CLASSICAL TRADITIONS IN MODERN FANTASY

EDITED BY BRETT M. ROGERS & BENJAMIN ELDON STEVENS
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Contents

Preface vii
List of Contributors ix

Introduction: Fantasies of Antiquity 1
Brett M. Rogers and Benjamin Eldon Stevens

Part I: Classical Apparitions in (Pre-)Modern Fantasy
1. Classical Epic and the Poetics of Modern Fantasy 25
Jesse Weiner
2. Theorizing Fantasy: Enchantment, Parody, and the Classical Tradition 47
Cecilie Flugt
3. The Mirror Crack'd: Fractured Classicisms in the Pre-Raphaelites and Victorian Illustration 63
Genevieve S. Gessert
4. Classical Antiquity and the Timeless Horrors of H. P. Lovecraft 92
Robinson Peter Krämer

Part II: False Medievalism and Other Ancient Fantasies
5. Ancient Underworlds in J. R. R. Tolkien’s The Hobbit 121
Benjamin Eldon Stevens
6. C. S. Lewis's The Voyage of the “Dawn Treader” and Apuleius' Metamorphoses 145
Jeffrey T. Winkle
7. A Time for Fantasy: Retelling Apuleius in C. S. Lewis's Till We Have Faces 160
Marcus Folch

Part III: Children and (Other) Ancient Monsters
8. The Classical Pantheon in Children’s Fantasy Literature 189
Sarah Annes Brown
# Contents

   Brett M. Rogers  
   209

10. Filthy Harpies and Fictive Knowledge in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* Trilogy  
    Antonia Syson  
    233

11. Girls in Bears’ Clothing in Greek Myth and Disney/Pixar’s *Brave*  
    Elizabeth A. Manwell  
    250

## Part IV: (Post)Modern Fantasies of Antiquity

12. Fantasies of Mimnermos in Anne Carson’s “The Brainsex Paintings” (*Plainwater*)  
    Sasha-Mae Eccleston  
    271

13. Aeneas’ American New World in Jo Graham’s *Black Ships*  
    Jennifer A. Rea  
    290

14. Genre, Mimesis, and Virgilian Intertext in George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*  
    Ayelet Haimson Lushkov  
    308

**Works Cited**  
325

**Index**  
357
Preface

*Classical Traditions in Modern Fantasy* is the second book to come out of our interest in how science fiction and fantasy—so important in modern literature, film, and other media—are deeply linked to Greco-Roman antiquity. In our first edited volume, *Classical Traditions in Science Fiction*, we argued that to read ancient classics and to read science fiction require similar suspensions of disbelief: similar acceptance of what we described, after literary theorist Darko Suvin, as textual worlds that are empirically and epistemologically different from the world as readers and authors know it. The present volume takes a similar approach to classics and fantasy. Its general assumption, discussed at some length in the Introduction, is that the fantastic represents an even greater difference from the world at hand: not simply an empirical or epistemological difference but a more complex and profoundly metaphysical one, in which the unreal becomes real and the impossible possible. The collected chapters suggest that fantasy’s alterity—its requirement of belief in metaphysically different worlds—is powered in part by the genre’s engagement with Greco-Roman antiquity.

Each contributor makes that suggestion with regard to particular texts and modifies it in his or her own peculiar way; even as they cohere, the chapters therefore both merit and reward individual consideration. In selecting the chapters we were able to consider a wide range of research, beginning with papers presented at a panel we organized for the 2012 annual meeting of the Pacific Ancient and Modern Languages Association in Seattle and extending to a directed call for papers the following year. We are pleased and honored to be able to present so much of that work for publication here. Diverse as its chapters are, the present volume is only a portal to an entire world of rapidly burgeoning scholarly interest in the topic. Many such pioneering works are naturally discussed throughout. It is a pleasure to be in this company, and one of our greatest hopes for the volume is that it helps inspire others to conduct their own exploration of this endlessly fascinating field.

It should be clear that we have many people to thank for helping make this work possible. Above all we are grateful to the contributors for
sharing their work and for their energy and generosity over the course of the project. Special thanks are due to the team at Oxford, including Stefan Vranka, Editor for Ancient History, Archaeology, and Classical Studies; Editorial Assistants Sarah Svendsen and John Veranes; and Design (for the cover); and to the copyeditors and compositors without whose work this volume simply would not exist. Thanks are also due to Kris Kinsey and Special Collections in the University of Washington Libraries for help in obtaining the cover image, as well as to Krista Moll and Daniel Sealth Hill for their good humor and technical skill in capturing Dulac’s Argos in all of its fantastic splendor.

Rogers would like to thank those students at the University of Puget Sound who have shared with him their infectious enthusiasm in talking about modern fantasy or Harry Potter, his colleagues in the department of Classics for their encouragement and support of this implausible work, and the University of Puget Sound for supporting the later stages of this project with a research leave during fall 2015. His deepest gratitude is owed to Jennifer for patiently enduring yet another series of late nights while he was lost in a neverwhere of frumious editing. He would like to dedicate his work on this volume to his daughter Elinor, who truly is a θαῦμα ἰδέσθαι.

Stevens would like to thank the students in his courses on underworlds and afterlives at Bryn Mawr College and Trinity University for their adventurous explorations of imaginary places, and the Bryn Mawr Traditions Committee for casting—or simply identifying?—him as Puck in the Midsummer Night’s Dream-themed May Day celebration in 2015. His work on the volume is dedicated to The Imaginary Gardeners, in the hope that it confirms their feeling that fantastical experiences do indeed have “real toads in them,” and to his nephew Asher, whose first-ever visit to a bookstore led—with literature-professor uncle in tow—to a lovely hardcopy of Tolkien.
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Introduction: Fantasies of Antiquity

Brett M. Rogers and Benjamin Eldon Stevens

A TALE OF TWO HORACES; OR, FANTASY AND DISUNITY OF FORM

Once upon a time, the first and second editions of Horace Walpole’s novel The Castle of Otranto (1764 [Otranto]) included the title pages below (Figures 0.1 and 0.2).

Some of the differences between these two editions merit attention for scholars and fans of both classical antiquity and modern fantasy. To begin with, the first edition offers the simple subtitle “A Story,” whereas the second edition is subtitled “A Gothic Story.” The addition of the adjective “Gothic” asserts a generic affiliation. What precisely ‘Gothic’ meant at the time and has meant since is beyond our scope here, but for our purposes, it is important to note that Gothic fiction is one of the feeder genres, and more recently subgenres, of a larger category that emerged in the eighteenth century: what Joseph Addison in 1712 called “the fairy way of writing” and what we now call—by way of an ancient Greek term for the faculty of imagination—‘modern fantasy’ (MF).¹

In the context of MF, the second crucial difference between the two editions of Otranto lies in the second edition’s inclusion of a quotation—two

¹On Gothic and horror fiction more broadly, see Roberts (2012). See also Addison in Sandner (2004: 21–23). On the many meanings of Greek φαντασία, including ‘image,’ ‘apparition,’ and (the creative faculty of) ‘imagination,’ see Liddell, Scott, and Jones (1925 s.v. φαντασία, esp. 2a–c).
Figure 0.1 Title page to the first edition of *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). Credit: Public domain.

