Fantasy, Colonialism, and the Middle Landscape

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Abstract

Weaving together Anglo-American folklore, the Indian captivity narrative genre, and science fiction and fantasy with Midwest settings, Attebery explores the lasting influence of the pastoral chronotope of the "middle landscape" and its entanglement with colonialism and empire. Scholar Guest of Honor Address, Mythcon 53.

Additional Keywords

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Fantasy, Colonialism, and the Middle Landscape

Brian Attebery[1]

I hope you will bear with me as I wander through time and space in this talk. Since one of my topics is the pastoral, that sort of meandering is pretty much unavoidable, but I will try to signal the major shifts. I'll start with a question about the nature of fantasy, move to the American landscape, wander into the ancient world, work my way back to the here-and-now, and end with a challenge to fantasy writers, scholars, and fans.

Here is the question: If fantasy were a landscape, what sort would it be? What do you see in your mind's eye? I am guessing that many of you picture something like the opening scenes of Hobbiton in *The Lord of the Rings* (book or movie) or maybe the seaside meadow of Narnia's Cair Paravel. Perhaps your default image is the grounds of a school for wizards—no, not that one, the one from Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea*. Or maybe you go meta, and think of the generic Fantasy Land of Diana Wynne Jones's brilliant *Tough Guide*. These are all different, of course, but they share a number of qualities that can be termed "pastoral." They are idyllic, peaceful, green, wilderness-adjacent but not really wild. This is the landscape of romance, what Northrop Frye and others have called the green world (*Anatomy of Criticism* 182) and what the ancient world referred to as *locus amoenus*, the pleasant, pleasing, pleasurable place. As I thought about the theme and location of this conference, my mind reverted to a phrase I learned in graduate school. At that time I was immersed in the old Myth-Symbol School of American Studies, and the term I have in mind comes from one of the leading lights of that school, Leo Marx. In his book *The Machine in the Garden*, Marx found a key to American thought and identity in what he called the middle landscape.

Marx traces the image of the middle landscape from Virgil's poetry to mid-nineteenth century writers such as Walt Whitman and to landscape painters such as Thomas Cole and George Inness. He defines middleness as a position between nature and civilization, with a "transcendent relation" to both extremes (23). Those poles can also be designated as art and nature (71), as in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, or the wild and the cultivated, as in Robert Beverly's

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History and Present State of Virginia, from 1705. Significantly, Beverly's wild landscape includes its original inhabitants, who are depicted as living in a state of nature, "without Labour […], daily finding sufficient afresh for their Subsistence" (qtd. in Marx 77). This tendency to conflate indigenous peoples with scenery is, of course, deeply problematic. I'll come back to it. Marx notes that Beverly's imagery posits two rival versions of the garden, one primitive and pre-lapsarian and the other mild and cultivated. The second of these is the middle landscape, which wins out over wilderness as an American ideal through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and much of the twentieth. The middle landscape is fruitful, lush, serene. Going back to Virgil, the farmer lives in an ideal balance between repressive civilization and violent nature: "This ideal pasture," says Marx, "has two vulnerable borders: one separates it from Rome, the other from the encroaching marshland" (22).

His wording implies a narrative arc rather than a fixed scene. Something separates; something encroaches: that's the germ of a story. The pastoral is not just an idealized image, but also a literary genre—or rather several genres, including idylls, eclogues, georgics, and even almanacs. As a non-Classicist, I know little about most of those, except that it turns out the difference between pastoral and bucolic poetry has to do with whether one is surrounded by sheep or cattle. That is a pretty significant difference for someone like me with roots in the Mountain West. Herding preferences notwithstanding, and setting aside more static forms such as lovers' laments and farmers' guides, the pastoral scene lends itself most readily to a scenario of love found, lost, and found again after a series of misadventures. This is the plot of the prose romances of the classical world, such as *Daphnis and Chloe*. The amorous shepherds (or cowherds) in a romance typically meet, court, and pair up, only to be parted as wilderness encroaches in the form of invading peoples or natural dangers. The lovers are subject to anything from pirates to premature burial. Only after separate adventures and misadventures do they finally reunite. This scenario has been recycled by everyone from William Shakespeare in *Pericles* to William Goldman in *The Princess Bride*. It has also been parodied by Voltaire, in *Candide*, where he makes fun of the convention that the parted lovers remain young and desirable through years of wandering and hardship. Such a violation of normal chronology is not a flaw in romance, though, but an essential component—not a bug but a feature, as the language of computer programming has it.

