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In Romanticism's Wake: On the Nineteenth-Century Roots of *Actual Play*

By

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DISSERTATION/THESIS

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Introduction: Remediating Romanticism

In an episode of the Dropout TV actual play advice series, *Adventuring Academy*, longtime *Dimension 20* gamemaster, writer, and producer, Brennan Lee Mulligan, offers a striking metaphor for thinking about the imaginative “work” that goes into roleplaying:

...[C]haracters are translucent, not opaque... they’re like stained glass... [and] it’s sort of like you are the light behind the stained glass. And what that means is that the character is still you, but the colors and shapes and the way things are arranged changes and the light shines through differently. (1.10 “Giving Yourself Permission to Feel with Marisha Ray”)

It was this unique characterization of the act of roleplaying in tabletop games which acted as the first seed of the project that would eventually blossom into this dissertation. The implied proximity here between the player/performer and the *heroic* character which they are playing is strongly reminiscent of some of the ways in which Romantic-era writers like William Wordsworth and Lord Byron helped to develop a novel form of heroism—one which collapsed the distinction between poet and hero as separate figures. Furthermore, representation of the relationship between the player’s inner self and the projected character they might “assume” during any given session of a tabletop roleplaying game like *Dungeons & Dragons* bears a resemblance to the ways in which poetic self-fashioning often functioned during the Romantic period (Hundert 145). In the fourth canto of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, for instance, Byron reflects on the artistic consolation offered by poetry to a wearied soul:

He, who grown aged in this world of woe,
In deeds, not years, piercing the depths of life,
So that no wonder waits him; nor below
Can love, or sorrow, frame, ambition, strife,
Cut to his heart again with the keen knife

Of silent, sharp endurance: he can tell
Why thought seeks refuge in lone caves, yet rife
With airy images, and shapes which dwell
Still unimpair'd though old, in the soul's haunted cell.

'Tis to create, and in creating live
A being more intense, that we endow
With form our fancy, gaining as we give
The life we image, even as I do now... (v-vi, 37-49, emphasis added)

For Byron, poetic creation is a necessary sustenance that arises from the self even as it nurtures and reflects that self. Byron's thinking here is indicative of a relationship to poetic self-fashioning that can best be expressed and understood as a kind of doubled play, both on the side of the reader/interpreter and on the side of the poet/creator.

This kind of play is central to the pseudo-confessional nature of Byron's poetry, which often relies on what Tom Mole has called the "hermeneutic of intimacy," an interpretative model that "worked by suggesting that his poems could only be understood fully by referring to their author's personality, that reading them was entering a kind of relationship with the author, and that that relationship resembled an intimate connection between individuals" (22). Mole goes on to say that,

for many of Byron's first readers, buying, reading, reading aloud, lending, borrowing, copying into commonplace books, annotating and discussing Byron's poetry were the central activities among a group of practices aimed at investigating Byron the man in order to know more about him or relate more intimately to him. (24)

These interpretative activities constitute, I argue, a kind of "metagame"¹ through which the aesthetic pleasure of reading is further heightened as readers maintain sustained attempts at

¹ See Boluk & LeMieux, *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames* (2017).

unlocking the poet's "true" self. Such an interpretative—and, indeed, parasocial—relationship to the poetic persona is, according to Mole, at least partially rooted in the rise of industrial print culture, a socio-economic and historical shift with wide-ranging implications for poetry and, in time, celebrity culture.

This kind of Byronic self-fashioning that Mole sees in Byron's earliest attempts at poetic heroism is itself strikingly reminiscent of Mulligan's metaphor on the relationship between the "true" or inner self of the player and the "stained glass" that constitutes the character through which the performer's inner light is projected. *Actual play* series actively cultivate a similar kind of parasociality between consumers of the medium and the main casts themselves, making audience members feel as if they themselves are part of the "table," and can fantasize about participating in the game.² In the same way that a reader of Byron might have felt like they truly *knew* him after reading his work, so, too, might a consumer of a show like *Dimension 20* feel like they themselves are a part of the camaraderie and friendship that constitutes such a central part of the genre's appeal, what Erik Kersting describes as a particular "affective atmosphere" cultivated by *actual play* series. For Kersting, this affective atmosphere is one that player-performers are aware of creating, "and [they] explicitly use it to raise capital and engagement with their audience," much like Byron leveraged the hermeneutic of intimacy in the construction of his own commodified celebrity persona (14). Intimacy, then, or at least the cultivated *impression* of intimacy is just as vital to *actual play* today as it was to Lord Byron's commercial efforts.