Figure 0.2 Title page to the second edition of *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), including quotation from Horace. Credit: Public domain.
partial lines and one full line of verse—attributed to "Hor." This refers to Quintus Horatius Flaccus, better known as Horace, a Roman poet of the first century BCE. The quotation derives from his *Ars Poetica* ("the Art of Poetry" [AP], c. 19 BCE), a treatise about which techniques work in poetry and which do not.² Enjoying the fact that one Horace is quoting another, we observe as well that the second edition of Walpole's novel asserts a link of some kind between MF and classical antiquity.³ Otranto thus invites us to wonder about the nature and purpose of connections between the modern genre and materials drawn from the ancient world: it suggests that there is a case to be made for the study of classical traditions or classical receptions in MF.

If a subtitle and a single quotation do not seem like much to go on, we can strengthen the case by looking more closely at what the modern Horace has quoted from his ancient Roman namesake: *vanae / fingentur species, tamen ut pes et caput uni / reddantur formae* ("empty appearances will be fashioned, but in such a way that foot and head are given to the same form"; *AP* 7–9).³ In the *Ars Poetica*, Horace generally discusses what we might call 'unity of form.' In the quotation, from near the beginning of the poem, Horace is making the point that certain sorts of depiction or representation work well in the arts—not limited to poetry or writing, but including visual arts like painting—while others do not. At first glance, Walpole may seem to draw on that same aesthetic in *Otranto* by suggesting that certain "appearances" (*species*) will be depicted in a way that results in a "unified form" (*uni . . . formae*).

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² For the *AP* see, e.g., Brink (2011) and Rudd (1990).
³ Roberts (2012: 23–25) discusses the title page and reference to *AP*, but uses the third edition of *Otranto* (his Figure 1) and thus misses that the inclusion of the quotation dates to the second edition, which also includes Walpole's second preface offering a defense against critics. Roberts also does not observe that Walpole has changed Horace's Latin; see our discussion further, herein.
⁴ ‘Classical traditions’ and ‘classical receptions’ offer different, if overlapping, images of how later authors and artists use ancient material: the study of ‘traditions’ focuses on something like a long-standing stream of thought flowing from antiquity; the study of ‘receptions’ emphasizes the complex and meaningful (mis)understandings of such material that are offered by later work. See recently, e.g., Grafton, Most, and Settis (2010), Hardwick and Stray (2008), Kallendorf (2007), Martindale and Thomas (2006), Hardwick (2003), and Hig het (1949). In what follows, we also distinguish between ‘classics,’ meaning the ancient material itself, and ‘Classics,’ the modern field of study.
⁵ The long history of translations of *AP* into English includes an influential version by Ben Jonson published in 1640, which renders our lines as follows: "shapes, like sick-mens dreames, are fain'd so vaine, / As neither head, nor foot, one forme retaine" (his lines 9–10); see Moul (2007).
Introduction

But there is a wrinkle: Walpole has quoted—or at least the publishers, William Bathoe and Thomas Lownds, have printed—a version of Horace’s lines that differs in crucial details from how they have been transmitted from antiquity and are usually printed by modern editors. Ancient Horace actually writes: *vanae / fingentur species, ut nec pes nec caput uni / reddatur formae*. The differences may seem slight—Horace’s *ut nec . . . nec . . . reddatur* instead of Walpole’s *tamen ut . . . et . . . reddantur*—but make for a significantly different meaning. As opposed to Walpole’s meaning—“empty appearances will be fashioned, but in such a way that foot and head are given to the same form”—Horace’s lines translate to “empty appearances will be fashioned, such that neither a foot nor a head is given to the same form.”

In other words, what ancient Horace means here, and what distinguishes his point from Walpole’s, is that a mishmash of forms makes for unsuccessful works of art. Horace’s first example in the *Ars Poetica*, which comes from painting, is a particularly striking one for students of fantasy: “If a painter should wish to join a horse’s neck to a human head and attach multicolored feathers to limbs brought together from every source . . .” (*humano capiti cervicem pictor equinam / iungere si velit et varias inducere plumas / undique collatis membris; 1–3*). For Horace, this is a hypothetical image of an unsuccessful work of art: a monstrosity marked by ‘disunity of form.’ Returned to their original context, these lines are thus not meant to suggest that *vanae species* can be brought into unity, but rather that such “empty appearances” cannot be brought into unity and therefore ought to be avoided in art.

Given both Horace’s original words and their context, the version of Horace quoted by Walpole’s second edition represents a seemingly conscious departure from the ideas expressed in the *Ars Poetica*.

The second edition of *Otranto* also included a new preface, in which Walpole defends his work against critics: in that context, it seems safe to call his departure deliberate and to identify it as part of a larger, unified defense. The Gothic genre, at least in works like *Otranto*, may therefore be read as imagining .

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6 The manuscript tradition does not seem to show any variant readings for *ut nec pes nec caput*. *Fingentur*, the preferred reading for that verb here, is given thus in one branch of the tradition, while others give variants including *funguntur* (the present tense, “are fashioned”) and *funguntur* (a misuse of a verb meaning ‘to make use of’); see Brink (2011: 55, with discussion of the tradition at 1–51). In this context, the modifications in Walpole’s quotation seem deliberate.
itself as having to do precisely with the sort of multiplicity or ‘disunity of form’ denigrated by Horace. It might not be too much to say that the Gothic, and by extension MF, represents a sort of artistic monstrosity—a celebration of ‘disunity’—that an ancient reader of Horace’s ilk would have disliked.

Such dislike would not have been due to surprise or lack of recognition; on the contrary, it seems rather that Horace anticipated the sort of thing Walpole got up to and, furthermore, would have had real ancient examples—not just his hypothetical painting—in mind. Nor was ancient Horace alone in his distaste for ‘formal disunity,’ as many other classical Greek and Roman authors show similar concerns about such disunity or hybridity. For example, the Roman poet Lucretius, writing a generation earlier than Horace, inveighs against the physical impossibility of hybrid creatures made from “discordant limbs” (*discordia membra*), like centaurs—half-human, half-horse—and the dog-like Scylla (*De rerum natura* [DRN] 5.878–898). Lucretius has certain philosophical arguments in mind, but for our purposes, he may be regarded as following a long-standing tradition of criticizing hybridity as a particular example of a more general ‘problem’: the perception that the arts depict certain things implausibly or impossibly. One strain in that critical tradition is concerned with how poetry, especially epic poetry, portrays the gods and the supernatural. Thus Plato identifies “an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry” (παλαιὰ μὲν τὶς διαφορὰ φιλοσοφία τε καὶ ποιητικῆ; *Republic* [Rep.] 607b5–6) in part for how the Homeric epics, the *Iliad* (*Il*) and the *Odyssey* (*Od*.), show the gods engaging in unethical behavior. Although we should take the famously ironical Plato’s statement with a grain of salt, in his view such depictions are artistically indecorous and ethically irresponsible because they are metaphysically impossible: gods, who by definition must be embodiments of good, are not able to act badly. Similarly, later ancient readers report criticism of Virgil, the Roman successor to Homer, for what were perceived to be certain lapses

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8 For this basic reason, Plato argues that imitative poetry would need to be excluded from a political state ideally configured to foster philosophy. For an emerging modern SF-cum-MF take on Rep., see Jo Walton’s *The Just City* (2014; with Stevens [2015b]) and *The Philosopher Kings* (2015).
of plausibility in his *Aeneid*, as for example when the Trojans’ ships are saved from burning by being miraculously transformed into Nereids or sea-nymphs (9.77–122).⁹