Mikhael Bakhtin summed up the relationships between narrative time and place in the concept of the chronotope: the time dimension that is also space. Romance time, or adventure-time, was one of Bakhtin's key examples of a chronotope ("Forms of Time," 87). Here is how he describes it: "At the novel's outset the heroes meet each other at a marriageable age, and at the same

marriageable age, no less fresh and handsome, they consummate their marriage at the novel's end" (90). Bakhtin's great insight is that this sort of time satisfies because it is part of an entire package that includes character types, allowable actions, and a physical setting, the *topos* part of chronotope. Each component implies the others. I disagree with Bakhtin on the nature of romance space. He says, rightly, that it has to be large enough and diverse enough to accommodate the many kinds of ordeals the lovers go through, but he asserts that "the size and diversity is utterly abstract"—any place will do so long as it provides storms at sea and hide-outs for kidnappers (100). Yet at least one part of the location is not so much abstract as idealized, and that's an important difference. The place of the beginning and end represents the pastoral ideal, which Bakthin identifies with a different chronotope, the "bucolic-pastoral-idyllic"—it evidently includes both sheep and cattle. He describes this chronotope in terms not of its green-world beauty but of its "dense and fragrant time, like honey" (103).

All of this is relevant not only to classical literature but to modern fantasy. We can trace a direct line from classical romances to Medieval ones such as those of Marie de France and Chrétien de Troyes, and the European fairy tale likewise draws from classical narratives including the "Cupid and Psyche" segment of *The Golden Ass*—a story that was probably already in circulation as a folktale but given literary polish by Apuleius. Medieval romance and magical folktale are, of course, two of the major influences on the contemporary fantasy genre. The story of fantasy's precursors is one of frequent transmission between orality and print. We don't have direct evidence regarding the purely oral parts of that history, at least in the days before electronic recording, but the work of folklorists from the Brothers Grimm onward indicates that oral storytellers have always been as willing to incorporate elements of written texts into their repertoires as writers have been avid borrowers from orality. Folklorists Michael Dylan Foster and Jeffrey A. Tolbert have coined a useful term—the *folkloresque*— to indicate the ease of crossing the line from traditional lore to popular imitations of that lore. Much modern fantasy could be classified as folkloresque. Another term, *rhetorical culture*, is used by Biblical scholars such as Vernon K. Robbins to designate a practice of frequent transmission in both directions, from orality to writing and back. The texts of the Pentateuch and those assembled in the New Testament arose in rhetorical cultures. Folklorist Jennifer Eastman Attebery explains that in rhetorical cultures, "group identity, human interaction, and meaning-making through texts are particularly reliant on a mixture of oral and literate genres [...] used redundantly" (78). The "redundant" part of this description is the extra layering of information that allows narrative elements to function either for readers or listeners, and enables some people to belong to both categories. Such was the culture that produced the ancient romances; such too was the culture in which peasant tales were re-circulated among the

Grimms' bourgeois friends. Fantasy harkens back to various rhetorical cultures. It stabilized as a genre by developing folkloresque elements into extended narratives. From such mixtures you get the literary fairy tale, the pre-Raphaelite romance revival, and eventually the fantasies of the Tolkien, Lewis, and their successors.

