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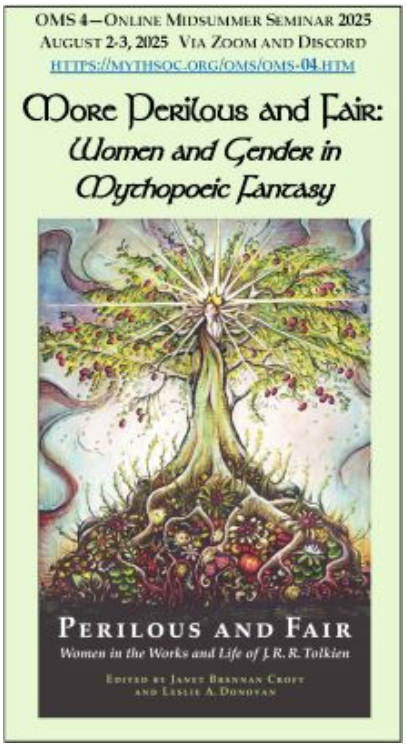

History in the Margins: Epigraphs and Negative Space in Robin Hobb's *Assassin's Apprentice*

Abstract

Robin Hobb's *Assassin's Apprentice* demonstrates a significant effect of epic fantasy's conventions for creating the history of a fictional world. By prefacing each chapter with an epigraph from an official in-world historical text before giving a first-person personal narrative, the novel blurs the boundaries between text and paratext, public and private, official history and personal myth-making. This structure raises questions about what is central and marginal in history, suggesting the extent to which historical narrative is constructed in the imagination by taking the facts surrounding a central event from which the historian is absent—a process much like negative space drawing in the visual arts. The novel uses negative space an image, a formal structuring principle (both in the style of the text and the relationship between text and epigraph), and a philosophical concept about the construction of history. Both the epigraphs and negative space, then, suggest that fantasy, as a genre which *invents history*, is well-positioned for metafictional reflection on the constructed narrativity of history and the dependence of historical "fact" upon the historian's imagination. At the same time, epigraphs and negative space claim authority for reporting events "as they really happened," displaying a collision between fantasy's constructivist metafictional overtones and its mythic, essentialist need to secure the reader's belief.

Ultimately, Hobb's novel suggests a more dynamic relationship between epic fantasy and postmodernism than is usually assumed.

Additional Keywords

fantasy; epic fantasy; paratexts; epigraphs; negative space; Robin Hobb; history in literature; history and myth; postmodernism

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History in the Margins: Epigraphs and Negative Space in Robin Hobb's *Assassin's Apprentice*

Matthew Oliver

Midway through Robin Hobb's *Assassin's Apprentice* (1995), the first-person narrator Fitz, a royal bastard raised on the fringes of the palace and trained to become an assassin, tells a story about meeting his dead father's widow, Patience, who attempts to connect to him emotionally by training the young teenager in the cultural arts that his education has neglected, such as drawing. Eventually, in attempting to sketch his puppy for her, he discovers the key to drawing successfully: "I wasted sheet after sheet of paper until I suddenly saw that it was the shadows around the pup that made the curves of his back and the line of his haunch. I needed to paint less, not more, and put down what my eye saw rather than what my mind knew" (238). Fitz here is describing the use of negative space in art, focusing on the space around the central subject in order to define it. The subject is defined by focusing on what it is not. Fitz learns the impossibility of representing reality literally (by definition, a "representation" is not the reality). Instead, representation must appeal to the imagination to supply the subject by shaping the space around that subject and suggesting it, painting "less, not more." In a novel, such comments about the nature of art often reflect the construction of the novel, and *Assassin's Apprentice* is no exception, as the novel constantly focuses on what is *not* happening or what is *not* present in order to define what *is* happening by evoking it in imagination.

Intriguingly, the novel's use of negative space parallels another notable feature of its narration: its use of epigraphs at the start of each chapter. Each chapter of the novel begins with a lengthy epigraph selected from a history of the kingdom, the Six Duchies, also written by Fitz. Such frequent epigraphs are common conventions of the fantasy novel, often providing additional expository details or varied perspectives on the narrative. However, in this case, both the chapter epigraphs and the main text are written by Fitz. The chapter epigraphs are excerpts from a public document, largely a formal history written in a distant, scholarly voice. The main narrative, on the other hand, is undefined, perhaps a private text or even an internal monologue, filled with Fitz's reminiscences instead of "objective" history. This general structural outline makes visible the primary discursive conflict of the novel: public vs. private, official history vs. personal myth-making. The irony might be immediately

apparent: the formal, scholarly, distant history is presumably the primary one, the authoritative one, yet it is placed in the margins of the text while the personal narrative (which would typically be the footnotes or evidence in such an authoritative history) is primary. The main text is the marginalia—the personal secrets, the negative space—surrounding the authoritative historical text, which is instead structurally placed in the margins, inverting its priority. This situation is compounded by Fitz's social status. As a royal bastard, he lives near the center of national power, yet he is required to be an unacknowledged figure on the margins. As an assassin, much of his personal story must remain secret and invisible, even when it directly shapes the main course of history.

Thus, the novel's use of epigraphs enlightens fantasy's use of paratextual supporting materials to establish a fictional history, a defining feature of the genre at least since Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (although Tolkien himself made little use of epigraphs specifically, save the "one ring to rule them all" poem). Despite this long tradition of using paratextual apparatus (maps, appendices, prefaces, and epigraphs included), this feature of the genre has been undertheorized.[1] At the same time, Hobb reveals the significance of absence and negative space in the construction of historical "fact." Epigraphs are themselves the texts at the margins of a text, the negative space that surrounds a text; furthermore, the epigraphs of this novel in particular focus on the relationship between historical narrative and personal narrative, and the extent to which the official historical narrative must itself also be imagined and constructed. This use of negative space blurs the boundary of what counts as authoritative knowledge. While fantasy, particularly the subgenre of epic fantasy, is often assumed to be largely reactionary and conservative, this use of epigraphs serves as an index of how fantasy represents the relationship between imagination and history. History—as a domain of fact—and myth—as a domain of imagination—are often seen as opposites, but much recent scholarship, particularly from a postmodern perspective, argues that historical accounts are constructed imaginatively much like myths. Myth, for my purposes, should be taken to mean both "product of the imagination" but also "a story with a claim to a higher truth." While a myth may or may not be factual, it is a narrative