Though Mulligan is not, of course, the singular authority in the relationship between the "real" and "imagined selves" in the context of roleplay, this statement remains nonetheless

² For a fuller discussion of this relationship, see Robyn Hope's "Critical Role and Audience Impact on Tabletop Roleplay" and Anthony David Franklin's "Communal Narratives in Actual Play Environments" in the edited collection, *Watch Us Roll: Essays on Actual Play and Performance in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (2021)

important, especially because of the increasing popularity of the *actual play* show, *Dimension 20*. Given the implicit pedagogical intent of a tabletop roleplaying talkback show titled *Adventuring Academy*, it is clear that this kind of media aims to normalize and popularize certain kinds of play. These parallels between Romantic (and especially Byronic) self-fashioning and the model of roleplay that Mulligan (and, by extension, the actual play series *Dimension 20*) subscribes to leads me, in this dissertation, to explore the further connections between the *Dungeons & Dragons* of *actual play* and those concerns—aesthetic, poetic, and philosophical—that Romantic writers returned to again and again? It is this question that this project continually explores, with each chapter focusing on a particular adaptive dimension of *actual play*'s relationship with the Romantic period.

Actual Play: A Definition

But what *is actual play*? Similar to the “Let’s Play” videos of Twitch streamers, *actual play* involves a group of friends, actors, or even, in some cases, celebrities, coming together and recording themselves playing a table-top role-playing game (TTRPG). These recordings are either streamed live to a viewing audience (the original model of *Critical Role*, which I discuss further below in this introduction), or recorded, edited, and then distributed. Some, like *Dimension 20*, emphasize the multimodal nature of the genre in their production of television-like episodes, while others, such as *Worlds Beyond Number*, are audio-only podcasts. All cultivate intimacy with audiences in a variety of ways, from talkback shows like *Adventuring Party* to the rhetoric of camaraderie and friendship deployed throughout.

Although all *actual play* series involve collaborative storytelling through players *actually playing* a game, they can take on a variety of formats and can employ a wide range of different game systems. For the purposes of this dissertation, I will be primarily focusing on *actual play*

series which use *Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition* as their ludic framework, although one of my case studies, *A Court of Fey & Flowers*, hybridizes this system with another tabletop role-playing game, *Good Society: A Jane Austen RPG*. According to a statistical survey published in April of 2022, 34% Americans had (as of that study) some degree of familiarity with tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs), with about half of this number having played in these kinds of games with some frequency, ranging from the 6% of respondents who said they played once every few months to the 1% of respondents who claimed to play every day (“Tabletop Roleplaying Game Participation Frequency in the United States”). Though hardcore players of games like *Dungeons & Dragons* certainly remain within a minority in this country, it is nonetheless striking that a nearly a third of those surveyed reported some degree of exposure to roleplaying games. Researchers have widely credited the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns³ with inspiring more individuals to pick up the hobby, and academics specializing in tabletop roleplaying games have pointed to the contemporaneous and exponential rise in *actual play* shows.

I walk well-trodden ground when I assert that *Critical Role* (2015—present) stands out as one of the most successful examples of this genre, with thousands of paid and unpaid subscribers tuning in each Thursday night for the latest installment of an episodic adventure. Indeed, the show’s commercial success is such that, among other things, their “campaigns” (which, for our purposes, we can imagine as “seasons” of the show, though *Critical Role*’s campaigns can stretch over the course of years while those of *Dimension 20* typically unfold over a handful of months) have been adapted and transformed into animated series under the auspices of Amazon Prime. Add to that the show’s frequent live performances, its spin-offs and “side quests,” and a fully

³ See, for instance, Gwyndaf Hughes’ BBC 2021 article, “COVID-19: ‘*Dungeons and Dragons* got us through lockdown.’”

functioning merchandising arm to boot, and we are forced to acknowledge *Critical Role*'s centrality to the phenomenon known as “*actual play*.”⁴

