



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

---

Volume 37  
Number 1

Article 9

---

10-15-2019

## A Modern Fairy-story: *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* Seen Through the Prism of Tolkien's Classic Essay

Douglas Charles Kane  
*Independent scholar*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kane, Douglas Charles (2019) "A Modern Fairy-story: *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* Seen Through the Prism of Tolkien's Classic Essay," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 37 : No. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol37/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:  
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

SWOSU<sup>TM</sup>

---

## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021

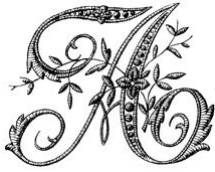


### Abstract

Tolkien's essay "On Fairy-stories" provides both a definitive discussion of fairy-stories and their relationship to myth and fantasy and his most explicit analysis of his own art. In addition, in carefully laying out over the course of his essay what makes a true fairy-story, he also makes it possible to analyze other artists' works to determine how successful they are as fairy-stories. Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* meets those standards on every point, and is thus shown to be a true modern fairy-story in the tradition that Tolkien documents so plainly.

### Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-stories"; Fantasy literature; Clark, Susanna. *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*



MODERN FAIRY-STORY:  
*JONATHAN STRANGE & MR NORRELL*  
SEEN THROUGH THE PRISM OF  
TOLKIEN'S CLASSIC ESSAY

DOUGLAS CHARLES KANE

IN MARCH OF 1939, J.R.R. TOLKIEN WAS ASKED to give the Andrew Lang Lecture at the University of St. Andrews, and he elected to speak about fairy-stories. This was a natural choice since fairy-stories were what Lang was best known for. This lecture generated a fair amount of attention in the local press (see *Tolkien On Fairy-stories* [hereafter *OFS*] 161–169) and Tolkien went on to revise the lecture through several different manuscripts (see *OFS* 173–299) before the essay reached its completed form in 1943. It was first published in 1947 in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, edited by C.S. Lewis. It has since been published in several different compilations, beginning with 1964's *Tree and Leaf* in which it was combined with Tolkien's semi-autobiographical short story "Leaf by Niggle," followed by *The Tolkien Reader* in 1966, *Poems and Stories* in 1980, *The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays* in 1983, and *Tales from the Perilous Realm* in 1997. In 2014, an expanded edition was published with commentary and notes, edited by noted Tolkien scholars Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson. All citations herein to the essay are to that edition.

In *On Fairy-stories* Tolkien goes to great pains to define what is and what is not a true fairy-story (or fairy tale, as these works are often referred to as). The wide-ranging essay reflects his often prickly and rather stubborn personality, expressing strong opinions with great vehemence, but backed by Tolkien's vast knowledge and nimble wit. It has great significance in documenting Tolkien's own philosophy on fantasy and thoughts on mythopoiesis, and in clarifying his view of fairy-stories as a legitimate literary genre, and in focusing his mind on what he wanted to accomplish in his own works of fantasy. However, this essay can also be used in a practical way to evaluate how well a modern work of fantasy fiction succeeds as a traditional fairy-story.

One such modern work of fantasy fiction is Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*. Clarke's book was a major commercial and critical success. It won numerous awards and accolades when it was released in 2005, including being named *Time Magazine's* Book of the Year, the Hugo Award for Best Novel, the World Fantasy Award for Best Novel, and the Mythopoeic Award for Adult