But with the Inklings we have moved far from the American landscape and whatever versions of the pastoral it might accommodate. My first scholarly project involved trying to find sources for American fantasy. Without a tradition of magical epics, ballads, and romances, what could American writers do other than imitate European romances and English fantasies? Hence Nathaniel Hawthorne's complaint, in his preface to *The Marble Faun*, that,

> No author, without a trial, can conceive of the difficulty of writing a Romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a common-place prosperity, in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case with my dear native land. (3)

To Hawthorne's list of lacks, I would add that Anglo-American folk culture produces no epics, no demigods, and only a fragmentary mythology in what Francis Lee Utley called "the bible of the folk," which is to say, brief conversational references to Adam's apple or the Number of the Beast. Supernatural motifs from the old world don't transplant easily to American soil. The folktales that cross the ocean often end up localized and rationalized, with their magical elements toned down and transmuted into jokes.

However, many years ago, fantasy scholar Jules Zanger suggested another way European magical lore could be acclimatized to the American landscape. The legends of the fair folk, he hypothesized, or more particularly those involving involuntary servitude in fairyland, re-emerged in America as Indian captivity narratives. Mary Rowlandson is the New World equivalent of Thomas the Rhymer. Her account of capture by dispossessed Narragansett, Wampanoag, and Nashaway bands might have acquired some of its popularity from its resemblance to stories of changelings and mortal servants of the elves. Zanger is careful not to claim a direct chain of transmission between the two:

> The Indian captivity narrative appears to be too firmly grounded in the religious, historical, and geographic conditions that shaped it to have been significantly compromised by a body of pagan folk tales; the fairy tale captivity developed its distinctive shape centuries before the Indian captivity appeared. (123)

Yet even so, the two genres share not only a general plot outline but also a function, which has to do with confronting the liminal qualities of their borderland setting. Zanger points out that "both deal with the trials and temptations of people living very close to a line separating the familiar, the ordinary, and the accepted from the unknown, the terrible, and the forbidden" (125). On one side of the line is piety and restraint, on the other, Pagan ritual and "unprincipled Nature" (125).

Again, there is a lot to object to in the assimilation of Native peoples and their practices into a generalized natural scene, but in terms of cultural work, the narratives of Rowlandson and others played a major part in providing Americans with a national mythos. In that mythos, the middle landscape is not secure. Its pastoral beauty can turn treacherous. The wilderness encroaches. Secure ground falls away, suddenly opening into a gulf like the one that swallows Dorothy Gale and her cousin Zeke in L. Frank Baum's *Dorothy and the Wizard in Oz* (if we can stretch the middle land to California).

Going back to the relationship between place and narrative possibility, the locus amoenus is also the place of peril: *locus periculi*. There is a reason that renaissance painters included symbols of danger and loss in their depictions of the pastoral. Giovanni Barbieri's painting of *The Arcadian Shepherds* from the early 17th century includes a prominent skull sitting on a pedestal with the inscription *Et in Arcadia ego*, which is to say that death (the "ego" that speaks) is present even in paradise. Northrop Frye describes the Green World of comedy as the "dream world we create out of our own desires" (183), but this ideal only comes about at the end of the play, after the obstacles are removed and the misunderstandings cleared up. Before that ending, things can get nightmarish. Here is where I think fantasy has been misrepresented by equating it with wish-fulfillment. Pretty much every fantasy I know of is composed of equal parts desire and dread. The perfect moments come only at the very beginning of the story, where they quickly give way to danger and loss, and at the end, where they represent a hard-won and temporary victory. It's jam lost and jam regained; never jam today.

In Mary Rowlandson's narrative, the lost paradise is her life before capture, in a safe cabin with an intact family; at the end, she is reunited with the surviving parts of that family, and she finds security not in place but in her relationship to God. In between, she feels herself to be lost and abused, even though her captors treat her better than her white compatriots treated their own Native or Black captives. I have often taught Rowlandson's book, and my sense of the story changed when one of my students, a young woman from our neighboring Shoshone-Bannock tribes, commented on what a hateful person Rowlandson seemed to be. And she is: judgmental, self-righteous, always complaining about conditions that those around her endure with good humor.