But if we take a step back and think about what it is that we are actually seeing, what do we have before us? *Critical Role* has historically played within the system known as *Dungeons & Dragons*, a game with a long and complex history, both in terms of its actual inception and vis-à-vis its thorny genealogy. At its core, *Dungeons & Dragons* asks players to create characters which they will then inhabit, interacting with the imaginative world created by the game master or “dungeon master” through the persona they have chosen. Though the game system itself is certainly complex, its basic mechanics are rooted in the meeting of randomization, improvisation, and the performance (to varying degrees) of a semi-distinct, traditionally *heroic* persona with its own subjective experience of the imagined world. A player who wishes to carry out a certain action must first roll a die, the result of which will determine the player's success or failure. The game master (or GM) then determines the effect of that positive or negative roll, and is more broadly responsible for the creation of the fictive world in which player-characters live out their adventures. Thus, narratives always unfold in negotiation with the GM and the other players at the table.

Historically, these mechanics have often been used simply as a means of facilitating what Brian Upton⁵ has termed the “gamist” approach to roleplaying games, an approach in which players tend to prioritize certain elements of the game over others, namely combat (i.e., the use of dice to attack and destroy enemies), exploration (in the form of what are called “dungeon

⁴ Since the meteoric rise of *Critical Role*, other groups of performers have adopted (and adapted) its basic structures, and these days there are dozens upon dozens of potential games and campaigns to follow, including (but certainly not limited to) *Dimension 20*, *Not Another D&D Podcast*, *Three Black Halflings*, and many others.

⁵ See Upton, *The Aesthetic of Play* (2015)

crawls”), and the acquisition of treasure or equipment through that exploration⁶. Upton contrasts this style of play with two other modes, the narrativist and simulationist approaches. Players who adopt the former kind of play tend to prioritize the development of narrative choice and development.⁷ Put differently, the gamist-oriented players generally see their chosen character (known as a PC or player character) primarily as a kind of “skin” that allows them to interact with and ultimately *conquer* the world, whereas the narrativist player tends to take much more seriously the *role* in roleplaying, creating and immersing themselves in a specific and distinct (albeit, of course, imagined) persona, one which might think, speak, or act very differently from the player themselves.

Critical Role itself has historically privileged this much more *narratively* immersive and theatrical form of play, due in large part to the core cast’s background as voice actors. Indeed, the affective intensity of the players’ performances—which often cross into the excessively melodramatic—is pointed to as a means of further legitimizing role-playing games as a distinct art form. The voice is central to my engagement with the *actual play* series that this dissertation takes as case studies. As I’ve suggested above, the positioning of voice actors, comedians, and other performers of *actual play* as simultaneously occupying heroic and creative roles parallels the Romantic tendency to collapse or condense the distance between Romantic poets writing within the epic genre and their heroes. Put differently, much as the Romantics made heroes of their poets, so, too do *actual play* series make heroes of their player-performers, who

⁶ This playstyle bears some similarities to colonial configurations of power that prioritize domination, extraction, and control.

⁷ To be clear, all three of Upton’s elements of play are always present in tabletop roleplaying games that follow *Dungeons & Dragons*’ example. My point here is that, because actual play is necessarily an entertainment genre, it has historically privileged styles of play that prioritize character development and overall narrative in ways that are distinct from how the game might be played at a home table. That being said, there is a kind of feedback loop at work in actual play shows, especially those that dominate the genre like *Critical Role*, given that newcomers to the game often follow the models popularized in these shows.

simultaneously occupy these creative and heroic roles.

Such efforts at legitimizing not only the study of tabletop role-playing games, but also the act of play itself, come from a variety of areas of artistic expression and expertise. A 2020 article on the HowlRound Theatre Commons website, for instance, calls for a kind of interdisciplinary cross-pollination between tabletop role-playing games and theater performance more broadly:

We believe that theatre artists could learn something from the collaborative storytelling techniques employed in tabletop role-playing games. As professional dramaturgs and gamers ourselves, it's easy to see that theatre and TTRPGs share obvious points of overlap. In both, people perform characters and work together as a group to tell a compelling dramatic narrative. The emotional highs and lows of a tabletop game can be just as compelling for the players as any play is for its audience—indeed, it can sometimes feel more so because players in a tabletop role-playing game are experiencing the story firsthand, taking on the roles of actors and audience simultaneously. (Backus “Theatre of the Mind”)