[1] The use of epigraphs is a subject of frequent comment by readers: for instance, Diana Wynne Jones satirizes the use of "Gnomic Utterances" in her *Tough Guide to Fantasyland* (1996) and David Pringle comments on how "refreshing" it is when fantasy has "no epigraphs" or other paratextual materials (193). Nonetheless, I am aware of only two critical studies focusing on epigraphs in fantasy: a chapter in my recent book, *Magic Words, Magic Worlds* (2022), and an article by Stefan Ekman and Audrey Isabel Taylor, "Between World and Narrative: Fictional Epigraphs and Critical Worldbuilding" (2021).

shaped by imagination and still makes essentialist claims about meaning.[2] Fantasy, as a genre which *invents history*, is well-positioned for metafictional reflection on the constructed narrativity of history and the dependence of historical "fact" upon the historian's imagination. Even when that historian lives through the events being depicted, as is the case with Fitz, imagination is necessary to give shape and meaning to events. Only through absences, the negative spaces, the things that did not happen, can we imagine and apprehend what did happen (that is, *create* the narrative of what "did happen"). At the same time, these epigraphs, in combination with Fitz's eyewitness narration, claim authority for reporting events "as they really happened," displaying a collision between fantasy's constructivist metafictional overtones and its mythic, essentialist need to secure the reader's belief. Too often, readers and critics have binary expectations about fantasy (and about literature more generally), expecting it to be either revolutionary or reactionary. The case is often more dynamic and complex than that, however. *Assassin's Apprentice* offers an illustration of how fictional epigraphs reveal both the progressive possibilities and limitations of metafiction in secondary-world fantasy.

Epigraphs and Negative Space: A Theoretical Overview

As my argument below creates a hinge between two areas only lightly theorized in fictional narrative—epigraphs and negative space—I will outline each concept and the connection between them before analyzing Hobb's novel as a test case. An epigraph, as defined by Gérard Genette, is "a quotation placed *en exergue* [in the exergue], generally at the head of a work or a section of a work; literally, *en exergue* means *off* the work, which is going a little too far. Here the exergue is, rather, at the *edge* of the work" (144). Genette classifies epigraphs in a category he calls "paratexts," those elements of a text that are not strictly speaking part of what we might call the main text but which are nonetheless attached to it, elements such as titles, dedications, prefaces, and intertitles in addition to epigraphs. This notion of the "edge" or margins of a text is consistently central to his definitions and to his argument about the function of paratextual materials: they serve as an entry point or "threshold" to the text, a "zone […] of transition […] at the service of a better reception for the text and a

[2] While many sources contribute to my understanding of the conflict between myth and history, some of which will be cited below, a good overview source for me has been Peter Heehs's "Myth, History, and Theory" (1994), published roughly at the same time as Hobb's novel. Heehs defines myth as based on unexamined assumptions rather than argumentation and evidence (which is presumably the basis of history). However, Heehs ultimately argues that history and myth interpenetrate one another and should be taken as having a dialectical relationship, as even historians construct history based on unexamined assumptions.

more pertinent reading of it" (2). The function of paratexts more generally, then, is to control the reader's experience of the text. Epigraphs particularly serve a function of providing authority for the text. In listing the functions of epigraphs, Genette describes "the sense of indirect backing" that the selection of epigraph can provide "without seeking permission" (159). Epigraphs generate cultural capital for the text, so perhaps unsurprisingly, they seem to appear more in texts on the margins of the literary canon: for instance, Genette cites their frequency in the early history of the novel and in Gothic texts—genres trying to establish credibility—and their relative absence in high modernism. Furthermore, epigraphs often shape the meaning of the text, "commenting on the *text,* whose meaning it indirectly specifies or emphasizes" (157). Thus, conventionally an epigraph serves a double gatekeeping function, saying both "this is a text to take seriously" and "this is how you should understand its meaning." Yet paradoxically, the epigraph is not part of the text and could forgivably be skipped by a reader.

Clearly, these functions take on slightly different meaning in the context of fantasy novels. While Genette discusses examples of epigraphs written by the author and attributed to fictitious sources, these situations are typically not flagged as "fictitious" to the average reader. In contrast, while fantasy novels may use "real world" quotes for epigraphs, the preponderance of epigraphs in fantasy fiction are not only part of the fictional world but are manifestly so. The full extent of this effect has not yet been adequately studied,[3] although recent work by Stefan Ekman and Audrey Isabel Taylor has started to close that gap. Ekman and Taylor focus primarily on those epigraphs in fantasy novels that are presumably written by the author but credited to sources within the secondary fantasy world, which they call "world-intrinsic epigraphs" but which I will more often refer to as "fictional epigraphs" (a less precise but intuitive term).[4] As Ekman and Taylor point out, a crucial factor that such epigraphs add to Genette's model is their role in worldbuilding, as they provide supplementary information, exposition, and perspectives outside of the main body of the narrative. While this may initially seem like an excuse for expositional excess, the use of the epigraph form has a profound effect here: epigraphs typically provide authoritative thresholds for meaning and interpretation of a text, yet here that "authoritative threshold" is already manifestly artificial. The threshold is part of the fiction. Ekman makes a similar

[3] To be clear, while there is much scholarship on paratexts, little of it focuses on epigraphs and virtually none of it discusses epigraphs in fantasy texts.

[4] "Fictional epigraphs" could also refer to epigraphs attributed to real-world sources but invented by the author. In theoretical terms, I believe such epigraphs would have similar effects to "world-intrinsic" ones, but throughout this essay, when I refer to "fictional epigraphs" my examples will always be "world-intrinsic."

argument in his earlier work on another common paratextual fantasy element, maps of the fictitious secondary world. By playing with the reader's conventional expectations for what a map represents, Ekman argues, "The map blurs the distinction between representation and imagination, suggesting that the places portrayed are in fact representations of existing places" (Ekman 21). In reference to a map in Russell Kirkpatrick's *The Right Hand of God* (2005) that the text credits to a mapmaker in the secondary world, Ekman says, "Examining the map is not a question of entering the story; the fictional world has already been entered" (Ekman 31).[5] Such comments apply to fictional epigraphs as well and suggest a metafictional affordance in conventional fantasy structures: by making the threshold to the text artificial, the fantasy texts call attention to the function of epigraphs for securing narrative authority. Clearly, the authority of a fictitious quote is conferred by convention rather than by the essence of the author.