There is thus no shortage of ancient examples of formal disunity or deeper metaphysical implausibility or impossibility, nor of readers who recognized—and could criticize—them as such already in Greco-Roman antiquity. But the reverse is also true: as Walpole reminds us in the preface to the second edition of *Otranto*, in which he claims to have composed the novel as “an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern,” the ancient world included other authors and audiences who seem to have enjoyed the implausible and the impossible. For example, in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Socrates criticizes and therefore points to the existence of people in classical Athens who devoted attention to understanding “multitudes of other impossible things and the extraordinary natures of portentous creatures” (ἄλλων ἀμηχάνων πλήθη τε καὶ ἀτοπίαι τερατολόγων τινῶν φώσεων; 229e1–2), such as chimaeras, gorgons, and pegasi. Socrates dismisses such attention as a poor use of time unless someone has the leisure (πολλῆς αὐτῷ σχολῆς; e3) to make sense of such stories in accordance with probability (κατὰ τὸ εἰκός; e2), and thus seems to divide audiences into two kinds: those who have time for ‘the improbable’ and those who (wisely?) prefer the ‘probable.’¹⁰

We may therefore conclude that ancient readers who preferred ‘formal unity’ and ‘the probable’—such as Horace, Lucretius, and Plato—formed only one among several kinds of readership in Greco-Roman antiquity. Another kind of reader, representing another tradition of reading, seems to have found aesthetic value or, at least, pleasure in works of art allowing formal disunity and the deeper metaphysical implausibilities or

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⁹E.g., Servius mentions this scene, among others, as being objected to by readers “because it is worthy of condemnation when a poet invents the sort of thing that departs entirely from the truth” (vituperabile enim est, poetam aliquid fingere, quod penitus a veritate discedat; 3.46); Servius uses the same verb, fingere, as Horace does in *AP*. On the scene, see, e.g., Fantham (1990), Hardie (1987), and Hathaway (1968: 109–132); on the marvelous in Virgil, see further, e.g., Biow (1996: 13–36) and Williams (1967). Such criticism could yet be applied with a light touch: Servius acknowledges that “poets frequently vary fables” (frequenter . . . variant fabulas poetae; 6.617); for Servius on ‘poetic license,’ see Zeeman (1996: esp. 162 and 171) and generally Kaster (1988: 169–197).

¹⁰Cf. Sandner (2004: 14–16) and Hume (1984). The notion that ‘probability’ (τὸ εἰκός) is important in poetic composition is found as early as Aristotle’s *Poetics* 1451a12 and 1456a24–25; cf. 1454a24–26 (on ‘plausibility’ in character) and 1460b22–26 (on ‘impossibilities’ as a fault).
impossibilities such ‘discordant limbs’ can connote. For our purposes, what matters most is that this complex situation in antiquity is reflected in MF’s equally complex manner of engagement with ancient sources. Having led us to this point, the value of a work like Otranto should be clear. Walpole’s invocation of one particular, long-standing aesthetic tradition—his near-quotation of Horace’s Ars Poetica—is deliberately playful enough to challenge that tradition’s tastes and tenets by simultaneously invoking another ancient tradition (romance) whose standards and practices are quite different. In this way, an early example of the modern genre provides a first suggestion of the complex narrative constituting the reception of classical antiquity in MF.

DEFINING MODERN FANTASY: IMPOSSIBILITY AND CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

Beyond provoking the ancient Horace’s ire while delighting the modern Horace, our narrative brings us closer to a definition of fantasy that is, perhaps surprisingly, as applicable to certain ancient materials as it is to modern works like Walpole’s novel and its successors. In The Encyclopedia of Fantasy, co-editor John Clute offers this definition: “A fantasy text is a self-coherent narrative. When set in this world, it tells a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it . . . ; when set in an otherworld, that otherworld will be impossible, though stories set there may be possible in its terms.” As we continue to investigate connections between MF and Greco-Roman classics, the most salient part of the definition here is the phrase “impossible in the world as we perceive it.” Clute expands on that phrase as follows, under the subheading ‘Perceive as impossible’:

Before the beginning of the scientific revolution in Western Europe in the 16th century, most Western literature contained huge amounts of material 20th-century readers would think of as fantastical. It is, however, no simple matter to determine the degree to which early writers distinguished, before the rise of science, between what we would call fantastical and what we would call realistic. Nor is it possible with any certainty to determine how much various early writers perceived stories which adhered to possible

11 Clute and Grant (1997: 338).
events and stories which did not as being different. There is no easy division between realism and the fantastical in writers before 1600 or so, and no genre of written literature, before about the early 19th century, seems to have been constituted so as deliberately to confront or contradict the “real.” Though fantasy certainly existed for many centuries before, whenever stories were told which were understood by their authors (and readers) as being impossible, it is quite something else to suggest that the perceived impossibility of these stories was their point—that they stood as a counter-statement to a dominant worldview.

In this expanded definition, Clute summarizes a case for limiting the application of ‘fantasy’ as a description of a ‘structure,’ genre, or mode to materials dating from the 1600s (or early 1800s?) and later.\textsuperscript{12} His main argument is that it is difficult to tell whether—and if so to what degree—works from “[b]efore the beginning of the scientific revolution” are “deliberately” or purposefully fantastic. Granted that “huge amounts of [such] material” would be thought of as ‘fantastical,’ for Clute it remains an open question whether it was therefore “their point” to stand “as a counter-statement to a dominant worldview” or to offer an alternative to realism in the arts.

It should be clear that any such open question is in fact answered by ancient examples like those discussed above. First, although it is indeed difficult to find evidence definitively proving that a given author or artist intended his or her work “deliberately to confront or contradict the ‘real,’” there is plenty of evidence that is strongly suggestive of such intent, including the works of Apuleius, Lucian, Apollonius of Rhodes, and Homer (most notably, Odysseus’ apologoi or so-called ‘lying tales’ in Od. 9–12). Second, and even more important, is the fact that we have examples already showing that “the perceived impossibility of [certain] stories” was recognized, and criticized as such, by at least some ancient readers (such as Plato’s Socrates, discussed above). Taking these two points together, it is hard to see how the descriptive term ‘fantasy’ could meaningfully be denied to certain works of ancient literature. Readers

\textsuperscript{12}The case for limiting ‘fantasy’ to the modern period is not made in the Encyclopedia: the entry for “History of fantasy” simply points to the entry for “Fantasy,” where discussion of history is limited to the paragraph quoted in the text just above and to some comments on whether ‘fantasy’ as a critical term allows, but may not encourage, the inclusion of “much of 20th-century literature.” Cf. the suggestive chronology in James and Mendlesohn (2012: xv–xxiv).
like Horace, Lucretius, Plato, and Servius—and by extension, authors like Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Lucian, and others—should indeed be considered “early writers [who] perceived stories which adhered to possible events and stories which did not as being different” from each other. This consideration gets us quite close to showing the ‘deliberate’ or ‘conscious’ practice in antiquity of a mode of fantasy in the precise sense of a mode of impossibility.