Literature, and was adapted into a popular BBC mini-series. Clarke's work has often been linked to Tolkien's. For instance, the Shetland Library Fantasy Reading List entry for her book begins by stating, "What would happen if you locked Tolkien, Dickens, and Jane Austin [sic] in a room? Why, Susanna Clark's [sic] masterpiece *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* of course!" (Shetland 39). *Time* gushes that it is "a chimera of a novel that combines the dark mythology of fantasy with the delicious social comedy of Jane Austen into a masterpiece of the genre that rivals Tolkien" (Grossman). Clarke herself acknowledged that she was strongly influenced by Tolkien. When asked in one interview about the genesis of *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, she stated "I was teaching English in Bilbao, and I became ill with some sort of postviral thing. This necessitated resting a lot. So I bought *The Lord of the Rings* [sic] and reread it. Then I reread it again. It completely took me over, and by the time I'd finished, it was obvious I ought to try writing a novel of magic and fantasy" ("Harry Potter Meets History"). In another interview when talking about creating the Raven King (the key character in her book, sometimes referred to by other magicians as "the nameless slave"), she notes that "there's a magician in *The Lord of the Rings*, right at the very end, who comes out of Mordor to do battle against our heroes, and no one knows his name because he himself has forgotten it. I thought this was rather cool, and when I was developing my magicians, I wanted one without a name" ("Susanna Clarke Interview"). There is, however, no indication that Clarke was specifically aware of Tolkien's essay *On Fairy-stories*, or that she used it as a template of any kind. Nonetheless, looking at Clarke's work through the prism of Tolkien's classic essay, it becomes clear that it meets the definition of a true fairy-story in the tradition Tolkien documents.

#### WHAT ARE FAIRIES AND ELVES?

Tolkien naturally begins his exploration of fairy stories by quoting the *Oxford English Dictionary* (which Tolkien himself contributed to as a younger man), which while having no listing at all for "fairy-story" defines "fairy tale" as "(a) a tale about fairies, or generally a fairy legend; with developed senses, (b) an unreal or incredible story, and (c) a falsehood" (OFS 28). Tolkien notes that the second two definitions would make his topic "hopelessly vast" (28) and thus focuses on the first definition. As such, his starting point in examining fairy-stories is to look at who or what are fairies.

However, he quickly turns his back on his old colleagues, rejecting the "lexicographer's definition of *fairies*," which he quotes as being "supernatural beings of diminutive size, in popular belief supposed to possess magical powers and to have great influence for good or evil over the affairs of man" (28). Tolkien takes issue with using both the words "supernatural" and "diminutive" in

describing a fairy (which Tolkien notes “is as a noun more or less equivalent to *elf*” (OFS 30).

As for “supernatural,” Tolkien disagrees with the use of this word in describing fairies except in the most mundane sense of being a “superlative prefix” (OFS 28). It is man who is “supernatural” as in being outside of nature whereas fairies are closely oriented with nature (28). He also points out that “[t]he road to fairyland is not the road to Heaven; nor even to Hell, I believe, though some have held that it may lead thither indirectly by the Devil’s tithe,” going on to quote several stanzas from the old fairy-story *Thomas the Rhymer* (OFS 28–29).

As for fairies being “diminutive,” Tolkien takes particular issue with the popularizing of this concept by Shakespeare and the lesser-known Michael Drayton, about whom Tolkien says his “*Nymphidia* is, considered as a fairy-story (a story about fairies), one of the worst ever written” (OFS 30). Tolkien follows Andrew Lang himself in labeling the whole concept of diminutive fairies or Elves trying to be funny and failing as “tiresome” (OFS 29–30).

Tolkien would surely approve of the fairies presented Clarke’s *Jonathan Strange*. The gentleman with the thistle-down hair (the only fairy presented in detail, referred to hereafter as “the gentleman” since no other name is given) is the opposite of “diminutive,” being physically imposing in his stature and beauty. He is described as “a tall, handsome person with pale, perfect skin and an immense amount of hair, as pale and shining as thistle-down” (*Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* [JS&MN] 83.) Moreover, it is repeatedly emphasized that his magical power is derived from his profound connection with nature. When he first appears (summoned by Mr Norrell to recall the future Lady Pole from death) “suddenly there was something green where nothing green had been before and fresh sweet smell as of woods and fields wafted through the room” (83). This connection between the fairies and nature is further emphasized when Clarke describes the battle in which the British King Henry is defeated by the Fairie host led by John Uskglass, the Raven King, and “the birds for miles around began singing as if for joy” (JS&MN 497). Furthermore, Clarke’s fairy is far from the cutesy Elf trying to be funny and failing that Tolkien found so annoying. As Grossman observes in his *Time* feature, “Much of *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* takes place in the shadow of a powerful and fascinatingly cruel fairy who makes Voldemort look like a Muppet” (Grossman).