The terrible wilderness she is dragged around in is the same landscape that early explorers saw as a new Eden. If the landscape is wild and barren, it is because the invaders made it so deliberately, cutting forests and eradicating Native food crops.

So I come back to the middle landscape but now I need to redefine it. It isn't a space between civilization and wilderness, but a disputed border between two societies. The word "frontier" in common American usage connotes emptiness, "virgin land," something free for the taking. That's how Frederick Jackson Turner used the term in his famous essay about the closing of the frontier, as evidenced by the 1890 census. Turner was right about the moment of change but wrong about its nature. If there is a story that arises from the emptied landscape, it is one of uneasy quiet. The middle landscape falls between two kinds of space but also two times: a violent past and a future reckoning. "Et in arcadia ego" also signals those who were already here, those whose individuality gets confused with the landscapes they tended, to whose descendants we owe an unsettled debt. Our American story-space is not as benevolent as patriotic songs and political rhetoric would make it. The challenge for our writers is to get beyond Hawthorne's "common-place prosperity, in broad and simple daylight" to tell other, truer stories.

I went looking through my bookshelves for examples of the middle landscape in American fantasy, and I came up with a number of key works from the 1980s and 1990s, when Tolkien-imitations began to give way to primary-world fantasy, or urban fantasy. A number of Midwestern writers offered particularly compelling visions of an enchanted and renewed heartland: Charles de Lint's *Moonheart* (1984), Nancy Willard's *Things Invisible to See* (1985), Emma Bull's *War for the Oaks* (1987), Eleanor Arnason's *Daughter of the Bear King* (1987), and Pamela Dean's *Tam Lin* (1991). These are all lovely stories. I gave myself the enviable assignment of re-reading them in preparation for this talk. Each evokes middle-American (or Canadian) space but recasts it as pastoral chronotope.

Rereading these fantasies in the twenty-first century, I notice something Fredric Jameson pointed out about romance as a genre: the reduction of each story-world to a narrow slice of geography, history, and culture. The distant past doesn't exist; other continents don't exist; there is little cultural diversity among the central cast. In taking on the task of naturalizing magical elements to an American landscape, writers of the 1980s and 90s gave the impression that European story-forms inevitably accompany the motifs. It's like farming techniques: to grow Old World crops, you have to clear the land and plow the soil, even if such methods might not fit the local ecology. Transplanting fairies works the same way, except that the fields are story-spaces. Yet in each of the stories I've mentioned, one can also find enough counter-currents and implied alternatives to suggest that they might function quite differently in the

2020s than in the 1980s. If we bring our current awareness of alternative narrative models and world views to a rereading, we might find that the classic fantasies are also contemporary ones.

I'm going to focus on the three Minnesota fantasies, *Tam Lin*, *War for the Oaks*, and *Daughter of the Bear King*, looking for ways each might have subverted the pastoral fantasy model even while invoking it. In those bits of subversion, each story potentially lines up with more recent non-European fantasies—in other words, they can be read as mediating not between civilization and wilderness but between the British fantasy tradition and contemporary fantasy.

Though the plots of the three books differ, they share some key features. Each creates a magical zone within a more generally mundane space. Crossing the boundary requires special ability, identity, or knowledge. Within the zones, which are located in pockets of urban nature and close to liminal spaces such as bridges, the old oppositional forces of love and death preside. Outside the zone, the magic is protected by something like the Somebody Else's Problem field in Douglas Adams's Hitchhiker books—not true invisibility but a kind of distraction that works just as well. As story-worlds, the magical zones welcome certain kinds of characters and plots while excluding others. Their denizens are powerful and untrustworthy, grotesque or devastatingly beautiful. Mortals allowed inside tend to be young (with Arnason's hero a notable exception), attractive, artistic, and motivated by the undefined longing that the German romantics called *Sehnsucht*. As in other instances of the pastoral chronotope, the magical spaces carved out of mundane Minnesota defy laws of sequence and duration: time stretches out or compresses or loops upon itself until the plot has worked itself out.