In other words, it is clear that ‘fantasy’ or ‘the fantastical’ not only existed prior to the scientific revolution or Gothic fiction but also was recognized as such—that is, recognized as representing a mode of impossibility or implausibility, in contradiction to reality or artistic realism. We may therefore say that the characteristic mode of MF’s ‘fiction’ (a word derived from the same root as Horace’s fingentur, ‘to fashion or invent’) is a departure from aesthetic standards promulgated by a select few classical readers (e.g., Plato, Aristotle, and Horace). Although the nature and manner of that departure remains to be explored much further, nonetheless this single example—Walpole’s quotation of Horace—has already invited us to consider how MF is modern in part by being purposefully post-classical: MF is what it is in part because of its relationship to the classical tradition and its role as a site for classical receptions. Accepting this invitation, we may start to develop a theory for the study of classical traditions—and classical receptions—in modern fantasy.

THEORIZING RECEPTION: PROMETHEAN SCIENCE FICTION AND PROTEAN FANTASY

What might such a theory look like? In our previous collection, Classical Traditions in Science Fiction, we began developing a theory for the study of that subject by discussing a starting-point for modern science fiction (SF), Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818). Discussing Frankenstein allowed us to note how closely linked SF is to ancient classics—how rich an area it is for classical receptions—thanks in part to Shelley’s self-conscious nod to the classical tradition in the form of the novel’s subtitle, “The Modern Prometheus.” With that subtitle, Shelley intends for her aggressively modern scientist-antihero to be understood in relation to,

13 Rogers and Stevens (2015: 1–6).
among other things, the Titan from ancient Greek myth who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humankind, leading to consequences for all, including introducing the artificial being—and first human woman—Pandora.  

With fire understood as a symbol for technology, Shelley invites us to think of SF as a ‘Promethean’ genre or mode, interested in how ‘technology’—in the broad, Heideggerian sense of any process that transforms unknown ‘natural’ materials into knowable ‘cultural’ products—helps define the human condition. Since in some versions of the ancient myth Prometheus was not just a technology-giver but also a life-giver who provided humankind with its animating ‘divine spark,’ thinking of SF as a Promethean mode bears directly on the question of what it means to be human. From this perspective, *Frankenstein* exemplifies how SF, the genre perhaps most characteristic of the modern world, helps raise such urgent questions today in part by looking back to the philosophy, myth, literature, history, and art of the ancient Greek and Roman worlds.

Constructing a parallel theory for the study of classical receptions in MF involves some complications that may, however, lead to a potentially illuminating image from classical antiquity. First, if there is debate

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14 On Prometheus, see, e.g., Hesiod *Theogony* 507–616 and *Works and Days* 42–105 (both including accounts of Pandora’s creation), Aeschylus *Prometheus Bound*, Plato *Protagoras* 320c–22a, Ovid *Metamorphoses* (1.76–88); see also Gantz (1993: i.152–66), Dougherty (2005), and Podlecki (2005).

15 Cf. fire’s connection to and identification as another god related to *technē*, Hephaestus (Lat. Vulcan), as in, e.g., *Il. 2.426* and Aeschylus *Agamemnon* 280–316. For Heideggerian ‘technology,’ see his (1977 [1954]); cf. Barthes (1972 [1957]: 129) on how “myth today” obscures contingency by changing “history into nature.”


17 We are not the first to borrow an image from classical antiquity in constructing a theory related to MF. Notably, Bloom (1982) borrows the notion of the *clinamen*, ‘swerve,’ from *DRN* as an “opening Lucretian swerve of a theory of literary fantasy,” although his subsequent discussion develops instead, via Freudian psychoanalysis, the image of the Ovidian Narcissus in his reading of David Lindsay’s *A Voyage to Arcturus* (1920). Indeed Lucretius’ *clinamen* does not seem central to Bloom’s theoretical model, and thus he does not refute Homer’s Menelaus, who promises in his fantastic tale “not to speak in a swerving fashion” (οὐκ ἂν ἐγὼ γε / ἄλλα παρὲξ εἴποιμι παρακλίδον; *Od*. 4.347–348). On the other hand, Bloom’s formulation of ‘fantasy’ may have some interest for classical reception studies: “fantasy, as a belated version of romance, promises an absolute freedom from belatedness, from the anxieties of literary influence and origination, yet this promise is shadowed always by
surrounding *Frankenstein’s* status as inaugurating SF, it is even more difficult to identify a corresponding starting-point for MF, whose roots and branches are if anything more varied. This literary-historical difficulty is related to the question, discussed above, of how ‘fantasy’ is to be defined, with scholarship having reached no real consensus. For example, the editors of *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, develop their working definition of MF by noting that, although “[t]he major theorists in the field . . . all agree that fantasy is about the construction of the impossible whereas science fiction may be about the unlikely,” “critics” as well as other readers “quickly depart” from each other. In emphasizing “the construction of the impossible,” James and Mendlesohn may be seen to draw on the definition offered by Clute in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, discussed previously. To describe the situation, they follow Clute further by drawing on Brian Attebery’s use of the mathematical concept of a ‘fuzzy set’: if MF is centered around “stories which share tropes of the completely impossible,” it also includes “stories which include only a small number of tropes, or which construct those tropes in such a way as to leave doubt in the reader’s mind as to whether what they have read is fantastical or not.”

Given this sort of open-definitional discussion, it seems that fantasy studies may still be at a stage where each definition depends on the individual’s preferred set of texts.

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18 *Otranto* is perhaps not a serious contender, although, as Roberts notes, “almost all scholars of the Gothic agree . . . that it was this short novel . . . which initiated the late eighteenth-century vogue for Gothic fiction” (2012: 23).

19 This is not to say that SF has been defined to everyone’s satisfaction; Clute (in Clute and Grant [1997: 338]) usefully contrasts MF’s focus on “impossibility” with the idea that “sf tales are written and read on the presumption that they are possible—if perhaps not yet.” We might add, “or not any longer,” to account for and include tales that were intended to be SF but are now judged fantastical. See also Rogers and Stevens (2015: 5–11) with sources cited there.


22 For further discussion of this problem, see “Outline of the Volume” in this Introduction. See also Mendlesohn (2008: esp. xiii–xxv), who articulates the rhetorical strategies used in various works of modern fantasy.
Strikingly, however, this complicated situation affecting the study of MF includes a recurrent critical term derived from classical antiquity, a term that allows us to suggest a possible framework for theorizing classical traditions in MF that would be meaningfully parallel to ‘Promethean’ SF. For when it comes to characterizing the ‘fuzziness’ of the ‘set’ comprised by MF, more than one influential scholar has invoked the term ‘protean.’ Meaning ‘metamorphic,’ ‘fluid,’ or ‘of no fixed form,’ the term ‘protean’ derives from the ancient Greek figure of Proteus, an ‘Old Man of the Sea’ said to reveal truths to anyone who can wrestle him to a standstill—a near-impossibility since he continually changes his form (e.g., becoming animals) and substance (e.g., becoming fire or water). The ‘protean’ qualities of MF may already be clear from the preceding discussion.

