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The Canons of Fantasy: Lands of High Adventure (2019) by Patrick Moran

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The Canons of Fantasy: Lands of High Adventure, by Partick Moran. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019. [vi], 80 pp. $12.99 (trade paperback) ISBN 9781108708678. Also available in ebook format. "Elements in Publishing and Book Culture" series.

Originally applied to biblical exegesis, the idea of canon has been the object of changing fortunes within contemporary literary studies, from its defence by notorious critics such as Harold Bloom to its questioning over the past couple of decades by different schools of thought such as post-structuralism, feminism and Marxism. As part of the Cambridge Elements series, Patrick Moran's *The Canons of Fantasy* reflects on four issues regarding fantasy literature: the mutual influence between the fantasy genre and its potential canon; the meaning of Tolkien's works for fantasy fiction; the inclusion of multimedia and transmedia within the genre; and the need for inclusivity and diversity within the canons of fantasy.

In the introduction to his text, the author uses cartography as a visual metaphor for the "territory of fantasy", with fluctuating borders and distinct pinnacles. Amongst these, Moran makes a point of naming Tolkien and his oeuvre "the Mount Everest of fantasy fiction" on the first page of his text. Moran then seeks to convey the complex panorama that constitutes the fantasy genre and initially argues in favour of the plural *canons* for, agreeably, multiple canons would reflect the multiple communities that inhabit fantasy; nevertheless, the author will overwhelmingly use the singular *canon* throughout the rest of his text (4). In order to materialize the possibility of establishing (a) canon(s) of fantasy, Moran names three factors worth considering: fantasy's condition as a more recent, ongoing cultural phenomenon; its position as a popular, lower cultural field (as opposed to canon as a high cultural concept); and the difficulty in defining what fantasy actually is. However (and more interestingly), Moran declares that instead of establishing said canon of fantasy, his intention is rather "to highlight some of the issues that arise when addressing the canon of modern fantasy . . . about what we do when we discuss the canon of fantasy" (5).

The axis of the first chapter of *The Canons of Fantasy* is the definition of fantasy. From this point it proceeds to examine the genre's synchronic and diachronic aspects—that is, its history and multiple expressions—as well as its key works according to their commercial success, cultural impact, and so on. Throughout his text, Moran displays his vast knowledge of fantasy works, the overlaps between fantasy and other genres, and the commercial impact of fantasy. He acknowledges the influence of complex interactions between publishers, authors, and readers—including virtual forums, websites, awards, and fantasy conventions—in the development of fantasy, as well as the impact of collections such as the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series and Gollancz' Fantasy Masterworks.

After navigating through different definitions given by critics such as Lin Carter, Richard Mathews, and Kathryn Hume, the author finally circumscribes fantasy to the following criteria, which nevertheless must be approached with flexibility: "fantasy is a form of fiction" that *tends* to portray impossible phenomena in a secondary world (12). The author then sets the beginning of the genre in nineteenth century Great Britain and its consolidation in the aftermath of Tolkien's Middle-earth narratives during the twentieth century.

Moran's second chapter is dedicated to Tolkien's position within the fantasy landscape, for the author names Tolkien "the first author to play a canonical role for all subsequent fantasy, rather than just a localized tradition" (30). The success of Tolkien's oeuvre, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, and more recently thanks to its cinematic adaptations, has undoubtedly marked turning points within fantasy, making the author as a "transatlantic phenomenon" (29). However, Tolkien's legacy and current place in the fantasy genre as well as the wider circles of general literature is an ongoing matter of reflection for academics, critics, and enthusiasts. For Moran specifically, this means articulating such reflections around the concept of *quality*: asking if Tolkien is the best fantasy writer ever and if Tolkien's works are the best fantasy texts ever written.

Moran understandably tries to swiftly tackle these complex questions—to which there is no conclusive answer—by giving a brief albeit comprehensive overview of Tolkien's significance throughout the history of fantasy literature, as well as his potential contributions to a canon of fantasy. Nevertheless, his explanation of Tolkien's importance, with special consideration towards a non-specialized readership, culminates in a series of well-known if not worn out notions about Tolkien and his literary production. This ranges from the tropes that *The Lord of the Rings* introduced or reinforced within fantasy—the quest narrative, the hero's journey, the clash between good and evil, the disenchantment of the world, the multivolume format, and so on—to the use of qualifiers such as "a universe that was both simpler and more meaningful" or "stark moralized landscapes" in order to describe Tolkien's work within Moran's text (32). Where Moran does excel is at presenting different manifestations of Tolkien's influence in the genre: the author mentions the predominance of "high fantasy" and medieval scenery template—although Tolkien was not the first one to seek inspiration in the Middle Ages nor are they his only source—as well as important and conscious attempts to depart from this brand of fantasy, and Tolkien's connection to children's literature.

However, Moran's appreciation and interpretation of Tolkien's literary production fails to consider already decades-old discussions led by scholarship and fandom in two specific directions. On the one hand, they have transcended the mythological, philological, and archetypal aspects of the author's work. On the other, they have problematized Tolkien's "political and ideological stances,

his traditional world view and the very male-centric, white-centric and European-centric fantasy he produced and inspired" (37). These efforts have led to ground-breaking perspectives on how Tolkien's texts engage with vital discourses of the 21st century while also explaining their enduring appeal and thus lasting position within the canon.[1] The former will be of importance when considering the Moran's fourth and final chapter, which will be discussed in more detail later on.

