a complete conscience, condemn part of her city, part of herself, to die or be forced out of home and stasis. Inasmuch as our Monarch was given a Commercial choice, to determine the fate of her whole city, so too does she allow the people of the Gilded Front to make a Cultural, individual one. There's still much for our friends to discuss, so let's give them some space. Come with me to the top of the Monarch's tower. I have something for us to see.

M. fantasy's worldbuilding is a cornerstone of its identity. Imagining histories, peoples, and places totally removed from our own causality and temporality is unique to this genre. Other genres can imagine potential futures or pasts, but M. fantasy brings violence, magic, and monsters to its worlds. And, from dragon to nameless, writhing corruptions, those elements will reverberate, often in ways far beyond the monster or the Hero which slays them, to affect the wider world, Commercially and Culturally. Successfully acknowledging, and employing the cyclicity of Culture-Commerce and character-environment is vital, as we have seen in Tolkien and Martin's work, in realizing an M. fantasy world in its prime.

*As the sound of civil (by comparison) discussion begins to fade, an inalienable feeling of ending pervades that Monarch's tower. The stairs winding smoothly up to the top of the Monarch's tower, the highest point in the city, are chimeral. The stairs change from rough stone to brick to marble and back to rough-hewn rock again. This tower was started many,*



*many years ago. The Monarch was the ruler to finish its construction; the history of feast and famine, war and peace, are reflected in the very atoms of this impossibly-tall structure. From outside, haunting the occasional open window, comes the familiar mournful sound of windchimes. Perhaps, when the corruption is finally expunged from this literary country, the Monarch will add yet more stairs to her tower to denote yet another step in this land's history.*

## CHAPTER 6 THE SEED

*The sky seems cleft in twain by the height, the history, of this tower. From up here, in the Monarch's own study, the horizon rolls far beyond the mighty city walls. There's an element of hope in being up this high, seeing that there is such untold adventure and so many expanses beyond this city. The clouds overhead remain heavy, but every now and again, a yellow beam cuts through the grey and a handful of homes are lit up in ghostly, golden-pale fire. It's easy to look out towards the future with this kind of perspective.*

Our Monarch has planted a pair of gardens up here on the windowsills of her study. Yes, one is much livelier than the other. The one on our left is practically spilling out of the windows and onto the nearby furniture. The one to our right is doing the best it can. The garden to the left receives a new plant every time the Monarch is forced to make a decision which brought discomfort to her subjects for the greater good. The garden on the right receives a new plant when our Monarch makes a decision which brings joy and hope to her people. Our Monarch is a woman in command of this city's Commerce; she can't afford to show her personal vulnerabilities. Like our Hero, she carries the hopes of so many men and women on her shoulders. As capable as she is, she sometimes just loves to see something simple grow and flourish. I feel some kinship with the Monarch in that regard. When I consider the state of medieval fantasy, I think on these gardens. I see the growth of M. fantasy to our left. More than ever, this genre is flourishing with life, to the point where it overflows and spills out into empty space. Meanwhile, to our right is a small, yet stubborn, collection of critics and authors who are so dearly devoted to this genre that endeavor to push it beyond its current limits, possibly out to new and fertile soil.

Attebery, Slusser, Jackson, Armitt, Aquino, and more have shown us that the potential scholarly landscape of M. fantasy is more fertile than the wider literary world might expect. However, we have referenced Tolkien, science fiction, and general fantasy scholars liberally throughout our journey, with very few voices primarily concerned with medieval fantasy itself. By establishing this groundwork of Commerce and Culture, Positive and Negative Tension, and the forces of violence, home, worldbuilding and maps in medieval fantasy, I hope to contribute, in whatever small way, to a shared M. fantasy lexicon.

To reiterate just one last time, Commerce and Culture, I hope, will be seen as the fundamental mechanisms of this genre and can be used as part of a shared vocabulary for writers and critics of M. fantasy. I do not expect my ideas to be accepted into M. fantasy canon, nascent though that field may be at this moment, without debate, of course. I aim to create conversation about this genre, conversations that woefully few critics are having. So, if Culture and Commerce, whether by sparking agreement or argument, can vitalize writers and critics into examining the essential inner workings of M. fantasy, I will consider this piece a success.

Oh, it seems we are no longer alone up here. Our Monarch has invited the Hero, Peasant, and Friar up to her study as well. While the matter of the Gilded Front was resolved, it seems the discussion about how best to root out the lingering corruption beneath this city is not yet finished. By the energy of the conversation, it sounds as though the debate will be continuing for quite some time. As it should be. Our Hero stands in mild shock as the Friar informs him that his heroic actions have saved thousands of lives, certainly, but the unpeopled neighborhoods have gone unsung and unnoticed for a long while; there are countless lives to rebuild still, and decay is setting into the abandoned buildings. The Hero

claims that he had no idea that the people of the city were suffering so silently. He admits that his focus was too singular, too focused on bringing about the bloody end of the corrupting monster. However, he argues that our Friar was obsessed with micromanaging every small detail of his parish, and that he failed to notice the monstrous tectonics which were shifting the city; our Friar wasn't even aware that there was a beating heart, a source, to the corruption. He was only concerned with handling the fallout from the corruption.