Moreover, although there is no single starting-point to MF that proclaims the genre’s protean status—no inaugural text analogous to Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and subtitled “The Modern Proteus”—the term recurs in scholarship. For example, Adam Roberts writes of “the protean force of the Gothic novel,” a genre that we have seen identified as an important precursor to MF. For Roberts, that quality is emblematized by ‘monsters’ like vampires, werewolves, and Stevenson’s Mr. Hyde—that is, creatures who have the “protean ability to transform, to move from unexceptional ‘human’ behaviour to barbaric, violent, transgressive, and unfettered.” In a way similar to such fantastic monsters, the fantasy genre itself—or at least subgenres such as Gothic or horror—seems transformational, transgressive, indeed protean.

Proteus first appears in literature in *Od.*, where he uses every “crafty trick” (δολιής . . . τέχνης; 4.455) to escape the hero Menelaus, including transformations into a bearded lion, serpent, leopard, massive boar, water, and a lofty tree (4.456–458); see also Gantz (1993: ii.575, 663–664), and esp. Baumbach (2013), for whom Proteus becomes symbolic of multivalent interpretations of the Homeric text itself. Note that in the passage from *Od.*, shape-shifting is considered a *technē*, offering an interesting parallel to Promethean SF. The term ‘protean’ also appears in SF criticism: e.g., Darko Suvin in his seminal study writes of his approach as being motivated by “the pleasing blend of protean formal-cum-substantial process identified by the . . . metaphor of metamorphosis” (1979: xv). ‘Protean’ has also been applied to the study of classics; e.g., Kallendorf (2015).

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Introduction

These metamorphic qualities have seemed characteristic of MF more broadly, not limited to Gothic. For example, W. A. Senior identifies the same quality in a different subgenre, the quest fantasy: “[f]ar from a rigid formula, the quest fantasy is characterized by its protean quality, its ability to subsume and reflect varied purposes and narratives through the medium of Story.” Here Senior makes explicit what Roberts implies: the genre is felt to be just as protean, in terms of its structures and modes, as the creatures it represents are protean in their bodies and moods. This “protean quality” —or “force” or “ability”—in the stories is, then, repeatedly offered as the reason for the genre’s resistance to definition. A final example serves to emphasize that this has been, and may productively be, applied to the genre as a whole. In an influential contribution to scholarship on MF, Rosemary Jackson, addressing the question of why MF has seemed to lack a coherent history, writes: “It seems appropriate that such a protean form has so successfully resisted generic classification.”

For these scholars and others, then, MF seems to be a profoundly protean form indeed. Not only does it routinely feature characters that change their shapes and moods, and rely on settings that cross impossible physical boundaries, but MF is also transgressive in itself, mixing narrative modes and making ‘fuzzy’ the metaphysical boundaries between what is real or possible and what is implausible, impossible, or, in a word, fantastic. We should acknowledge here that there is a risk of mistaking a fuzziness in analysis for the fuzziness of the thing being analyzed—mistaking our own failure to understand the genre for the genre’s intrinsic resistance to being understood. In other words, and to resume the image of ancient Proteus, this would be the equivalent of failing to wrestle the genre to a standstill in fact, and believing that we have thus shown that it cannot be bested even in theory. The great potential value of the critical trope should nevertheless be clear: if MF is rightly identified as a protean mode, in parallel to SF as a Promethean one, its shape—or shape-shifting—and significance will be clarified by considering its close historical links to classical traditions and its continuing status as a rich site for classical receptions.

26 Senior (2012: 199, emphasis added).
27 Jackson (1981: 13, emphasis added), after Irwin (1976: x) and Rabkin (1976: 118). Jackson also engages in a bit of classical reception by briskly deriving the term ‘fantastic’ from Latin phantasticus, although she erroneously claims phantasticus derives from the (nonsensical) Greek term φανταστικός (sic); compare n. 1 herein.
As a final illustration of this possibility, and by way of rounding out this Introduction, we note that thinking of MF as protean is a good description of—and possibly a historical justification for—the sort of ‘disunity of form’ we have seen mark Walpole’s Otranto in deliberate contrast to the ‘unity of form’ advanced by the author of his epigraph, the ancient Roman Horace, in the Ars Poetica. It is perhaps no more than a coincidence, albeit a serendipitous one, that Walpole also helped bring to publication Erich Rudolf Raspe’s Critical Essay on Oil Painting (1781), which featured Raspe’s own motto derived from the programmatic opening lines of that most protean of Roman epic poems, Ovid’s Metamorphoses: In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas (corpora, continues Ovid: “My mind leads me to speak of forms changed into new [bodies]”; 1.1–2).28 This may seem tangential, and its connection to MF tenuous.29 But the links are suggestive, anticipating further developments still: for Raspe is doubtless better known as the author of Baron Munchausen’s Narratives of His Marvelous Travels and Campaigns in Russia (1785), a fantastical and protean text if ever there was one. Thus in the wake of Walpole in the eighteenth century, there emerge still more forms changed into new fantasies, similarly animated by ancient notions of the impossible.

OUTLINE OF THE VOLUME

In the preceding sections of this Introduction, we have pointed to some ways in which the study of classical receptions in MF might proceed. Tracing links among texts, subgenres, and authors, and considering especially the possibility of MF being a protean mode, we have intended mainly to help articulate perennially open questions more precisely. The same intention guides this volume as a whole and is reflected in the selection of topics. Even as the chapters cover a wide range of texts representative of MF, all together they are deliberately less definitive than exploratory. What light do classical receptions shed on MF and vice

28 Discussed in Carswell (1948: xxiv–xxv): “it was Walpole who saw it through the press, even though Raspe’s name remained on the title page with his motto.”
29 To strengthen the connection, we could consider the role played by Ovid’s poem, over centuries, as inspiration and sourcebook for countlessy many fantastical works of art; see, e.g., Brown (2002) and many of the essays in Gildenhard and Zissos (2013).
versa? What relationships do ‘canonical’ or well-known MF works have to antiquity, and do other, ‘non-canonical’ MF works have other types of relationships to ancient material? What could or should count as MF, and how might materials from classical antiquity help shape our approach to that question? By grappling with these and other, related topics in their own ways, the chapters collected herein offer not a single, unitary vision but a diverse range of approaches to the emerging study of classical traditions in modern fantasy.

The chapters are organized thematically. Like this Introduction, the chapters in Part I, “Classical Apparitions in (Pre-)Modern Fantasy,” point to some of the fundamental ways ancient materials appear in—or haunt—the early stages of MF. Discussing examples of what we might call the prehistory of the genre or indeed ‘pre-modern fantasy,’ these four chapters emphasize that fantasy is indeed ‘older than it may seem.’ In particular, connections between Greco-Roman antiquity and MF are not limited to certain tropes, motifs, or images, but run deeply enough that similar theories of interpretation, similar ways of reading, are richly applicable to both areas. From this perspective, MF has not so much a linear history, including a simple classical tradition, as multiple histories that must be regarded as constituting complex ‘fuzzy sets,’ indeed, drawing on sources from a wide range of time-periods and types. Of course, a purpose of this volume is to justify a larger role for the ancient Greco-Roman world in particular.