Clarke also repeatedly emphasizes the separation between fairy-land from “Christian” lands, including heaven and hell, but also reflects the tradition that Tolkien refers to that “it may lead thither indirectly by the Devil’s tithe.” For instance, John Uskglass (who though of human descent is some ways even more fairie-like than the fairies in Clarke’s work) is several times stated to have ruled three kingdoms: Northern England, a land in Fairie, and a land on the far

side of Hell that he is said to have leased from Lucifer (*JS&MN* 122, n. 1). Clarke's concept of fairies seems firmly rooted in the tradition that Tolkien considered appropriate, untouched by the "tiresome" modern concept of diminutive creatures trying unsuccessfully to be funny.

### THE PERILOUS REALM

Having touched upon the nature of fairies and elves, Tolkien then observes that Fairy-stories need not primarily be about fairies or elves. He states that "[m]ost good 'fairy-stories' are about the *aventures* of men in the Perilous Realm or upon its shadowy marches" (*OFS* 32). He adds that "The definition of a fairy-story—what it is, or what it should be—does not, then, depend on any definition or historical account of elf or fairy, but upon the nature of *Faërie*: the Perilous Realm itself, and the air that blows in that country" (32).

Clarke's tale meets this definition very well. As Shulman observes, "In Clarke's world, all magical power is ultimately derived from fairyland—not the sugar-and-flowers fairyland of greeting cards, but the spooky, amoral world of pagan folklore" (Shulman). Grossman notes, "Clarke's magic is a melancholy, macabre thing, confabulated out of snow and rain and mirrors and described with absolute realism" (Grossman).

Clarke illustrates the nature of *Faërie* through the contrast of her named characters with it. Norrell's neurotic avoidance of the Perilous Realm and its denizens (other than his arrogant dalliance with the Gentlemen in bringing Lady Pole back from Death's cold embrace for his own wicked ambitions) serves to emphasize Strange's increasingly desperate longing to explore the "shadowy marches of the Perilous Realm." During his adventures as the Duke of Wellington's "Magician-in-Ordinary" in the wars against Napoleon, his magic becomes increasingly wild, particularly his ill-fated attempts to re-animate seventeen dead Neapolitans (*JS&MN* 329–333), culminating in an event in which Strange uses a spell that resulted in "a bead of pearly blue light" coming out of the breast of a Frenchman facing him, and another from the Frenchman's horse, which Strange reached out to "smash horse and horseman out of existence" (*JS&MN* 449). Strange himself is shook by this experience and retreats to a more "proper use of English magic" (449). Earlier, when Strange is asked to attempt to cure the British monarch's madness, he travels to Windsor Palace and when he brings the mad King outside he suddenly finds himself truly on "the shadowy marches of the Perilous Realm" when the King is nearly brought to the Other Lands by the gentleman (*JS&MN* 360–364). Strange's longings eventually lead him to discover "the King's Paths" which are accessible through the mirrors and were created by the Raven King (see *JS&MN* 394–398).

This mirrored path between the “real world” and the Other lands had already been seen in an earlier scene. In his essay, Baker observes

It is through (and behind) the ‘mirror’ that *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* makes one of its first, major, transitions between the “real world” and Faerie. Encountering the ‘gentleman with thistle-down hair’ (a Faerie creature) in the halls of his master, Stephen, an African servant, stands before a mirror. [...] However, a sudden shift occurs in the parameters of the scene’s material ‘reality.’ Instantly after looking at his reflection Stephen stands in Faerie (the fantastic ‘other’ world). (Baker 6-7)