This example reflects an active trend in the conversation around TTRPGs as both play *and* art—in a way, Backus’ essay is an attempt to lay a kind of claim on tabletop role-playing as inherently theatrical, and it is in making this claim that the article then acknowledges the artistic potential of these games. Backus goes on to enumerate the “possible ways in which that flow [between the genres of theater and TTRPGs] can be reversed,” asking “what ideas does the world of TTRPGs offer for theatrical production?” (Backus “Theatre of the Mind”). Backus’ proposed (re)adaptation of TTRPGs emphasizes the potential of these games specifically as engines for narrative, as means of telling stories. As we shall see, however, there are a wide array of philosophical, aesthetic, and historical “claims” that can be made on TTRPGs beyond those of theater.

A key difference between *actual play* and any of the other genres I have discussed thus

far is, of course, the centrality of dice rolls to determining narrative and character arcs. For the most part, player-characters must use dice to interact with and move through the world constructed by the GM. And when a dice roll feels especially appropriate (or, in some cases, when the roll results in a kind of bathetic deflation common in the mock epic), a player might utter a phrase that has become an *actual play* cliché: “the dice tell a story.” This common refrain, at times reinforces a characterization of “the dice” as a quasi-spiritual or divine force for narrative good (or ill), can be deployed in a variety of contexts. A “natural 20” on a particularly meaningful roll, especially one in the service of a specific narrative thread, might evoke this saying, but so, too, might a natural 1 on a similarly momentous roll, as we see in my analysis of the Canonade scene in the second chapter of this dissertation. Thus, even as the game’s dice rolls preserve a truly random factor in *actual play*, this role has taken certain connotations which might be described as Romantic, given the implication of a sublime force moving the story toward greater narrative satisfaction.

For example, *Not Another D&D Podcast*⁸ (2018—present), produces, alongside a variety of long- and short-form campaigns, a parodic series known as *Dungeon Court*, which sees Axford, Murphy, Hurwitz, and Tanner discuss and pass comic judgment on the submissions of listeners who present “cases,” situations from their own home games where a submitter might feel like they were slighted by their GM or one or more of their players, depending on the submitter. For most of the years that they have produced *Dungeon Court*, the player-performers always include a “confessional” segment to close the episode. In brief, someone submits a “confession” which ironically draws from excessively religious language and, in the style of a

⁸ An audio-only *actual play* series, *Not Another D&D Podcast* centers around four main performers: Brian K. Murphy, Emily Axford, Caldwell Tanner and Jake Hurwitz, with Murphy most commonly acting as the GM for the other three. Murphy and Axford are both players in the main “Intrepid Heroes” group of *Dimension 20*.

Catholic confession, “begs” absolution of the judges-turned-priests. Submitters might refer to the performers as “the Church of Dice Christ,” and invoke the language of “blasphemy” when describing either their own or someone else’s “offence” against “Dice Christ” (*D&D Court* “Dramatic Dice Trays, Enrazzment, and the Family Fun Mix” 54:00). These “offences” might range from “fudged” (faked) dice rolls to questions about “unusual” forms of rolling the dice. In one of the most recent episodes, the quartet discusses a submission which describes a player that pre-rolls their dice in a covered dice tower well in advance of checks, revealing the result when prompted by the GM (*Ibid* 55:12). This approach contrasts with the usual method of rolling at the moment that the player is prompted to do so by the GM, to the comic surprise and ironic disapproval of Axford, Murphy, Hurwitz, and Tanner.

This example offers a brief illustration of the degree to which this game mechanic has become the subject of much discourse in the *actual play* community. Thus, while the dice are certainly a tool for preserving the inherently improvisational nature of *actual play* in a way that *is* unprecedented, the *framing* of the dice as a source of divine narrative inspiration—here coded with Christian language, but elsewhere discussed in other spiritual or religious contexts—parallels the model of poetic inspiration (and natural structures more broadly) we see in Coleridge’s poem, “The Eolian Harp” (1795, pub. 1796):