It will take a balance between Commerce and Culture to bring out the full potential of an M. fantasy work. Violence and worldbuilding must work together in a cyclical, symbiotic way. Our Hero is disquieted with how bloodthirsty his thoughts have been, now knowing that the people who he was fighting for had been suffering so silently for so long. Meanwhile, our Friar is ashamed to think that, without the Hero, the source of the corruption would have never been destroyed and, eventually, the city would have fallen, despite his best efforts. Our Friar and Hero can learn much from each other. I hope the same can be said for us writers and critics of medieval fantasy. The acknowledgement of these fundamental forces will help set a bedrock for examining our genre closer, a necessary step for improving it, for leading it towards that ultimate apotheosis.

While our Friar and Hero reconcile, our Peasant and Monarch sit close together, near the right windowsill. Our Monarch was humbled, if you can believe it, by the arrival of the Peasant. She tells her now that she had been thinking too coldly about how to serve her people. Our Monarch, in the throes of the crisis, saw this city as a map drawn on paper. It was so easy to her, she admits, to sign eviction notices and mandates which had brought harm to her people. Even if she acted for the greater good, such actions should never be easy to take. They must carry Negative Tension, or our Monarch would be callous in her decision-

making. But now, she promises to wield her power more fairly, understanding the weight her decisions have on the health of the city as a whole. Our Peasant has learned something as well; having seen the Monarch's great map table and listened to her dictate the fate of hundreds, she can acknowledge the vital nature of a leader who can understand a world on such a large scale, managing it in times of war and political or societal upheaval. Our Peasant knows the people of nameless villages well, as well as her neighbors in the Gilded Front, but she acknowledges that if leaders only ever focused on the individual, the nation on the whole would never move. Making decisions is easier on such an individual level; our Peasant knows just how to please and appease her neighbors and the folk of the countryside.

These two women are also coming to understand the results of the elements of Commerce and Culture colliding in this city: violence and worldbuilding. Violence can be a weight or pain of the mind, and worldbuilding can be achieved through the various perspectives of the characters who walk through said world, with each character contributing a new perspective. Both the Monarch and Peasant have also come to understand the weightiness of Tension in their lives. Our Hero and Friar are used to seeing violence or death in front of their eyes, but to our Friar and Monarch, now they are coming to understand how their beloved places will always exist on the bleeding edge of danger. The Gilded Front, a neighborhood which has stood for generations, has been rocked. This city, with its roots stretching back into the stuff of legend and myth, suffered scars from this corruption, scars that will take time and effort to heal; our Monarch knows this acutely now.

So, here we are, at the end of our little journey. Believe me when I say that, if I had my way, I would have written much, much more on medieval fantasy. There is more to be said about the rule Commerce and Culture play on systems of magic and non-human races,

both are very common elements in this genre. However, as I have been saying since the very beginning, I would like to leave ample space for my fellow writers and critics to explore. I can only hope that my attempts at creating the groundwork of an M. fantasy lexicon will just be the first of many, many steps taken on a long journey. Ideally, the tale of our shared adventure will serve to demonstrate some of my observations on Commerce and Culture, Positive and Negative Tension, as well as our examinations of violence, worldbuilding, home, and maps, will inspire more critical approaches to this genre which brims with potential.

As a parting note, I just want to reaffirm, again, what I'd like you to take away from this whole journey. The medieval fantasy genre is worth the consideration and attention of serious scholarship. Certainly, in its current state, the genre is asymmetrical in its quality. But, without serious critical lenses examining M. fantasy as a distinct, unique genre, it will, I fear, remain largely content to stay behind its tall walls. From all the way up here, we can see beyond those walls. This is the only place in the city that gives this kind of view. Out there, beyond the walls, lie plains and woods and ancient roads which lead to some of the most marvelous countries; the wider literary world is waiting for the walls of medieval fantasy to come down.

Personally, I am terrible at ending things, mostly because I think that true endings are rare. All an ending is to me is the first part of a journey that has yet to start. I hope to revisit this city again one day, and I hope to see its front gates unbarred and unguarded, allowing in all manner of outsiders looking to understand this new, exciting land. So, I choose to leave you with one final parting image to coincide with our journey and my tentative hopes for the future.

*Our Monarch passes over to the right windowsill. She reaches into a small wooden box and retrieves a seed. Planting and watering it, she regards the little seed as just one more step towards restoring her city to health. Even though none of our other traveling companions have been up to the Monarch's study before, they seem to, instinctually, know that something good was planted. Whether it germinates, we will all have to wait and see. This seed may set a trend that all subsequent sprouts follow. Or, it may not. But, so long as there is fertile soil to plant new seeds, and so long as there is space to accommodate their growth, there's reason to be hopeful.*

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