Later the borders between England and Fairie are opened through Strange’s attempts to rescue his wife, Arabella, after she is stolen by the gentleman and brought to his kingdom, the Fairie-land of Lost-Hope (truly a “Perilous Realm”). As a result, as Childermass observes, “the paths to Faerie are open again” (*JS&MN* 709; see 709–711 and 729–730 for the experiences of Childermass and Henry Lascalles, respectively, on the fairy road after those paths are opened). Both Childermass and another character, the humble magician John Segundus, several times find themselves on the edge of “the shadowy marches of the Perilous Realm” when encountering magic. When Segundus first encounters Jonathan Strange at ‘The Shadow House’ he finds himself caught in Strange’s induced dream as the latter attempts to consult with the seventeenth century magician Maria Absolom. “It’s like the Other Lands!” Segundus exclaimed, before succumbing to the “strange kind of influence” that Absolom’s garden was having on him (*JS&MN* 212–219). When Lady Pole attempts to take revenge on Norrell for his mortgaging her happiness to the gentleman in order that Norrell could advance his own ambitions, Childermass becomes inundated by the magic of the Perilous Land that surrounds her, so that the birds and the stones, the brown fields, and the pools made by the rain and sky itself all spoke to him in a language that he could not understand (500–508.) Later, when Segundus encounters Lady Pole and Steven Black, who are both under the gentleman’s enchantment, he sees a red-and-white rose in the mouth of each of them (*JS&MN* 519) and later, just before Segundus is able to remove Lady Pole from the gentleman’s enchantment, Segundus again sees the red-and-white rose while Childermass is able to see Lady Pole in both the “real world” and the fairie world at the same time (*JS&MN* 726).

However, the nature of Faërie is perhaps best illustrated by the journey of John Uskglass, the Raven King, to the Perilous Realm as a young boy, to emerge more powerful (and in some ways more fairy-like) than the fairies

themselves (see *JS&MN* 495–499).<sup>1</sup> While the book is called *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, the tale is really John Uskglass's story, with Norrell, Strange and even the gentleman (as well as his successor as king of Lost-Hope, the other nameless slave known for much of the story as "Steven Black"), all manipulated by the Raven King and the power that he derived from his sojourn in the Other Lands for his own purposes of restoring Magic to England.<sup>2</sup> As Strange himself says, and even Norrell confirms, "It is John Uskglass's magic that we do" (see *JS&MN* 414, 417.) And as Vinculus tells Childermass when the latter claims that Norrell and Strange had succeeded in restoring English magic, "They *are* the spell John Uskglass is doing. That is all they have ever been. And he is doing it now!" (*JS&MN* 758, emphasis in original). John Uskglass's prophecy, as quoted by Vinculus to Norrell and Strange, and to Steven Black, defines the course of the tale, culminating in the restoration of English magic. It is very much a story about the "the Perilous Realm itself, and the air that blows in that country" and the effect that the Perilous Realm has on our own domain.

#### THE NATURE OF A FAIRY-STORY

Tolkien goes on to add that

a 'fairy-story' is one which touches on or uses Faerie, whatever its own main purpose may be: satire, adventure, morality, fantasy. Faerie itself may perhaps most nearly be translated by Magic—but it is magic of a peculiar mood and power, at the furthest pole from the vulgar devices of the laborious, scientific, magician. There is one proviso: if there is any satire present in the tale, one thing must not be made fun of, the magic itself. That must in that story be taken seriously, neither laughed at nor explained away. (*OFS* 32-33)

Clarke again follows this proviso closely. Her tale is full of a dry humor but at all places magic is treated seriously.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> As Jonathan Strange says of John Uskglass in the Prologue to *The History and Practice of English Magic*, "[h]is was a perfect blending of fairy magic and human organization — their powers were wedded to his own terrifying purposefulness" (*JS&MN* 499).

<sup>2</sup> Clarke herself states in one interview in response to how the book changed over the course of writing it "I knew with John Uskglass that I had a sense of how he was powering the whole story" ("Conversation with Susanna Clarke").