That justification begins with fairly global questions about genre and reception through a focus on one of the most important current works in modern fantasy, George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996–). Anticipating many of the concerns in later chapters, Jesse Weiner (“Classical Epic and the Poetics of Modern Fantasy”) draws particular attention to the ancient epic form by exploring some of the theoretical consequences of the common idea that modern high fantasy is ‘epic in prose.’ Detailing how *A Song of Ice and Fire* fits aesthetic guidelines developed in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Weiner argues that modern high fantasy—for many readers, the very paradigm of the modern genre—shares not only many of the superficial tropes of ancient heroic epic but also, and perhaps more importantly, some of its deeper aesthetic values. In the second chapter, Cecilie Flugt (“Theorizing Fantasy: Enchantment, Parody, and the Classical Tradition”) shifts from ancient poetics to more recent theories of ‘fantasy,’ seeking to move beyond a traditional view of MF as having
to do mainly with ‘enchantment.’ Recognizing how that slippery literary concept—and readers’ experience—plays an important role, Flugt argues that modern works owe as much to ancient Greco-Roman examples of the parodic, such as Lucian’s *True History* (second century CE), as they do to the enchanting or magical features of more commonly cited precursors such as medieval romances and Germanic fairy tales.

Next, Genevieve S. Gessert (“The Mirror Crack’d: Fractured Classicisms in The Pre-Raphaelites and Victorian Illustration”) examines how Pre-Raphaelite artists and subsequent Victorian illustrators (especially Henry Justice Ford) incorporated the ‘classical’ into the development of what became MF’s dominant visual style, seemingly ‘medieval’ but really a hybridization of the ‘medieval’ and the ‘classical.’ In asking how we look at periodization in the visual arts, Gessert affects how we understand MF narrative, since the illustrations she considers helped inspire such enormously influential authors as Tolkien and Lewis. In the final chapter of Part I, Robinson Peter Krämer (“Classical Antiquity and the Timeless Horrors of H. P. Lovecraft”) reminds us of the importance of a closely related genre, horror, by surveying classical materials in Lovecraft, not only in his ‘weird fiction’ but also in documentary evidence regarding his life and education. Discussing Lovecraft’s use of ancient languages, classical quotations, and repeated motifs, Krämer argues that such elements from Greek and Roman literature play a large role in establishing Lovecraft’s trademark atmosphere of fantastically terrifying sublimity and timeless horror.

Several of the topics in the first four chapters—Weiner’s focus on ‘epic,’ Flugt’s interest in ‘enchantment,’ Gessert’s examination of influential visual art, and Krämer’s attention to a pioneering early author—combine to prepare us for the subjects of Part II, perhaps the two single most influential authors in MF: J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. Both were inspired by visual art like that found in Andrew Lang’s *Fairy Book* series—Lewis famously attributes the original inspiration behind Narnia to his vision of a lone lamp-post in a snow-covered field, while Tolkien himself was a prolific illustrator of Middle-earth—and deeply interested in literary enchantments. Tolkien and Lewis have exerted a powerful influence on MF to this day and thus merit careful attention. In combination with authors like Lovecraft, they show—not only in their fictions but also in their own critical work and correspondence—that MF’s deep connection to earlier periods is no accident, but is rather the result of deliberate
cultivation. This fact should complicate any image of the genre as being simply ‘modern.’

Building on the work of Part I, then, the chapters in Part II, “False Medievalism and Other Ancient Fantasies,” examine an earlier period of particular importance to MF—namely, the medieval world, or, rather, visions of the medieval that are meaningful despite—or because of—not being historically accurate. These have been called ‘false medievalism’ after Lewis, who famously applied the phrase to MF’s frequent dependence on an ahistorical, nineteenth-century Romantic image of chivalric Europe. For our purposes, the most important consequence of MF’s emphasis on medievalism, whether true or false, has been to obscure the deep wellspring of Greco-Roman influences flowing through the genre, both on their own and in conjunction with the medieval. Suggesting ways of redressing that imbalance, the chapters in Part II examine several MF texts that feature a host of characters, icons, themes, and images that are ‘other than they seem,’ that readers often misperceive as simply medieval in origin, but in fact more complexly reflect even more ancient sources.

Benjamin Eldon Stevens (“Ancient Underworlds in J. R. R. Tolkien’s The Hobbit”) examines how Tolkien’s novel revises the ancient motif of the journey into the underworld, focusing on Bilbo’s encounters with Gollum and Smaug. Drawing on Tolkien’s own statements about the effects produced by ancient and medieval literature, Stevens argues that The Hobbit consciously draws on—and departs from—ancient images of the underworld to emphasize themes of forgetting and thus achieve Tolkien’s preferred melancholic “impression of depth.” The next two chapters address the work of Tolkien’s colleague, friend, and fellow Inkling, the likewise beloved and influential C. S. Lewis. Jeffrey T. Winkle (“C. S. Lewis’s The Voyage of the ‘Dawn Treader’ and Apuleius’ Metamorphoses”) examines the ancient narrative and philosophical traditions that provided thematic and theological foundations for Lewis’s work. In comparing the many similarities between Apuleius’ narrator Lucius (transformed into an ass) and Lewis’s character Eustace Scrubb (transformed into a dragon), Winkle argues that both characters are ‘Platonic sinners,’ rendered and allowed to develop in accordance with neo-Platonic morality and imagery that bridges classical and medieval worlds. The final chapter of Part II maintains a focus on Lewis while offering the volume’s most direct observation as to how MF’s medievalism is complicated by the classical. Focusing on Lewis’s retelling of the ancient myth of Cupid and
Introduction

Psyche, Marcus Folch (“A Time for Fantasy: Retelling Apuleius in C. S. Lewis’s *Till We Have Faces*”) argues that Lewis himself problematizes the privileged position occupied by the medieval in MF’s evocations of space and time by deliberately contrasting it to classical models. In Folch’s reading, Lewis’s imagined world changes from realistic to fantastic, becoming infused with supernatural presence, precisely when medieval structures are replaced by the classical.

Raising different versions of the question most central to this volume—“What, if anything, has the classical contributed to fantasy?”—the chapters in Parts I and II invite us not only to think diachronically, in terms of the influence of classical traditions on MF, but also to imagine how influence might flow in the reverse direction. How might the study of MF clarify our understanding of classical texts in their turn? Here is one of the highest potential values of classical reception studies, which serves to invite serious reconsiderations of ancient material in response to how that material has been ‘strongly mistaken,’ not in scholarship but in other literature and art. The chapters in the second half of the volume thus consider versions of that possibility by plunging more deeply into two notable estuaries for ancient classics and MF: in Part III, texts centering on children and monsters—that is, those whose bodies, changing in form and meaning, occupy humanity’s imaginative margins and thus have the capacity to critique authority and subvert dominant ideology; and in Part IV, alternate histories, likewise suggesting critical readings of the world as we know it. These two protean aspects of the modern genre are richly suggestive of how much we might transform the shape of our own understanding of ancient materials as well.

MF has often been accused of being a form of ‘children’s literature,’ and it is certainly true that MF often features children and fantastical creatures, whether as protagonists, helpers, or terrible forces to be overcome. Like much of recent scholarship, however, the chapters in Part III, “Children and (Other) Ancient Monsters” treat this aspect of MF rather as a source of interest and strength. Offering ways of understanding which particular roles ancient classics have played in relation to the genre’s overlapping images of the young and the inhuman, these chapters contribute to the burgeoning argument that children’s literature is not (only) for children: its sophisticated capacity to subvert authority is not limited to the present moment but should invite us to question both our relationship to
traditions—including the classical tradition—and our capacity for inventive receptions.