Despite such instability in the form, however, such epigraphs appear largely to attempt to create a text which feels realistic by adding texture and detail to the world, which is another way of accruing narrative authority for a non-realistic text. Farah Mendlesohn, for instance, locates secondary-world fantasy's preponderance of details (she uses terms like "diegetic overkill" and "mimetic excess") in the need to make the reader accept the fantastical world (9). For Mendlesohn, this becomes especially problematic in how the paratextual materials (she predominantly cites maps) represent the history of the world. By attempting to make the world stable and credible, she argues, such fantasy novels represent "a palpable failure to understand the fictive and imaginative nature of the discipline of history" resulting in a monologic "denial of discourse" (14). However, while this tendency may be present in the authorizing function of paratextual materials, here is where the use of epigraphs as a form may diverge, for as Ekman and Taylor point out, epigraphs (particularly in the way that many fantasy novels use multiple epigraphs throughout the text) have a surprising affordance for incorporating multiple voices and perspectives, creating a polyverse rather than a universe (Ekman and Taylor 254-255). Ekman and Taylor draw the term "polyverse" from Bakhtin's description of Dostoevsky's "polyphonic" novels, where "[T]he utterly incompatible elements […] are distributed among several worlds and several autonomous consciousnesses; […] these worlds […] combine in a higher unity, a unity, so to speak, of the second order, the unity of the polyphonic novel" (Bakhtin 16).

[5] For more on fantasy paratexts metafictionally blurring the line between text and non-text, see Ekman and Taylor's article (particularly its argument about the "double nature" of world-intrinsic epigraphs as both textual and paratextual) and my chapter on paratexts in *Magic Words, Magic Worlds*, which covers other paratexts such as glossaries and appendices in addition to epigraphs.

Similarly, by creating space for varying perspectives and voices, fantasy novels can create a surprisingly polyvocal narrative, not a simple monologic denial of discourse. At the same time, though, we should keep in mind that this polyverse is intended to make the fictional world feel more real—we as readers understand that in a "real" world not all perspectives are identical.[6]

Thus, the fictional epigraph, as a paratext, has a paradoxical effect, both showing the (invented) world "as it is" (an essentialist effect) and at the same time freeing it from a singular, hegemonic viewpoint by locating that identity in a polyverse of marginal voices which surround and define it. I phrase it in this way in order to bring out the parallel between epigraphs and negative space. A key concept in my argument about Hobb will be "negative space," as an image in the novel, a formal structuring principle of the novel, and a philosophical concept about the construction of history. Epigraphs construct the history of the secondary world through negative spaces in much the same way as negative space is used in the visual arts, and in Hobb's practice, it reflects back on how we construct the discourse of history, namely that history is like myth—a meaningful but imaginary narrative space built out of the voices and details surrounding it.

In the simplest terms, negative space is the space surrounding the central focus of a picture in the visual arts. Effective use of negative space guides the observing eye to the subject, thus serving a crucial function even though the negative space can be construed as an absence of content. Michelle Ann Abate summarizes this paradox as follows: "Negative space is simultaneously an absence and a presence. It is paradoxically invisible and the most visible element in a drawing, painting, or photograph. For this reason, negative space is at once an essential and an ephemeral design element and aesthetic principle" (290). Already this may remind us of the role of paratexts, which according to George Stanitzek "should delimit the field without questions being asked, without question, but […] should not enter the field of vision themselves" (34). As a marginal element, negative space (like an epigraph) is both fundamentally important and largely invisible. Yet the connection runs deeper, for like the epigraph, negative space shapes a proper reception of the artwork. Betty Edwards, in her drawing course *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* (1979), describes the use of negative space in art as a way of overcoming the "previously

[6] Bruno Zerweck makes a similar argument in relation to unreliable narration, namely that in contemporary culture "subjectivity and unreliability are accepted as realities" to such an extent that narrators who do not expose their biases and limitations are even more suspect: "a narrator who exposes his [*sic*] cognitive or epistemological limitations is arguably much more in tune with our notions of 'normality'" (169-170). Postmodern epistemology has been so absorbed into fictional practice that questioning hegemonic views of history, for instance, paradoxically grants an authorizing "normality" to the text.

stored, verbal, analytic […] knowledge" about the object in order to see it more accurately (106). Kimberly Greene Angle summarizes Edwards's point as follows:

> the artist is able to draw accurately what is actually there, rather than what he or she thinks is there, by concentrating on the empty spaces around an object. Thus, through this paradoxical drawing technique, the symbols developed in the artist's mind through a lifetime of experience are temporarily suspended so that the object comes clearly and accurately into focus by the artist's drawing what is not. (159)

This passage is strikingly similar to the passage on negative space from Hobb that I quoted at the beginning of this essay, where Fitz learns to "put down what my eye saw rather than what my mind knew" (238). The assumptions about representation here are largely essentialist: while acknowledging that human perception frames and gives meaning to objects, this negative space technique claims a privileged mode of seeing that sees "what is actually there" independent of the frames of human consciousness. Regardless of whether there is an implicit essentialism, this claim that negative space shapes perception is a consistent theme of the criticism. Angle, for example, argues that Flannery O'Connor uses fallen humanity to show what-God-is-not so that humans can apprehend a reality that is not physically present. Similarly, Roberta Rubinstein argues that Virginia Woolf's use of negative space allows the reader to apprehend patterns: "without the essential contrast, one could not apprehend it" (50). Thus, the concept of negative space entails an awareness of how absences and marginal elements shape and focus perception, often with an implication that such shaping somehow "corrects" perception (rather than being itself an artificial construction)—a discourse that Hobb certainly seems to imply in her use of negative space.