The third chapter addresses fantasy as multimedia fiction, for as the author puts it, "[l]imiting the canon of fantasy to literature would be a grave misunderstanding of the genre's development and inner workings" (40). The author attributes the multifaceted nature of fantasy to "the genre's inherent emphasis on world-building" (44) and describes the historic interplay between fantasy as literature and its visual paratexts—for example, the different maps of Middle-earth—RPGs and video games as Promethean formats, more traditional and wide-reaching expressions such as films, TV series, and comic books, as well as gamebooks and music inspired by fantasy works. Although Middle-earth has been a bountiful source of inspiration for all of these categories, Moran rightfully asserts that fantasy fans today need not have read Tolkien or even be knowledgeable in the complexities of fantasy literature to profess admiration for fantasy. Its canons should consequently address its multimediality and transmediality, even though this poses its own set of difficulties, as Moran insightfully illustrates regarding authorship in the case of RPGs and video games or the role of internet streaming platforms in the dissemination of storylines.

In the fourth and final section, Moran leads a promising discussion on perhaps the most problematic aspects of Western literary canons and their implications in the creation of one for fantasy. First, the instrumentalization of literary canons in the West to control and shape what is taught, read, and published to the detriment of female, LGBTQIA+ and BAME characters, authors, and fandom. Second, the hegemonic position of the English language, which has unfortunately led to "the implicit (and usually unconscious) idea that fantasy only exists in English, or that non-English fantasy is irrelevant or subpar" (56). Moran thus speaks of questioning these biases and the remnants of colonialism/paternalism within the genre in order to create an inclusive canon that sets precedents for the fantasy works of tomorrow. This includes a revision of what Moran states as Tolkien's influence on the genre—as quoted before—and bringing to the fore authors that challenge the high fantasy paradigm, from C.L. Moore, Ursula K. Le Guin, and N.K. Jemisin, to Samuel R. Delany and Nnedi Okorafor.

Moran closes this final chapter by addressing the so-called "the linguistic boundaries of the fantasy canon" (65). Given the definition of fantasy the author

1. As proven by the research of scholars such as Jane Chance, Robert Eaglestone, Dimitra Fimi, John Garth, Anna Vaninskaya, amongst others.

coined at the beginning of his text, fantasy is understood here primarily as an Anglophone expression. Moran is therefore of the opinion that despite the production of fantasy in other languages, these works are unavoidably defined by the Anglophone tradition, with scarce translations, limited impact, and their success only proportional to their influence on the English-speaking market. Nonetheless, other than mentioning the Witcher cycle and Aliette de Bodard's novels, Moran does not provide conclusive evidence in this regard nor is there any mention of the creation and reception of fantasy solely amongst non-Anglophone countries. Instead, Moran offers a brief case study of France's contemporary fantasy traditions—notably historical fantasy or *urchronie*, which departs slightly from Moran's rule of a secondary world—publishing houses, and RPGs, especially since the 1990s.[2] This final chapter is thus characterized by an internal dissonance due to the initial portrayal of the relation between Anglophone and non-Anglophone fantasy—which seems to incarnate a self-fulfilling linguistic prophecy—and his final validation of a non-Anglophone fantasy cultures without in fact offering alternatives for the effective expansion of a canon of fantasy to include them.

Discerning the different strands that build the skein called contemporary fantasy can be a daunting task for any academic, reader, or fan. Moran's text represents a valuable reflection regarding how a canon of fantasy could be constructed and the multiple roles it could fulfil, either as a requisite for scholarly legitimation and/or as a means to strengthen the fantasy community. Moran concludes his text by saying that "[t]he aim of this Element is neither to prevent nor to accelerate this canonization, but to incite fantasy readers to ask themselves the right questions when considering who or what the 'classics' of fantasy might be" (72). But fantasy has proven that these questions have long been part of an ever-increasing polyphonic discussion between fantasy devotees from all walks of life and cultures. And against all odds, regardless of its supposed state as a minor or peripheral genre as perceived by past and present literary *intelligentsia*, fantasy thrives, even to the point where its study has gradually consolidated a position in major academic institutions around the globe. Would it nevertheless *need* a canon? Does fantasy *want* a canon? And why would it be invested in such a measuring or quantifying tool, no matter how inclusive, if its origins and aims would inevitably lead back to a still problematic literary establishment as discussed by Moran himself? Perhaps in this sense one of fantasy's contribution is the possibility of transcending the canon by questioning the very pillars that

2. Perhaps it is also worth noting that besides the high adventure and historical fiction genres that Moran mentions, fantastic elements has been an important tradition within French literature since at least the 16th century (for example, Rabelais' *Gargantua et Pantagruel*). Tzvetan Todorov's seminal *Introduction à la literature fantastique* (mentioned in passing by Moran) was published originally in French in 1970.

would supposedly sustain it. Current discussions amongst Tolkien scholars, admirers, and detractors towards the creation of more inclusive readings and adaptations of his works already bear witness to this movement.

Furthermore, at the beginning of his text, Moran claims that "the aesthetic and emotional experience of reading is nearly impossible to share, but arguing about the canon of a genre we love is the closest we can get" (4). This review begs to differ: if fantasy has endured such a long and healthy life, it has clearly done so thanks to its ability to reinvent itself constantly and to the multifarious paths it has traced—and is yet to draw—to share its past, present, and future.

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