In the first chapter, Sarah Annes Brown (“The Classical Pantheon in Children’s Fantasy Literature”) examines the relative absence of Greco-Roman mythology—as opposed to Norse and Celtic mythology—in MF by tracking perceptions of classical myth in children’s literature. Surveying a wide range of examples—including E. Nesbit, Diana Wynne Jones, Rick Riordan, and Marie Phillips—Brown argues that children’s literature and literature about children reveal a conspicuous preoccupation with and antipathy towards the authority of both the Greek gods and the classical tradition itself. An interest in authority also appears in Brett M. Rogers’s chapter (“Orestes and the Half-Blood Prince: Ghosts of Aeschylus in the Harry Potter Series”). Exploring the unexpected quotation from Libation Bearers in Deathly Hallows, as well as a likely ‘ghosting’ of Aeschylus in Half-Blood Prince, Rogers argues that Rowling’s depictions of Voldemort as a tyrant, and of schoolchildren responding to tyranny, draw on and revise Aeschylean ideas about education and kinship. The Harry Potter novels treat schools as objects of scrutiny and emphasize the processes of both learning and unlearning knowledge.

Similar questions about knowledge in fantastic literature are raised by Antonia Syson (“Filthy Harpies and Fictive Knowledge in Philip Pullman’s His Dark Materials Trilogy”). Focusing on the harpies—their responses to Lyra’s storytelling in The Amber Spyglass and their changing role throughout His Dark Materials—Syson argues that Pullman offers a critique of modern fantasy that destabilizes several binary oppositions. In their place, Pullman articulates two kinds of ‘fictive knowledge,’ one that expands knowledge and another that distorts experience. In the final chapter of Part III, Elizabeth Manwell (“Girls in Bears’ Clothing in Greek Myth and Disney/Pixar’s Brave”) examines the nonconformist princess Merida and her mother, Elinor, within the larger context of fantastic tales about bear transformations, including Greek myths. Exploring how such tales could have been used to reinforce the mother–daughter relationship during a girl’s transition into adulthood, Manwell suggests that the comparison with Brave may offer insight into ancient Greek rites like the Arkteia and Brauronia.

Offering a further variation on MF’s fundamental theme of alterity—its capacity for suggesting changes both physical and metaphysical or epistemological—the chapters in Part IV, “(Post)Modern Fantasies of
Antiquity,” focus on ways in which some of the genre’s most transformative understandings of the (post)modern have been made possible by ancient materials. In subject matter, too, these three chapters cohere by making explicit a potential only implicit in the materials discussed earlier—namely, the potential for ‘fantasy’ to cover a much wider range of texts than generally considered, the crucial factor being an interest in ‘impossibility’ or ‘unreality,’ and the crucial result being an exposure of underlying ideology. The texts discussed in this part all realize that potential in various ways: although some are least likely to be recognized as MF, they nonetheless represent overlapping modes of ‘unreality’ in relation to the present world, in part by evoking similarly critical practices of classical reception. These chapters illustrate some of the ways in which, perhaps surprisingly, classical reception may help articulate meaningful challenges to traditional understandings of a genre like MF. Above all, they emphasize that ‘modern fantasy’ encompasses ‘fantasies,’ emphatically plural and diverse.

A first example of that potential for classically receptive ‘fantasies’ is explored by Sasha-Mae Eccleston (“Fantasies of Mimnermos in Anne Carson’s “The Brainsex Paintings” (Plainwater)). Like much of Carson’s work, “The Brainsex Paintings” is *sui generis*, in its case combining loose translations of Mimnermos with an impossible, fictive interview with that archaic Greek poet. Eccleston argues that Carson uses such fantastic tropes to challenge the authoritative pose of traditional scholarship, rendering memory as obscure as fantasy. Jennifer A. Rea (“Aeneas’ American New World in Jo Graham’s *Black Ships*) emphasizes the potential political ramifications of classical reception in MF by examining how Graham’s novel, a reimagining of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, invites readers to question the prohibitively high price to be paid for the ‘American dream.’ *Black Ships* thus exemplifies the potential for classically receptive MF to raise urgent questions about contemporary ‘fantasies’ or cultural fictions about freedom—including the freedom to invent one’s own destiny.

The final chapter of Part IV helps draw together many of the volume’s threads by returning to the question—raised in the first chapter—of how critiques of ‘traditional’ MF are developed in the classical receptions performed by George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Ayelet Haimson Lushkov (“Genre, Mimesis, and Virgilian Intertext in George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*) examines how the relationship between Martin’s Renly Baratheon and Loras Tyrell resonates with the Nisus and
Euryalus episode in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Exploring the various ways in which the two erotic pairs double one another and switch roles, Lushkov identifies a complex network of images and connections that belong to—and so invite critique of—the greater epic tradition.

The sorts of connections discussed by the preceding chapters are richly suggestive of possibilities for re-reading both the modern genre and its truly ancient—classical, not merely medieval—sources and antecedents. The chapters all together suggest how the ostensibly separate areas of Greco-Roman classics and MF are in fact closely linked, not only historically—in the form of relationships among particular works—but also metaphysically, with both areas involving what must seem, from the reader's perspective, to be ‘impossibilities’ or ‘unrealities’ of various kinds. From this perspective, both MF and the field of Classics—similarly inhabited by a vast bestiary of harpies and she-bears, trod upon by Psyche and even Proteus himself—are deeply connected by their commitments to ‘disunity of form.’

As we hope to have suggested in the preceding outline, the chapters collected in this volume do more than cover a wide range of ‘classical traditions in modern fantasy’—that is, they treat a great number and variety of sources from Greek and Roman antiquity, as well as more recent writing, televisual materials, and art emblematic of the genre. These essays also represent a wide range of approaches to this burgeoning area of scholarly activity. At the same time, we also recognize the limits to this collection, including the privileged place it offers, by accident of the chapters’ topics, to a predominately Anglo-American imagining of MF (even if such a designation may itself be a ‘fantasy’ that occludes a complexly multifaceted and protean diversity). The collection is thus intended to be not so much comprehensive or definitive—as perhaps no collection or study could ever be—as exploratory and inviting, raising questions to which other readers may be inspired to find answers, and leaving open spaces that other scholars may seek to fill. In other words, we are all too keenly aware that this collection represents merely the “Once upon a time . . .” and that a long journey lies ahead, no “happily ever after” in sight. Nevertheless, and most importantly, it is our hope that the volume as a whole captures something of the protean nature, not only of the genre of fantasy, but also of its myriad images of the classical world. Full of unreal creatures and elements, hard to get one’s hands—and head—around, always changing
its forms, tones, and meanings: modern fantasy offers delight and the prospect of great insight into our ongoing relationship to what is real, what is possible, what is human. If only we, too, like the ancient Greek hero Menelaus, might succeed at wrestling that mythical, unerring ‘Old Man of the Sea’ and so learn the depths of our imagination.
Part I

Classical Apparitions
in (Pre-)Modern Fantasy
INTRODUCTION

The case studies in this volume testify to the depth, density, and complexity of the myriad links between modern fantasy (MF) and classical literature. Although high fantasy in the strictest sense may be a modern literary phenomenon, the consummately mythological genre finds its roots in Homer, Aristophanes, Lucian, and other authors of Greek antiquity. Famously, such foundational authors of MF as Tolkien and Lewis were philologists—scholars of language and literary traditions—and in

1 I presented early versions of this essay at the October 2012 meeting of the Pacific Ancient and Modern Language Association in Seattle, and at Game of Thrones: Popular Culture and the Deep Past at Ohio State University in February 2014. In addition to the excellent feedback I received at both conferences, I am grateful for the comments, corrections, and suggestions I received from the editors and referees of this volume. This essay also benefited at an early stage from conversations with James I. Porter, Zina Giannopoulou, Kerry Mockler, and Michelle C. Neely.
2 Fredericks (1978).
their wake it would be difficult to find a high fantasy novel that is not rich in classical intertextuality and allusion.