However, some criticism sees negative space less in essentialist terms and more in connection with the margins—negative spaces as spaces of freedom. Lydia Brown examines this use of negative space in Emily Brontë's work (particularly her poetry) and finds that Brontë uses negation to locate marginal spaces that transcend the boundaries of self. Working in the negative space frees her from patriarchally imposed identities. Brown links negative space to David Halberstam's notion of "queer time and space" which frees one from the limitations of "'family, heterosexuality, and reproduction,' from work, morality, and biological time" (qtd. in Brown 189). Thus, far from simply reinforcing "correct" perception, focusing on negative spaces rather than focusing on typically valorized "content" can free discourse and identity from hegemonic restrictions. Clearly, this line of thinking aligns more closely with postmodern theories of marginal identity and poststructuralism's philosophy of

language as absence. Theory about both negative space and epigraphs describes meaning being shaped by representations surrounding an absent center (which is often literally what a negative space drawing looks like). This may remind us of a fundamental tenet of post-structuralism: that language merely gives shape to absence, not presence. (Jacques Derrida, for instance, once described a text as being "ordered around its own blind spot" [164].) Linguistic representation itself (in deconstructive terms) is about creating the illusion of presence for an absent signifier. Anything (such as epigraphs) that calls attention to the spaces surrounding the central representation then has the potential to call our attention to these artificial constructs.

Furthermore, while calling our attention to the construction of history and representational meaning, fictional epigraphs and negative space aesthetics can shine a light on those marginal spaces often left out of hegemonic narratives. In that way, these structural features align with a significant component of postmodern form. Linda Hutcheon has defined the decentering focus on the ex-centric as one of the principle features of postmodern practice. Postmodern discourse typically challenges "the notion of center, in all its forms" (58), including such concepts as "the subject and its pursuit of individuality and authenticity," "origin, oneness," and "the eternal and the universal" (58). In contrast to this totalization of centralized hierarchies, postmodernism offers "multiple, provisional alternatives" (60) and values "the local and peripheral" and "multiplicity, heterogeneity, plurality" (61). By introducing multiple contextually situated voices, fictional epigraphs accomplish something similar, while the continual focus on negation in negative space turns our attention to the peripheral spaces surrounding those that are usually given priority. However, to make this claim is not to say that Robin Hobb's *Assassin's Apprentice* or the secondary-world fantasy form which it illustrates embodies a progressive paradigm shift. Paradoxical traces of essentialism remain (in the form of epigraphal authority and corrective "seeing things as they are"). It is useful to keep in mind here Hutcheon's argument that postmodernism is itself a cultural *transition*, not a *transformed* culture. The act of questioning concepts (such as hierarchy or the center) does not inherently deny them, only "interrogate their relation to experience" (Hutcheon 57). In fact, the marginal position postmodernism values "relies on the center it contests for its very definition […] the power of these new expressions is always paradoxically derived from that which they challenge" (59). The paradox of postmodernism is that it is "complicitous yet critical" (73). Postmodern culture is not yet the change which it calls for: "There is not a break—or not yet, at any rate" (xiii).

Thus, in linking Hobb's practice to postmodernism, I am not claiming that her use of fictional epigraphs and marginal spaces makes her novel (or the fantasy genre more generally) progressive or revolutionary. Instead, *Assassin's*

Apprentice serves as a solid reminder that the modern fantasy genre reached maturity within a postmodern culture and has perhaps more roots in postmodern influence than are often acknowledged.[7] To that extent, there are seeds of progressive potential here, yet as with postmodernism itself, those seeds are often "complicitous" with the very things they question. Fantasy is not as reactionary as often assumed, nor is postmodernism as inherently revolutionary. Instead, forms collide in complex ways leading toward a paradoxical movement that questions the artificial hegemonic crafting of historical narrative as it simultaneously pushes the reader to the essentialism of "seeing things as they are." Thus, in *Assassin's Apprentice*, Hobb straddles the line between constructivism and essentialism, revealing history and group identity as ideological constructs that require imaginative creation. Furthermore, her text indicates the reason why history and identity are constructions of imagination: they require knowledge of places and events we do not have access to either spatially (no one can be in more than one place at once) or temporally (important defining events happened in the past, when we were not present). Thus, just like a fantasy novel, all historical knowledge must be constructed in the imagination, filling in the negative spaces in subjective experience. Yet while her novel questions the constructed nature of history, it retains a level of mythic essentialism by training the reader to form those constructs in ways that imply a possibility of arriving at a stable truth.

Historical Authority in *Assassin's Apprentice*

From the outset, *Assassin's Apprentice* opens up questions about the nature and reliability of historical narrative. Before the reader even knows the relationship between epigraph and text, the epigraph to the first chapter opens with the authoritative voice of History establishing a clear center to its narrative: "A history of the Six Duchies is of necessity a history of its ruling family, the Farseers" (4). Yet as soon as the epigraph ends, the main text of the novel begins by revealing that the epigraph author and first-person narrator are the same person, a revelation that also reflects back on how authoritative and reliable that

[7] Even J.R.R. Tolkien made use of metafictional paratextual materials that, as Vladimir Brljak has argued, "make Tolkien's work much more 'postmodern' than critics have hitherto acknowledged" (21). In fact, Brljak's argument about Tolkien is similar to mine about Hobb: while metafiction can be used as much to secure authoritative mimesis as it can to undermine it, the metafictional frame constantly reminds the reader that "'authenticity' can only manifest itself in the negative, as absence, as that which must be postulated to lie beyond the actual artifacts, which have to be seen as inauthentic, derivative, mediated" (14), and thus the reader has never "had any authentic experience of [the fantastic golden age], except in the negative" (22). This may account for why fantasy, as a literature of absent history, has become so popular in a postmodern era.

history can be: "I wonder if I can write this history, or if on every page there will be some sneaking show of bitterness I thought long dead. I think myself cured of all spite, but when I touch pen to paper, the hurt of a boy bleeds out with the sea-spawned ink, until I suspect each carefully formed black letter scabs over some ancient scarlet wound" (4). This passage admits that the appearance of scholarly objectivity in the written history is simply a rhetorical stance, that it may cover up personal experience and motives that bleed into that narrative without the reader's or writer's awareness. Thus, the blurring of the boundary between epigraph and text is immediately echoed by a parallel blurring of the boundary between historical narrative and personal narrative. Fitz takes this even further by questioning the reliability of his own memory within the personal narrative, as he questions the source of his earliest memory just before narrating it: "I wonder if it is truly mine. Am I recalling it from my own mind, or from dozens of retellings by legions of kitchen maids and ranks of scullions and herds of stable boys as they explained my presence to each other? Perhaps I have heard the story so many times, from so many sources, that I now recall it as an actual memory of my own" (4). First, the presumably objective history of the epigraph may in fact be shaped by private motives, and now the privacy of memory may be shaped by public narrative. In this brief passage, Hobb suggests the same sort of leakage of history into personal narrative that Salman Rushdie's Saleem Sinai does at much more length in *Midnight's Children*. In fact, like that novel, the magic in this story largely involves shared consciousness, a form of telepathy called the Skill (or, when shared with animals, the Wit—both forms of magic that Fitz has) which, among other things, allows its user to plant false memories in other people, a possibility Fitz acknowledges here: "Or could the completeness of the memory be the bright overlay of the Skill?" (4). Both the novel's structure and its magic system support this blurring of the boundary between history and personal narrative.