In two of the novels, the plot involves overlaying a British supernatural legend or ballad on another kind of story. That other narrative frame for *Tam Lin* is a school story of a particular sort: because it is set in a college rather than an English boarding school, the story of education and socialization also involves comings-of-age and sex. The narrative matrix for *War for the Oaks* is a version of the old Hollywood musical: it's "Mickey and Judy put on a show," only with an urban folk-rock band, some of whose members are fey. Like *Tam Lin*, *War for the Oaks* also involves romantic pairings: a couple of wrong ones leading to a final unexpected but satisfying match.

Daughter of the Bear King goes in quite a different direction. Its hero is a middle-aged, married woman whose frame story is a journey of liberation. The journey takes us out of real-world Minneapolis into a version of the pastoral green world with multiple leaky portals back to our own realm. She solves a central problem in the other world—defeating, not evil, but (one of my favorite details) the forces of shoddiness while in the process discovering her own strengths. She needs those strengths as well as the allies she finds, because her

adventures are right out of the classical romance novel. She is transformed, shipwrecked, marooned, imprisoned, transported against her will, betrayed by seeming friends, and rescued by seeming enemies. One thing that does not happen is a love match: by the end she is freed from her problematic husband with no substitute lined up.

A few years ago I concocted a three-part scheme for analyzing romance plots, with each type associated with, but not exclusive to, a particular audience. I called them the Romance of Erotic Fulfillment, the Romance of Adventure, and the Romance of Hidden Identity (*Stories about Stories* 99-100). We tend to assume that women are the consumers of the first, which includes everything from Shakespearean comedy to Hallmark movies; that the second is aimed at men, whether dime-novel Westerns or Melvillean South Sea epics; and that the third, represented by *Oliver Twist* and *The Land of Oz*, is especially appropriate for children. In fact, any variety of romance might appeal to any demographic, and classical romance was a melange of all three. The Minnesota fantasies are all Romances of Adventure, containing scenes of danger and derring-do. *Tam Lin* and *War for the Oaks* rely on love matches for their resolutions, making them also Romances of Erotic Fulfillment, while the ending of *Daughter of the Bear King* is grounded in the protagonist's discovery of her Hidden Identity and the power that comes with her lineage.

These plots aren't imposed on the settings of the novels. Rather, the chronotope is exactly where and when romance plots happen. The plot defines the story-space; the time-place invokes the plot. The great discovery of Bull and Dean and Arnason was that the pastoral story-space can share a name and a physical description with Minneapolis. The Middle West can be Middle-earth. These writers employed romance tropes to give us our world refreshed and Recovered, in Tolkien's terms, which is wonderful, but these stories are now more than three decades old. The world and the fantasy genre have changed around them. What is it like to reread them today, and what does a new context tell us about the pastoral and its Middle Landscape?

Fantasy is now a world-wide phenomenon, having made a second adaptive leap. The first jump was from the British Isles to English-speaking North America, Australia, and New Zealand. Now some of the best of the genre comes from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Indigenous communities within zones of European colonization. A good recent example is *The Saint of Bright Doors* by Vajra Chandrasekera, a book that is uniquely Sri Lankan while also participating in the new international culture of fantastic story-making. The thirst for the fantastic is now shared by people all around the world, perhaps because we are all encountering similar disruptions to traditional ways of knowing and narrating reality.