<sup>3</sup> One slight exception could be the magical gifts given to Steven Black by the gentleman, such as the glowing golden guineas that appear in the store of Mrs Brandy, who is in love with Steven (*JS&MN* 153–158), the farm overseer on paying Steven on a bet that Steven had never made (248), the dog that insisted on delivering a document with a secret map to him (248), the award given to him by the Mayor of Bath (where Steven had never been) for his extraordinary virtues (248–249), and the orb, crown and sceptre that magically



Another point that Tolkien makes that applies particularly strongly to Clarke's tale is that

[i]t is at any rate essential to a genuine fairy-story, as distinct from the employment of this form for lesser or debased purposes, that it should be presented as 'true.' The meaning of 'true' in this connection I will consider in a moment. But since the fairy-story deals with 'marvels', it cannot tolerate any frame or machinery suggesting that the whole story in which they occur is a figment or illusion. (*OFS* 35)

Clarke's story takes the form of historical fiction that is extraordinarily well-researched and detailed, with long, detailed footnotes adding to the appearance of veracity. This greatly contributes to how successfully Clarke is able to present the marvels that appear within this frame. As Clarke herself states, "In *Strange and Norrell* I wanted to use the historical background to make the magic seem more real, more convincing" ("Interview with Susanna Clarke"). In another interview, Clarke details her efforts to accurately describe the battles of the Napoleonic Wars and London politics of the period the novel is set in. "I've spent a great deal of time trying to get the detail of battles and people, etc., accurate. It seemed to me that the more real I made those details, the more real the magic would seem. But military history surprised me. I wasn't looking forward to researching it at all. But it's wonderful, so vivid, so immediate, so full of tiny detail" ("Harry Potter Meets History").

Another example of how Clarke achieves this veracity, detailed by K.A. Laity in her excellent paper, "The Unlikely Milliner and the Magician of Threadneedle-street," is her use of a "slightly altered version of the Tarot de Marseille" (Laity 215). As Laity details, "As with the rest of the history portrayed in the novel, Clarke carefully chooses the spaces in which to allow play, but always from a position of wider knowledge" (Laity 219). Laity notes "In interviews she has spoken of her zeal for research. 'I love doing research. [...] I wanted to use the historical background to make the magic seem more real, more convincing'" ("Interview with Susanna Clarke," qtd. 219).

#### NOT FOR CHILDREN

One concept that Tolkien bristles at is the idea that fairy-stories are for children. He states flatly that "At least it will be plain that in my opinion fairy-stories should not be *speciallly* associated with children" (*OFS* 56, emphasis in original). He goes on to note that "if written with art, the prime value of fairy-stories will simply be that value which, as literature, they share with other literary forms.

---

came into his possession (252–255). But even here, it is not the magic that is ridiculous, but only the results of the magic.

But fairy-stories offer also, in a peculiar degree or mode, these things: Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, Consolation, all things of which children have, as a rule, less need than older people" (*OFS* 58–59).

Unlike another highly successful recent epic about magic that started out as (and largely remained) a story mostly for children, *Jonathan Strange* is very much a story written for adults. Polly Shulman, reviewing the book for *Slate*, calls it "Fantasy for Grown-ups" (Shulman). John Hodgman stated in the *New York Times Magazine* just before the book was released, "The novel is being compared with abandon in the press to the 'Harry Potter' books, but it is not for children, unless they are children who really, really love footnotes" (Hodgeman). He adds "In short, it is a patient, grown-up novel of dueling wizards." Clarke herself has addressed the description of her book as being "Harry Potter for adults" by stating

I don't think there could ever be an adult Harry Potter. Harry Potter reaches into children's imagination and takes them over. It enchants them. It would be wonderful to think that any of my readers might be enchanted in the same way. But I think it's harder for adults to be enchanted—it's hard for them to switch off their critical faculties and just be swept along by the story. ("Susanna Clark Interview")

As shown below, Clarke's book successfully incorporates each of the "degrees or modes" that Tolkien notes that fairy-stories provide that older people require.