This structure indicates the extent to which history and its relationship to identity formation are themselves dependent upon imagination and fantasy. That the meaning of historical events relies on the artifice of narrative form has become a cornerstone of postmodern thought. In the 1970s, historian Hayden White argued that the accuracy of historical representation does not function the same as the accuracy of other representations (such as a model airplane) because "we cannot go and look at [the originals] in order to see if the historian has adequately reproduced them in his narrative" (286). Historians choose narrative models to shape their telling of events, and these models are formed as much from absence (i.e., negative space) as from presence: "The [recorded historical] events are *made* into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others" in addition to other strategies (281). As a result, "Our *explanations* of historical structures and processes are thus

determined more by what we leave out of our representations than by what we put in" (290). While some of these assertions have been contested,[8] this general claim has remained foundational to postmodern thought. Significantly for my argument, history requires imaginative structure because of our *absence* from events, and that structure is given shape by *negation*—features highlighted by Fitz's style of narration.

To further highlight the importance of imagination (or fantasy in the broader sense) in forming identity, it is also useful to remember Benedict Anderson's argument in *Imagined Communities* (1983). Anderson argued that print narratives such as novels and newspapers played a significant role in generating national consciousness by allowing readers to *imagine* other subjects and places existing simultaneously with them but invisible to them. In other words, because no one can know every person in the nation, or be every place in the nation, one must create a mental construct that unites people, places, and historical time, a construct called the "nation." While Anderson does not exactly present these ideas in terms of "negative space" as I do, he does explain that these imagined constructs are necessary because of the absence of direct experience of those others: "An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his [*sic*] 240,000-odd fellow-Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any one time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity" (26). Anderson describes novels as mechanisms for imagining these others existing simultaneously with me, different from me but acting in a parallel fashion. In order to have a concept of a group identity beyond the self, one must be able to imagine people, places, and events that occur where one is not present, yet also be able to see them as having a bearing on one's identity. Thus, even where history may attempt to be "factual" and "objective," it requires an imaginative projection into a place where we do not exist. The contours of our identities are shaped by absences.

In a similar way, to remind the reader of the extent to which knowledge is built on imagining absent information, Hobb's epigraphs continually blur the boundary between history and personal narrative, "fact" and "imagination" (and, of course, every "fact" in this novel is of necessity imagined, as it is a fantasy novel, which the fictional epigraphs constantly remind us). Thus, in the second chapter, Fitz follows up a historical narrative in the epigraph by starting the main text with "But family rumor says" (24). The conjunction "but" here violates the conventional separation of epigraph from text, drawing attention to that relation rather than allowing the paratext to function invisibly. It may be

[8] See Wulf Kansteiner's "Hayden White's Critique of the Writing of History" (1993) for a useful overview of White's conflicts with his critics, as well as an argument that White's project is less postmodern than structuralist.

objected at this point that the chapter epigraphs in *Assassin's Apprentice* are not truly epigraphs in the sense that they are also written by the first-person narrator and have no separate attributions. However, I would argue that this use of the epigraph form more forcefully emphasizes the metafictional character of these epigraphs. Within the conventions of fantasy novels, epigraphs often provide multiple voices, yet these epigraphs are written by the narrator (just as we know they are all written by the author), further reinforcing the narrative artifice that creates the meaning of events (and fragmenting the voice of the narrator). Furthermore, it calls attention to how the center and margins are inextricable, how epigraphs despite being on the "edge" of a text are nonetheless part of a text. George Stanitzek, in his critique of Genette's theory of paratexts, makes precisely this point: "no text ever has a truly paratext-free moment. Thus, it is not very easy to distinguish beyond a doubt between text and paratext, as might initially seem the case" (30). Text and paratext are always mutually intertwined and define each other, and fictional epigraphs effectively call attention to that quibbling between what is central and what is marginal in the same way that negative space does that in art. In fact, if paratexts function best when invisible (as I argued via Stanitzek above), then Hobb's method of entangling text and paratext in her fictitious epigraphs is all the more effective for making this relationship visible. In this case, the inclusion of a simple conjunction ("but") forms a connection between text and (what is structured as) paratext, while at the same time suggesting an alternative source of knowledge, one not appropriate to scholarly discourse ("rumor") yet paradoxically more authoritative as it suggests insider knowledge (personal experience passed down from those who stood in the presence of the figures being discussed). Yet both forms of knowledge enable the reader and narrator to imagine a temporal space to which they do not have access. The boundary between text (constructed fiction, or at least personal narrative) and not-text (in-world "fact") breaks down just as the boundary between paratext and text does. Both are subject to the structuring power of imagination.

Fitz constantly draws such connections between the epigraphs and the main text, often introducing expository details about a character or location in the epigraph that then contrast sharply to the emotional connection of a personal encounter described in the chapter itself. Chapter 13, for instance, opens with an epigraph describing his father's widow, Patience. This lengthy excerpt contains no hint of the author's relationship to her or that any information in it came from his experience of her. Instead, he includes evidentiary quotes from her nursemaids and publicly available information. Such moments seem almost like Fitz's exercises in imagining how others must engage with her, particularly as the ensuing chapter begins and ends with extended, dramatized personal encounters with her as an eccentric tutor. The "marginalia" here (that is, the

main text) feels more authoritative and satisfying than the dry, impersonal, but objective history beginning the chapter, as it allows the reader to more fully imagine her.