This chapter is intended to be not a specific case study but rather a broader exploration of the generic links between high fantasy and heroic epic, seen in part through the lens of ancient Greek aesthetics. I first trace the stylistic features, strategies, priorities, and preoccupations of contemporary high fantasy. I argue that high fantasy is, in many respects, modern-day epic in prose, since the genre closely fits Aristotle's aesthetic guidelines for authors of heroic epic poetry. The second portion of my chapter examines the divergent receptions of classical epic and MF (both by their respective cultures and in the modern canon) and attempts to explain what can only be described as a clash of aesthetics.

Amidst the summaries, teasers, and critical endorsements on the dust jackets and covers of high fantasy novels and series, from J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* to J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (*SIF*), 'epic' is one of the most common words bandied about. For instance, *The Washington Post* calls *A Dance with Dragons* (the fifth book of *SIF*) “epic fantasy as it should be written,” while *Time* magazine names the series “the great fantasy epic of our era.” Though I do not doubt that many critics use the word loosely, often as a substitute for 'high' or 'heroic' fantasy, they nevertheless tap MF's deep roots in epic poetry. All of the word's contemporary colloquial meanings ('long,' 'monumental,' 'heroic,' 'majestic') fit within the conventions and aims of classical epic. Fantasy shares many of its generic tropes as well as its broader aesthetic values with epic poetry.

For the sake of brevity and accessibility, I will ground my illustrations in *SIF*. At one level, my choice of texts is somewhat arbitrary: given that my broader argument is at the level of generic tropes, almost any high fantasy series would have served. However, my argument engages with
Epic and the Poetics of Modern Fantasy

‘popular’ literature, and SIF is, at the time of this writing, a worldwide phenomenon.

Prior to exploring the generic conventions of ancient epic poetry and their resonances in modern high fantasy literature, it seems prudent to define MF and to lay out in brief just what I mean by ‘high’ fantasy. First, I follow Brian Attebery’s caution against overly rigid definitions of genre, and I suggest that fantasy is best understood—both on its own terms and in relation to other genres—as a ‘fuzzy set.’ As Attebery also suggests, “fantasy is the most fictional of all modes.” Because fantasy points towards the unknown and unknowable, as David Sandner argues, its “strange encounters and wild possibilities” “bewilder the reader,” and “the fundamental characteristic of the fantastic is displacement.” Despite its radical fictionality and strategies of estrangement, “a fantasy text is,” as John Clute suggests, “a self-coherent narrative. When set in this world, it tells a story that is impossible in the world as we perceive it; when set in an otherworld, that otherworld will be impossible, though the stories set there may be possible in its terms.” Like this volume’s editors in their Introduction, I distinguish fantasy from its speculative counterpart, science fiction (SF), by the nature of its impossibilities. Whereas the impossible fictions of SF are epistemological, fantasy’s impossibilities are metaphysical.

For my purposes, there is no qualitative valuation of high fantasy over its opposite, low fantasy. Rather, ‘high’ and ‘low’ are technical, formal terms to classify and subcategorize the fantasy genre. I follow C. W. Sullivan (as well as Kenneth Zahorski and Robert Boyer) in defining high fantasy as fantastic literature marked by the creation of secondary worlds. These secondary worlds may be entirely separate from our own primary world (e.g., Tolkien’s Middle-earth, Martin’s Westeros), they may be connected to our primary world through a

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5 Attebery (2014: 33). Sandner (2004: 7): “Modern fantastic literature is thus defined and delimited in relation to what has been characterized as the ‘rise’ of the realistic novel in the eighteenth century.” On Attebery’s and Sandner’s definitions, see further this volume’s Introduction.


7 Sandner (2004: 9).

8 Clute and Grant (1997: 338, authored by Clute).

9 Sullivan (1996: 300); Zahorski and Boyer (1982: 56). The term ‘secondary world’ is drawn from Tolkien (1965); see some additional discussion in Stevens (this volume).
portal (Lewis’s Narnia), or they may exist as secondary worlds within our world, as long as they are created with their own structure and internal logic (Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series). Low fantasy is distinguished from high fantasy, not by literary or aesthetic deficiency, but rather by eschewing the creation of secondary worlds to present the non-rational fantastic within our primary world (e.g., Neil Gaiman’s and Terry Pratchett’s *Good Omens*, Lynne Reid Bank’s *The Indian in the Cupboard*, and the television series *Bewitched*).

While I focus on fantasy’s formal and aesthetic links to Greco-Roman epic, I in no way suggest a simplistic intertextual model in which classical epic is the sole genealogical progenitor of high fantasy. In comparing high fantasy with classical epic, I do not deny the relevance of other literatures, both epic and not.\(^{10}\) Many non-classical (and non-Western) cultures boast rich, autonomous epic and mythological traditions important to fantasy.\(^{11}\) For example, the Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata* shares many of the generic features I trace in classical epic and MF, while fantasy is also influenced by the romantic novel, the Norse saga, and the fairy tale. It is worth noting, however, that all of those prose genres are themselves influenced by epic.\(^{12}\) A feature shared between an ancient epic and a later epic may make its way into a MF text like *SIF* via an intermediary work, but it still represents an unconscious or unwitting reception of the ancient epic as well. All told, whether we view the influence of classical epic on fantasy as direct or as mediated through a number of heterogeneous strains, epic might emerge as both a mother and grandmother to fantasy.

\(^{10}\) I here follow the caution with which Martin (2005: 9) introduces his study of the epic genre.

\(^{11}\) See Clute and Grant (1997: 319, authored by Clute). Though Clute’s epic genealogy begins with the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and is grounded in Western traditions, Clute and Grant (1997: 675, authored by Ashley) elsewhere acknowledge diverse influences upon fantasy ranging from East Asian to Native American and Aboriginal traditions. While classical epic is by no means the only tradition important to the development of MF, it is an essential one. In discussing the immense influence of Greek and Latin literature upon fantasy, Joe Bernstein argues that, although they did not invent fantasy, “the Greeks gave us fantasy”; Clute and Grant (1997: 433).

\(^{12}\) On epic into prose sagas, see Saxby (1997: 147). While Tolkien fears reducing fairy tales to mere derivative recreations of past mythologies and literatures, he does grant these sources their place as part of a complex “web” or “soup” of story; Tolkien (1965: 20). Scholes (2003: 246): “For Lukács (1971: 61) the novel succeeds the epic as the proper narrative mode . . .”; see also Bakhtin (1981). Holzberg (1995: 33) acknowledges classical epic as a formal forerunner to the ancient romantic novel; see also the essays in Schmeling (1996).