#### FANTASY

One of Tolkien's most famous—and insightful—comments about what makes a successful work of fantasy is the following:

To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft. Few attempt such difficult tasks. But when they are attempted and in any degree accomplished then we have a rare achievement of Art: indeed narrative art, story-making in its primary and most potent mode. (*OFS* 61)

Just as Tolkien's own "Green Sun" was nothing less than creating a semi-complete fictional universe from the creation of physical world through to the dawn of modern times that parallels old world mythological traditions complete with contradictory concepts and philosophical and moral quandaries, Clarke's "Green Sun" was achieving a believable alternative history of England in which magic plays an integral role. That she was able to accomplish this so

convincingly truly is a rare achievement, one that could only be accomplished with a good deal of labor and thought, and certainly demanded a special skill, indeed nigh on an elvish craft. As often noted, Clarke spent ten years researching and writing her novel, and the labor, thought, and special skill resonate through every word.

### RECOVERY

The next mode that true fairy-stories provide according to Tolkien is “recovery.” By this he is referring to recovery from the weariness that comes from growing older and jaded in the world and the “rawness and ugliness of modern European life” (*OFS* 72). He says that for the true road of escape from such weariness “[w]e should look at green again, and be startled anew (but not blinded) by blue and yellow and red. We should meet the centaur and the dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses—and wolves. This recovery fairy-stories help us to make. In that sense only a taste for them may make us, or keep us, childish” (*OFS* 67). He goes on to add,

fairy-stories deal largely, or (the better ones) mainly, with simple or fundamental things, untouched by Fantasy, but these simplicities are made all the more luminous by their setting. For the story-maker who allows himself to be ‘free with’ Nature can be her lover not her slave. It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine. (*OFS* 68–69)

Clarke is very successful in achieving this sense of recovery. Of course, much of the magic she portrays is quite horrible, particularly the use by the gentleman of an old log of black oozing moss-oak to ensnare Arabella Strange. Norrell succeeds at making even the most astounding feats of magic seem dry and boring, while Strange is mysterious and forbidding. Nonetheless, Clarke succeeds in capturing the delight in magic, particularly reflected in the character of John Segundus, who is always full of wonder at magic in all its forms. Moreover, because her book is so successfully rooted in the real world of 19<sup>th</sup> century England, the magical elements stand out luminously. And in the climatic chapter “Yes!” in which Strange and Norrell cast a spell—at the secret inducement of the Raven King—that enables Steven Black to align himself with the natural world and use that power to defeat the gentleman the “wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass” is particularly on full display (*JS&MN* 762–765).

## ESCAPE

As for "Escape," Tolkien says

I do not think that the reader or the maker of fairy-stories need even be ashamed of the 'escape' of archaism: of preferring not dragons but horses, castles, sailing-ships, bows and arrows; not only elves, but knights and kings and priests. For it is after all possible for a rational man, after reflection (quite unconnected with fairy-story or romance), to arrive at the condemnation, implicit at least in the mere silence of 'escapist' literature, of progressive things like factories, or the machine-guns and bombs that appear to be their most natural and inevitable, dare we say "inexorable," products. (OFS 71)

He goes on to say "[t]his, however, is the modern and special (or accidental) 'escapist' aspect of fairy-stories, which they share with romances, and other stories out of or about the past" (OFS 73).

Clarke's tale, which has been described as a mix of Tolkien and Austen, achieves this type of Escape very successfully. Clarke combines Tolkien's world-building with Austen's acerbic eye. Austen, one of the most realistic cultural satirists ever to write, would not normally be conflated with 'escapist' literature. However, Clarke's carefully crafted semi-archaic Austenesque language, along with the historical veracity born of years of research, truly give the sense of a story out of the past, bolstering this 'escapist' aspect of her fairy-story.

Tolkien adds:

And lastly there is the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death. Fairy-stories provide many examples and modes of this — which might be called the genuine escapist, or (I would say) *fugitive* spirit. But so do other stories (notably those of scientific inspiration), and so do other studies. Fairy-stories are made by men not by fairies. The Human-stories of the elves are doubtless full of the Escape from Deathlessness. But our stories cannot be expected always to rise above our common level. They often do. Few lessons are taught more clearly in them than the burden of that kind of immortality, or rather endless serial living, to which the 'fugitive' would fly. For the fairy-story is specially apt to teach such things, of old and still today. (OFS 74, emphasis in original)