Negative Narration

While I have largely discussed the concept of negative space in relation to the epigraphs, the novel's style pervasively focuses the reader's attention on how imagination creates meaning by filling absences. Thus, the paratextual structure of the novel echoes in the form of the text itself. Just as the epigraph structure blurs the boundaries between history and personal narrative, the writing style is constantly blurring boundaries. Just as the structure of the book portrays history as made from absences that must be imagined, the style of the book is constantly insisting upon making the reader imagine what is not present. Perhaps the most striking stylistic element of this book is its continual insistence on describing *what is not happening* instead of or before describing what *is* happening, a style we might think of as "negative narration."[9] This manifests not just in double negatives (of which there are many) but in sentences that start by telling what a character is *not* doing or feeling. This is particularly frequent in the early chapters, where scarcely a page goes by without obvious examples: "I think it rattled the old man a bit, and stimulated him, *not to fear*, but to anger" (6); "The guard looked down at me, lips pursed slightly, *not in judgment*, but merely considering how to classify me. 'Whose get?' he asked, and his tone was *not one of curiosity*, but only that of a man who asked for more specific information on a situation […]. 'Prince Chivalry,' he said, *not turning back* as he added the qualifier" (7); "The guard *made no response* at all, *nor was one expected* of him" (9, emphases added on all). While the frequency of such negative constructions lessens as the novel continues, it remains one of the predominant modes throughout. Once, for instance, Fitz describes what others are wearing by describing what *he* does *not* wear: "At least my shoes were not hung with tiny chiming bells or gently rattling amber beads" (156). As part of that same scene, a party Fitz attends on his first assassination mission, he learns important information about his target "not by any act of his [the target's], but in the bearing of his lady as she arrived to join us" (157). Another event is particularly memorable to him because of what it was missing: "I will never forget that night ride. Not because it was a wild gallop to the rescue, but because it was not" (173).

[9] Styles which use negative syntax with unusual frequency have been studied little. A noteworthy exception is Roberta Rubinstein, who describes a similar parallel between negative space aesthetics and negative syntax in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, where the excessive "negative locutions delineate and, paradoxically, illuminate the novel's darker subtext. They also reinforce a central element of the narrative: the 'presence of absence'" (37).

This last example is especially intriguing, as we might recall that from the beginning of the novel, narrative authority is connected to memory, yet here, memory is based on absence rather than presence. The reader's attention is constantly drawn to the absences surrounding events, emphasizing how those events or actions are defined by what is missing, which then must be imagined or supplied.

As a bastard, Fitz himself particularly needs to imagine others to establish a meaningful identity. Even his name suggests an absence, as "Fitz" retains its real-world meaning "son of" but also its historical connotations of illegitimacy. His name, therefore, defines him by an *absence* of legitimacy. Even without that connotation, Fitz's name defines him in relation to someone he is not (which remains true even later in the narrative when his uncle, Prince Verity, re-christens him FitzChivalry after his father), and characters are constantly comparing him to a father he never knew and can only imagine. Furthermore, Fitz's telepathic abilities give him access to other people's consciousnesses, which gives him sometimes confusing knowledge of what they consider doing but choose not to do. One encounter with his guardian Burrich illustrates this best. Burrich, his father's chief stablehand and dog handler, raises Fitz. When Burrich discovers Fitz's telepathic link with a puppy—a taboo form of animal telepathy called the Wit to separate it from human telepathy, which is called the Skill—Burrich's semi-superstitious response[10] incites a potentially violent reaction that, significantly, he does not act on but that Fitz is able to sense: "I caught the growling undercurrent of [Burrich's] thoughts, the fury that taunted him to smash us both [Fitz and the puppy] and be done with it. Control overlaid it, but that brief glimpse was enough to terrify me" (46). As usual, the narrative gives us a description of something that does not happen, but this glimpse twists Fitz's relationship with Burrich for much of the rest of the book, as Fitz fears this potential violence and even assumes that Burrich killed the puppy to keep it away from him. This latter assumption is, of course, the type of deduction of an invisible action based on surrounding evidence that is precisely what much historical debate requires. (That Fitz's deduction turns out to be definitively

[10] While it is outside the parameters of my argument to consider more fully, it may be interesting to consider how Burrich's response here is gendered. He predominantly objects because of his fear that the Wit results in a loss of individuality. This porousness of identity in using magic may be coded as a feminine trait in the hypermasculine Burrich, in contrast to the masculine desire for control and hegemony. This may also be reminiscent of Brown's argument that Brontë uses negative space to find "The feminine, multiplicitous, dynamically transformable" self in contrast to "the masculine, standardized Christian God" (187). Hobb also seems to privilege the multiple connections forged through the Wit, as that *negation* of boundaries of self ultimately saves Fitz at the end of the story when his former puppy, now a full-grown dog, saves his life.

wrong is also, as we shall see, characteristic of how this novel handles the authority of historical facts.) Fitz's entire world and identity is constructed by imagining absent others and building evidentiary models—history constructed via imagination.

Even Fitz's primary profession, assassination, takes place in the negative spaces surrounding history, typically only visible by evidence around it. His mentor, Chade, makes this clear in a speech when he commences the instruction: "Just know, from the beginning, that I'm going to be teaching you how to kill people. For your king. Not in the showy way Hod [the fighting teacher] is teaching you, not on the battlefield where others see and cheer you on. No, I'll be teaching you the nasty, furtive, polite ways to kill people" (82). The central actions of the novel are therefore framed in negative, as the actions that cannot—indeed, ideally *must* not—appear in the public histories. Chade's speech also follows the novel's typical style by explaining it in negative terms (assassination is "not showy," people will "not cheer you on," etc.). Subsequently, Fitz's first assassination mission results in Fitz cleverly finding a solution that does *not* involve assassination but does involve a lengthy passage describing things that did *not* happen. He meets his target's young wife, a common girl recently elevated to noble status through marriage, and realizes two things: first, that she could convince her husband to take the course of action the king wants (and thus Fitz would not have to kill the husband), and second, that she would never take his advice because he is only a "dog boy" and "the only thing she knew about herself right now was that she was *no longer* a common girl, but a duchess" (167, emphasis added). Therefore, he convinces her to exert influence on her husband by claiming he has had a prophetic dream, "a vision," that has led him to her and flatters her vanity about her importance. There are two key features of this passage. First, it again describes (at length) something that did not happen, although with the slight difference that in this case, Fitz is pretending it happened. This may remind the reader that, in a way, the entire novel we are reading is a lengthy description of something that did not happen, as it is fiction and, more specifically fantasy fiction. Fitz's gambit here *is* in fact a fantasy, as his vision is not real and appeals to the duchess's imagination.