But genres are institutions, and like all institutions they constrain us to certain ways of doing and thinking. As genres spread around the world, they become mechanisms of colonization. When fantasy catches on in Sri Lanka or Nigeria, it comes with a set of expectations derived not from local forms of storytelling but from Tolkien and table-top gaming. Closer to home, a Native American or First Nations writer such as Darcie Little Badger or Cherie Dimaline has the task of reclaiming two kinds of territory: generic and geographic. Their fantasies remind North American readers that the lands we live on and the story-worlds we construct have complex and troubling histories. Once we factor in those histories, neither urban spaces nor urban fantasies are quite what we suppose. The middle landscape was never poised between city and marsh but always between two civilizations, one of which is treated as a blank by the other. City streets pave over traditional gathering grounds, and captivity narratives portray aggressors as victims and vice versa. Mary Rowlandson's experiences notwithstanding, many, many more native peoples have endured captivity by European invaders than the reverse. The real ghostly presence in arcadia is not merely death but the unacknowledged dead or displaced inhabitant. Un-writing the false narrative will take efforts such as Wirlomin-Noongar-Australian writer Claire G. Coleman's science fantasy *Terra Nullius*, which reconfigures Aboriginal captivity as an alien invasion story.

With regard to genre, "fantasy" and "pastoral" both derive from European classical sources and both entail colonialist expectations about self and other, home and away, good and evil, and a bunch of other binaries that allow readers to identify with the hero. As structural guides, fantasy and the pastoral tell us what kinds of events belong in stories and what kinds do not; who is allowed certain kinds of actions and is justified in taking those actions; and what outcome constitutes a satisfactory ending. These expectations are so engrained in our culture that they seem like universals—which is the real lesson I take from Joseph Campbell. There is a monomyth only because we think there is, and because we, like Campbell, tend to ignore or distort everything that doesn't fit the pattern. Yet people immersed in other narrative traditions have different expectations about the proper unfolding of stories, and those different expectations are summed up in different genre names. Folklorists distinguish between categories imposed from outside, which they call *etic*, and those recognized by cultural insiders, which are *emic* genres. Categories such as myth, legend, and tale, useful as they are, map out narrative possibilities in a way that fits European tradition but not necessarily other societies where not only the terms but divisions between truth and fiction, entertainment and instruction, and sacred and everyday space are quite different. When oral storytelling is supplemented by printed literature, a whole new understanding of genre arises within each culture. Characterizing this understanding through etic terms such

as "fantasy" and "realism" can falsify the insider's understanding and experience.

In his recent book *Reading Tolkien in Chinese*, Eric Reinders asks English-language readers to imagine that they are encountering *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings* not with the provenance they know but as a translation from a Chinese original. The effect is disorientation, surprise, maybe even a version of Tolkien's Recovery. Reinders imagines a reviewer's comments on this translation of "The Chinese narrative cycle known collectively as *Mojie* ('Magic Ring')" in which "Professor Tolkien appears to have synthesized multiple examples of the original Chinese tradition into a single text" (160). In the process, Tolkien-as-translator has lost some resonance but added it elsewhere. Reading the English version with the Chinese in mind, we may notice new details and connections between them. Reinders suggests, for instance: "A vivid image of Galadriel's eyes watching the movements of mountains and seas. Aragorn as a kung fu hero. Zen Master Gandalf" (160).

One reason this exercise is so fascinating is that *The Lord of the Rings* is already presented as a translation from an unseen original. Hobbits aren't hobbits but *holbytla*—or rather, *holbytla* itself is a borrowing from Old English that approximates the relationship between an older word and the modern term in Common Speech. Tolkien knew well the slippage between languages that creates dissonance and confusion but sometimes unexpected beauty. That same slippage is the source of magic in R.F. Kuang's linguistic fantasy *Babel* (2022), and it's a hobbit-hole I am mightily resisting falling into so that I can get back to genres as a form of colonization.

Reinders specifically addresses the question of what genres might be represented by Tolkien's work in translation, including *zhiguai*, or weird tales, *minsu* or folklore, *tonghua* or children's stories, *wuxia* or martial arts stories, and *xianxia*, a more elevated sort of quest narrative based in Daoism (42-43). Each is as much like—and as unlike—fantasy as the bawdy tale is like sacred myth—and that in turn is a distinction that might not make sense from a cultural perspective in which coyote stories are both or neither.