In Clarke's story this ultimate lesson of the Great Escape is demonstrated not so much by the fairies as by the human king who finds his power in the Other Lands, for the Raven King is not only seemingly deathless but also the grand puppeteer of all the other characters in the tale, both human and fairy. Not only has John Uskglass survived for centuries, he also effortlessly

brings Vinculus back from death after that ragged London magician is hanged by the gentleman, and when Childermass fires a bullet at him he is able to simply stop it in mid-air (see *JS&MN* 752–756). But perhaps the most telling lesson occurs when he appears to Strange and Norrell in response to their call in the form of a giant raven’s eye, reminding them (and us) of just how small and unimportant they (and we) really are (*JS&MN* 769–771).

#### CONSOLATION

Finally, Tolkien notes that

[i]t is the mark of a good fairy-story, of the higher or more complete kind, that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to child or man that hears it, when the ‘turn’ comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality. (*OFS* 75–76)

He then concludes in the Epilogue to the essay that

Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth. It is not only a ‘consolation’ for the sorrow of this world, but a satisfaction, and an answer to that question, ‘Is it true?’ The answer to this question that I gave at first was (quite rightly): ‘If you have built your little world well, yes: it is true in that world.’ That is enough for the artist (or the artist part of the artist). But in the ‘eucatastrophe’ we see in a brief vision that the answer may be greater—it may be a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world. (*OFS* 77, emphasis in original)

Clarke has very successfully built her little world, so that all is satisfyingly true within that world. However, at first glance, it appears that where Clarke’s story deviates the most from Tolkien’s vision of what makes a truly successful fairy-story is in providing that sense of a eucatastrophic happy ending. After all, at the end of Clarke’s story Strange and Norrell both remain stuck in an enchantment of everlasting darkness.<sup>4</sup> However, a closer look shows

---

<sup>4</sup>While the enchantment is purportedly performed by the gentleman, in Clarke’s secondary world it is clearly stated that an such enchantment is lifted at the death of the enchanter (see *JS&MN* 742). When Steven Black defeated the gentleman and killed him, the everlasting darkness should have disappeared if it truly was an enchantment of the gentleman’s. The enchantment is actually part of the prophecy of the Raven King’s as quoted by Vinculus, “*the second shall tread lonely roads, the storm above his head [...]*” (*JS&MN* 123). This spell was thus always truly the work of John Uskglass and could not be lifted while he still lived.

that we do see that “far-off gleam or echo of evangelium in the real world” since it is shown at the end that magic has been successfully reincorporated into English life.

In the final chapter we see Childermass (with Vinculus in tow) reconvene the York society of magicians that Norrell had destroyed at the beginning of the book. However, it is now seen that magic is no longer just the property of idle gentleman but rather of men and women of all walks of life. Particularly telling is the answer given to Dr Foxcastle, the crusty old leader of the old York society, when he complained about a young woman who attends the meeting along with her father:

Mr Redruth begs the society’s pardon but he is not a magician at all. He has a great deal of interest in magic, but no skill. It is his daughter who is the magician. He has one son and three daughters and he says they are all magicians. The others did not wish to attend the meeting. He says that they have no wish to consort with other magicians, preferring to pursue their studies privately at home without distractions. (*JS&MN* 776.)

The meeting concludes with Childermass presenting Vinculus to the society as John Uskglass’s book (*JS&MN* 778).<sup>5</sup> The upshot is that the spell that John Uskglass had been doing through *Strange and Norrell* was now complete, and Magic in England was successfully restored. That is the eucatastrophe of Clarke’s tale.

## CONCLUSION

Tolkien’s essay “On Fairy-stories” is important for several reasons. As Flieger and Anderson state, “[n]ot only is it a definitive discussion of fairy-stories and their relationship to myth and fantasy, it is his most explicit analysis of his own art” (*OFS* 9). In addition, in carefully laying out over the course of his essay what makes a true fairy-story he also makes it possible to analyze other artists’ works to determine how successful *they* are as fairy-stories. Following those dictates, Clarke’s epic book meets those standards on every point, and is shown to be a true modern fairy-story in the tradition that Tolkien documents so plainly.