This leads to the second key feature, a shift in style as Fitz narrates his "dream." His description employs several syntactic patterns typical of the elevated style associated with fantasy novels, particularly extensive parataxis, elevated figurative language, and parallelism:[11] "I dreamed of a woman, who

[11] I have detailed these stylistic features extensively in *Magic Words, Magic Worlds*, and other analyses of these features can be found in Susan Mandala's discussion of archaism

spoke wise words and turned three strong men into a united wall […]. She stood before them, and jewels were in her hands, and she said, 'Let the watchtowers shine brighter than the gems in these rings'" (167). Thus, at this key moment in Fitz's development, Fitz marks his shift from a discourse of history to a discourse of fantasy with a shift in style. In describing what is not present, in order to appeal to imagination and performatively make it real, he uses the language of fantasy. This scene therefore calls attention to the role of linguistic style in the shifts between history, personal narrative, and imagination. Imagination creates history here, and does so through its linguistic construction. In the following paragraph, Fitz proceeds to narrate (now to the reader) what he expects to happen the following day—events he will not be present for as the story calls for him to be elsewhere: "it caught her fancy, I could see her imagining herself standing straight and noble […]. Minstrels would celebrate her words in song. And her husband for once would be surprised by her. […] Almost I could see the thoughts parade through her mind" (168). A second straight paragraph is entirely constructed from details that are not there (Fitz can "almost" see these thoughts in her mind). Throughout this scene, Hobb dramatizes imagination and fantasy shaping historical narrative through absences.

"Misting" and Blurring the Boundaries

All of these examples of negative narration are capped by a large section of the novel that consistently describes things as they are *not* happening. I will refer to this as the "misted" section of the novel, taking the description that Prince Verity uses when he fixes the damage to Fitz's mind (341). During this section, Fitz is being trained in the use of the Skill by Galen, a petty, jealous teacher whose own abilities are rather weak compared to Fitz's genetic inheritance. After Galen attempts to force himself into Fitz's mind during training, Fitz retaliates and nearly overwhelms Galen, but Fitz becomes distracted by the addictive ecstasy of using the Skill. In revenge, Galen uses the Skill to alter Fitz's memories so that he remembers himself as a failure, weak in the Skill and unable to use it. Throughout the ensuing roughly 70-page section of the novel, Fitz continues in his belief that he is a failure, unable to use the Skill, and his narration is filled with depressed, suicidal thoughts. To this point, the novel has been narrated in first person in a retrospective voice that has often called attention to its retrospective style (for instance, "At the time I put it down to my stealth; now I wonder if […]" [163]). However, significantly, nowhere in this section does Fitz pull back to a narrative distance to point out that the

in *Language in Science Fiction and Fantasy* (2010) and in Ursula Le Guin's essay on fantasy style, "From Elfland to Poughkeepsie" (1973).

thoughts he was having did not correspond to the reality. There are no statements such as, "of course I did not realize that I actually was very powerful in the Skill." Instead, this entire section stays completely absorbed in Fitz's depressive conception of himself, describing only his state of mind and artificial memories even in places when it would seem natural to do otherwise. For instance, in describing the final mental test Galen gives to his students—which involves dropping them off in the wilderness and Galen using the Skill to contact them and give them instructions—Fitz writes, "Nothing takes the heart out of a man more than the expectation of failure. I had no belief he would really try to contact me, let alone that I would receive any clear impressions if he did" (303). Not only is this passage expressed in negative terms, but this would be a natural place for a retrospective reminder that these thoughts have been planted by Galen. Thus, this entire lengthy section of narrative is marked by the absence of a key detail—Galen's tampering with Fitz's mind—a key detail that is nearly always present to the reader but never overtly stated. In a way, this is a lengthy portion of the narrative given over to describing what is not there. This generates a strong narrative dissonance for the reader between what the reader knows to be the case and what the narrator says, drawing attention to how the artificial framing of the narrative is distinct from the "facts" of events. Significantly, though, the reader approaches this section with confidence in the "actual" facts in contrast to Fitz's narration. Thus, the narrative does not wholly embrace postmodern constructivism despite the fact that negation draws attention to the artifice of history.

This section ends when Verity discovers and fixes Galen's "misting" of Fitz, resulting in another narrative shift. At this point, Fitz still believes that he is unable to use the Skill, and he has been unable to let Galen into his mind for telepathic communication. The breakthrough occurs as he is talking to Verity and has a realization after the fact: "And in that moment I realized we were not speaking aloud, and sat bolt upright and looked at him" (338). What is striking about this sentence is that it does *not* explain what the breakthrough is: we are told what they are *not* doing, but it only leaves implied what they *are* doing (speaking using the Skill). Thus, in this section, there is a shift from *describing* what is *not* there to *not describing* what *is* there. When Verity looks into Fitz's mind and discovers the tampering, his removing of the "mist" is described only indirectly through a metaphor, as Verity enters and leaves his head "all as deft and easy as Burrich taking a tick off a hound's ear" (339). Only several paragraphs later does it become clear what Verity has done, after he asks Fitz about how Galen's testing had gone: "I never had any aptitude . . . wait! That's not true! What am I saying, what have I been thinking?" (341). Then Verity finally explicates what has been happening for the past 70 pages of the novel. All of the pieces have been placed in fairly obvious ways so that most readers

should realize from the beginning what Galen has done. Structurally, the explanation is not really needed. It only confirms what the reader already knows, yet it is a relief as the narrative dissonance finally resolves. Thus, we could see this entire section of the novel as training the reader to see what is not there, to imagine the connections, the same mental process required of the historian constructing a narrative of the past based on evidence. This section provides a macro-structural example of Betty Edwards's argument that negative space helps us see "what is actually there," despite it also calling attention to the perspectival construction of history. This blurs the boundary between history as a fixed narrative that is imparted to a reader and imagination where the reader constructs the connections that make that history. Yet at the end of the process, Hobb gives the reader the confirmation that those connections have been accurate. The novel intimates the constructed nature of history, but ultimately there is a "right" answer at the end.