A good example of the cultural slippage that occurs when etic terms substitute for emic is the debate about Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. The 2000 film is a tribute to Hong Kong's *wuxia* movies, which in turn drew on centuries of literary, dramatic, and folkloric narratives that incorporate the real alongside the unreal. For some U.S. viewers, Lee's film was not fantasy at all but a quasi-historical exercise in martial arts choreography. For others, it was obviously fantasy, and the amazing feats of the warriors were not merely good wire-work but actual flight. The only right answer is that *wuxia* is not fantasy but covers some of the same narrative territory. The same text might be both, especially if, like *Crouching Tiger*, it is made for more than one audience by a

filmmaker who crosses cultural divides. We can read the movie's plot, action, and themes in more than one way. It is an overlay, what critic John Clute calls a *crosshatch*: that is, "A mixing or blurring of realities which are not sharply demarcated by a portal or threshold transition but merge together in the same geographical territory."[2] In a cross-hatch, two characters might perceive their surroundings as quite different versions of reality. I suggest that we can read every fantasy the same way, only the differing perceptions are ours rather than the characters'.

So the pastoral Minnesota of *Tam Lin*, *War for the Oaks*, and *Daughter of the Bear King* has now become contested territory, and, because perceptual change works retroactively, it always was. The middle landscape lies not only between city and wilderness and between human and elfin realms but also between fantasies of the past and those of the present and future. It mediates between Tolkien and the contemporary genre represented by Kuang, Coleman, Little Badger, Dimaline, Chandrasekera, et al. Each of these writers writes both fantasy and something else, something rooted in other cultural soil than the ancient Mediterranean or rural England.

Genres, like other institutions, can be employed as instruments of cultural coercion. They colonize mental spaces, superimpose themselves on existing categories, and assimilate other narrative traditions to themselves. I propose that we use this occasion to reverse the process. Let us try to think of the half-magical, half-mundane landscapes of the fantasies I have been revisiting as being not just versions of the pastoral, but also as *wuxia* or Persian *dastan* (which is a word for "story," but also "history") or Bengali *battala* (a popular form of publication similar to English chapbooks). Every culture has its emic genres of the fantastic. Each of these oral or popular storytelling forms occupies a different cognitive and emotional territory. Each has different rules for inclusion and exclusion, different set-ups and conclusions. Each calls to mind a landscape that is both like and unlike the pastoral scene I had you imagine at the beginning of this talk.

So what if *War for the Oaks* is both fantasy and *wuxia*? What if the plot of *Tam Lin* came out of a *battala* rather than a ballad? What if the Bear King and his daughter were figures out of *dastan*? Not too many details would have to change, but the significance of each would change because the narrative container and the cultural surroundings would be different. We might discover that the binary opposition of fairy folk and European-derived mortals is really a trinary or quaternary or more, with exponentially more possibilities for captivity

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[2] This is a shortened version of the original entry in the online *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction,* and can be found at https://sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/encyclopedia_of_fantasy_the

and alliance. We would be invited to remember that American cities squat on someone else's land, and that the Minneapolis we see is the top of many historical layers, like the excavated Troy. We could see that the plots worked out in those spaces are culturally contingent—the underlying conflict might be something we missed, and the happy ending is only one possible solution. In that respect, the novel that seems most contemporary is Arnason's *Daughter of the Bear King*, because the story refuses closure. Its open ending implies alternative structures of story and meaning, and its refusal to answer questions invites us to find other oracles.

So once again I invite you to imagine fantasy as a landscape, only now try to think of it not as an isolated arcadia but as a contested and continually evolving space amidst many possible storyworlds. This is what the middle landscape really is, and what it always was.

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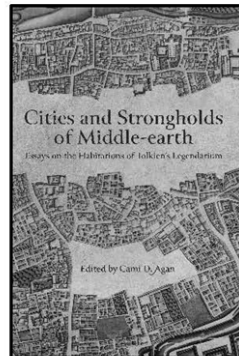
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