---

<sup>5</sup>Vinculus’s father ate the King’s Book as part of a drunken wager, resulting in Vinculus being born with the symbols of the book engraved in blue on his skin (*JS&MN* 307–314, 757). When John Uskglass brought Vinculus back to life, he changed the writing on Vinculus’s skin (*JS&MN* 755–756). Since the prophecy that Vinculus recorded had come true, he had become something else, though what is not entirely clear (see *JS&MN* 772–773).

## WORKS CITED

- Baker, Daniel. "History as Fantasy: Estranging the Past in *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*." *Otherness: Essays and Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2011, pp. 1-16. [deakin.edu.au/eserv/DU:30044995/baker-historyasfantasy-2011.pdf](http://deakin.edu.au/eserv/DU:30044995/baker-historyasfantasy-2011.pdf)
- Clarke, Susanna. "A Conversation with Susanna Clarke, Part 1." Interview with Steven H. Silver. *SF Site*, Oct. 2004. [www.sfsite.com/02a/su193.htm](http://www.sfsite.com/02a/su193.htm).
- . "Harry Potter Meets History: PW Talks with Susanna Clarke." Interview with Jessica Stockton. *Publisher's Weekly*, 12 July 2004. [www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/interviews/article/21286-harry-potter-meets-history.html](http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/interviews/article/21286-harry-potter-meets-history.html).
- . "Interview with Susanna Clarke." Interview with Geoffrey H. Goodwin. *Bookslut*, Sept. 2005. [www.bookslut.com/features/2005\\_09\\_006537.php](http://www.bookslut.com/features/2005_09_006537.php).
- . *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2004.
- . "The Susanna Clarke Interview." *BBC*, 15 Sept. 2004. [www.bbc.co.uk/nottingham/content/articles/2004/09/15/entertainment\\_books\\_susanna\\_clarke\\_feature.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/nottingham/content/articles/2004/09/15/entertainment_books_susanna_clarke_feature.shtml).
- Grossman, Lev. "Of Magic and Men." *Time Magazine*, 8 August 2004. [content.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,678627,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,678627,00.html).
- Hodgman, John. "Susanna Clark's Magic Book." *The New York Times Magazine*, 1 Aug 2004. [www.nytimes.com/2004/08/01/magazine/susanna-clarke-s-magic-book.html?mcubz=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/01/magazine/susanna-clarke-s-magic-book.html?mcubz=0).
- Laity, K. A. (2018) "The Unlikely Milliner and The Magician of Threadneedle-Street." *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*, vol. 36, no. 2 (#132), pp. 215-230.
- Shetland Library. Fantasy Reading List. [www.shetland-library.gov.uk/documents/ShetlandLibraryFantasyReadingList.pdf](http://www.shetland-library.gov.uk/documents/ShetlandLibraryFantasyReadingList.pdf).
- Shulman, Polly. "Fantasy for Grown-Ups: The excellent Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell." 16 Sept. 2004. [www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2004/09/fantasy\\_for\\_grownups.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2004/09/fantasy_for_grownups.html).
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Humphrey Carpenter, ed. with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien. Houghton Mifflin, 1981.
- . *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*. Edited by Verlyn Flieger & Douglas A. Anderson. Harper Collins, 2014.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DOUGLAS CHARLES KANE is an attorney specializing in employment discrimination and harassment cases and other civil rights matters. He is also a Middle-earth enthusiast who has loved the works of J.R.R. Tolkien for more than forty years. He co-founded and runs the Tolkien Internet discussion site [thehalloffire.net](http://thehalloffire.net). His first book, *Arda Reconstructed: The Creation of the Published Silmarillion*, was published by Lehigh University Press in 2009, with a paperback edition released in 2011; it was a Mythopoeic Society Scholarship Award in Inklings Studies finalist in 2010 and 2011. He has also had several papers and reviews published in *Mythlore*, *Tolkien Studies* and *The Journal of Tolkien Research*. Doug Kane lives in Santa Cruz, California with his partner, Beth Dyer, and their cat, Legolas Lateef.