Thus, both in its use of epigraphs and in the narrative structure of the main text, essentialism and constructivism consistently collide in this novel. This seeming shift late in the novel from the narrator's authority to the reader's imaginative construction parallels an even greater erosion of the boundaries between epigraph and main text. Even as the narrator starts to shift the burden of constructing events to the reader, the epigraphs become increasingly infected by the style of imaginative fiction in place of the style of scholarly discourse. This heightened blurring happens in several instances: Chapter 20 has epigraph text from the subjective perspective of another culture while the "objective" scholarly attribution is relocated to the main text at the start of the chapter, and Chapter 22 has an inexplicable narrative intrusion into the epigraphs, as the epigraph describes a dream-vision Fitz has, which does not seem to be part of his public history at all. However, the best example of how the epigraph/main text boundary blurs occurs at the start of the "misted" section in chapter 15, which begins with an epigraph describing the experience of using the Skill. In narrative terms, this expository epigraph sets up Fitz's failure in his mental duel with Galen, as it describes in detail the addictive qualities of using the Skill, which prove to be Fitz's undoing. However, whereas in the earlier epigraphs Fitz has largely kept the style of the epigraphs and the main text separate, here a poetic lyricism creeps into his style in the epigraph, similar to how the ornate style of fantasy seeped into the description of his "vision" to the noble's wife. While describing the experience of using the Skill, Fitz writes,

> then is the sweetness of using the Skill strongest and most perilous. And this is the thing that every practitioner of the Skill, weak or strong, must always guard against. For in using the Skill, the user feels a keenness of life, an uplifting of being, that can distract a man from taking his next

> breath. Compelling is the feeling, even in the common uses of the Skill, and addictive to any not hardened of purpose. (259)

When read in comparison to the epigraphs in most of the preceding chapters, the tonal dissonance of this passage is striking. Two sentences use inverted syntax (the first and the last), in addition to the parataxis across sentence boundaries ("And this is the thing") and the listing of parallel phrases ("a keenness of life, an uplifting of being"; "Compelling is this feeling […] and addictive"). Fitz's personal experience is leaking into the presumably scholarly description of the epigraph, and we see that even more clearly when he experiences this euphoria in the main text in a passage with much the same emotive style as the epigraph: "Galen had called it pleasure, and I had expected a pleasant sensation, like warmth in winter, or the fragrance of a rose, or a sweet taste in my mouth. This was none of these. Pleasure is too physical a word to describe what I felt. It had nothing to do with the skin or body. It suffused me, it washed over me in a wave that I could not repulse. Elation filled me and flowed through me" (267). While this passage is another striking example of negative description (he mostly tells us what the sensation does *not* feel like), it also has an increase in figurative language and a listing of parallel phrases very much like the epigraph. In other words, the style indicates that Fitz's emotional response to the Skill has informed his writing of the historical text in the epigraph, blurring the line between what is "authoritative epigraph" and what is "subjective personal narrative."

Conclusion

By blurring the boundary between history and personal narrative, the novel constantly suggests the constructed nature of historical narrative, yet just as we saw in the pattern of the "misted" section of the novel, it never quite fully gives way to that contingency as ultimately the authority of "true facts" remains. This likely accounts for Mendlesohn's argument that this novel (and other epic fantasy like it) assumes

> that 'the past' is unarguable, that it just *is,* and that "knowledge" is to be rediscovered rather than generated […]. Each chapter begins with a memoir not dissimilar to the Venerable Bede's history: recollection and gossip masquerading as an accurate description of the past. The argument is circular, but nonetheless valid; yet the consequence for the author is that in order to preserve this sense, any history narrated must be done so in an authoritative fashion. The moment one introduces argument, one also introduces research and experimentation. (16)

As we have seen, this is fair to a certain extent but misses how the structure of epigraph and negative space precisely draw attention to the "masquerade," undermining its authority even as it is instated.

Consequently, the novel serves as an emblem for how novelistic representation functions, and how it has become infused with postmodern awareness of the construction of history even as it is complicit in constructing narrative authority. This becomes clear in the novel's final moments. As Fitz is being drowned in a hot spring by Prince Regal, the leader of a conspiracy to take the throne, Fitz is able to use the Skill to connect his mind to Prince Verity, warning him about the plot and lending his magical strength to Verity so that Verity can use the Skill to defeat the coup. In this moment, Fitz is simultaneously on the margins of history, unable to physically participate, not present at any of the key events, and yet magically able to have access to everything happening in multiple parts of the kingdom at once (an attempted assassination of Verity in the capital, a royal wedding ceremony in the mountain kingdom). It is the ultimate magical instance of novelistic structure. Benedict Anderson describes the basic structure of the novel as a "complex gloss upon the word 'meanwhile'" (25), as it allows readers to imagine simultaneous action connected across geographical distance. This creates the conditions that allow for a united identity to exist in imagination. For Fitz, however, this connection across distances is literal: he is not present, but like some spirit of history, he sees all the key events as they happen. This seeing what he is not present for and creating the complete picture is what the book trains the reader to do through its boundary-blurring structure and negative space imagery, but Fitz is able to do it literally in the end, giving him an authoritative final word on what is "actually happening." This obviously implies a sort of essentialism (he is able to see what is happening in a simultaneous way unavailable to usual human perception), but the form of the novel trains the reader to see this knowledge as constructed, as the reader is constantly involved in *constructing* events through absences. The form continually gestures toward something (historical constructivism) that is not always present in the plot.

The implications for the conventions of epic fantasy—its framing of invented history through paratexts (particularly fictitious epigraphs)—is profound. Hobb retains a trace of essentialism—her rhetoric does not seem overtly to attempt to deconstruct stable, hegemonic notions of history. This should be unsurprising, as the myth-making function of imagination, as I suggested in my introduction, has an essentialist slant toward establishing truths and seeing things "as they are." Yet the use of fictitious epigraphs blurs the boundaries between fictional and real, between text and paratext, between history and myth, which undermines the establishment of an authoritative position for dictating textual "truth." Overall, this suggests a deeply subversive

power to the epic fantasy convention of fictionalizing the frame of the narrative. To be sure, even within more typical examples of postmodernism, this subversive potential is limited by its complicity with traditional fixed forms. Nonetheless, by opening up these questions, fantasy has much more potential than it is often credited with for increasing awareness of the construction of history and finding freeing spaces in the margins.

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