And that simplest Lute,
Placed length-ways in the clasping casement, hark
How by the desultory breeze caressed,
Like some coy maid half yielding to her lover,
It pours such sweet upbraidings, as must needs
Tempt to repeat the wrong! And now, its strings
Boldlier swept, the long sequacious notes
Over delicious surges sink and rise... (13-20)

Here, Coleridge's speaker describes an instrument which produces "long sequacious notes" of great beauty. The blowing of the wind on the strings is not random to the poem's speaker, who asks

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic Harps diversely framed,
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the Soul of each, and God of all? (45-49)

The poem represents this interplay between "all of animated nature" and the sweeping, "plastic and vast... intellectual breeze" as a kind of divine improvisation where *all* things are, in their own way, instruments. If we think of the dice of *actual play* as the *instruments* through which player-performers move through and interact with the world, then their characterization as in some ways (even if humorously) divinely or spiritually touched in moments like the *Dungeon Court* episode described above connects them to the Romantic framing offered by Coleridge's poem. In representing dice rolls as almost akin to poetic, religious, or narrative inspiration, player-performers of *actual play* couch this structuring ludic mechanic in the language of aesthetic legitimacy.

This emphasis on TTRPGs as capable of serious or important storytelling is especially present in discussions of *actual play* series like the aforementioned *Critical Role*, which has frequently positioned itself as a new genre of television. In a 2019 interview titled "*Critical Role: Dungeons and Dragons as a New Genre of TV*," Matt Mercer, the creative director of the company behind the series as well as its long-time gamemaster, foregrounds what he sees as some of the key elements that distinguish *actual play* series centered around TTRPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons* from earlier forms of entertainment when he says that, to him, a key part

of the work they do is “long-form stories through improv and friendship” (1:15). Though an admittedly saccharine response, it nonetheless emphasizes some of the key elements alluded to by proponents of this genre as a legitimate form of art and storytelling—collaboration, improvisation (which is itself rooted in character and performed subjectivity), and, of course, sustained narrative arcs. This framing of *actual play* also serves to legitimize the genre *as* art, a necessary move to its increased commercial success as a genre.

But this dissertation is not itself about *Critical Role*. Instead, I emphasize its example at the opening of this project because, for better or worse, *Critical Role* has historically served as a model for other actual play shows, in addition to changing the ways in which tabletop roleplaying is perceived more broadly within the mainstream of popular culture (Kersting 100-1). As *actual play* continues to emerge and evolve, how can we come to better understand this form? Shows like *Critical Role* have worked hard to create a sense of narrative legitimacy for their games, and the language that both players and performers often use when describing how *Dungeons & Dragons* is played today is that of “collective” or “collaborative storytelling.” Such language has obvious roots in communal forms of storytelling, practices that themselves underwent radical changes during the turn of the nineteenth century with the rise of industrial print culture. This history is one I engage more closely with in the second chapter of this dissertation, which reflects on the similar role that improvisation plays in both Byron’s *Don Juan* and the *Dimension 20* season, *Neverafter* (2022).

And yet I do concur that tabletop roleplaying games like *D&D* (especially as played in these actual play shows) constitute a new kind of aesthetic genre, even if critics continue to argue and debate about its precise nature and uses.⁹ Writers like Sarah Lynne Bowman and Felix Rose

⁹ See, for instance, Peterson’s seminal work, *Playing at the World* (2012) and Nachtwey’s *Strictly Fantasy* (2021).

Kawitzky, for instance, have written about some of the potential interpersonal applications of roleplaying games ranging from their educational potential to their use in the safe exploration of queer identities.¹⁰ Other critics, like Gary Alan Fine, take on a more sociological approach, exploring the ways in which new sub-cultures have formed around these forms of play.¹¹ And yet other scholars, thinkers, and historians have focused on the advent and genealogy of both the game and its performance as entertainment, with collections like *Watch Us Roll: Essays on Actual Play and Performance in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (2021) making recent inroads into developing a more precise critical language and framework for understanding the play performed in series like *Critical Role* as inherently commodified and ultimately consumable.

In what follows, I'd like to briefly offer a proposed taxonomical model for thinking about how performance and embodiment are at work in *Dungeons & Dragons* and, in particular, *actual play* series which use this game system. Within this model, I focus on the relationship between players' physical bodies and their imagined bodies, and between players' physical or material spaces and the imagined spaces their characters are moving through, as these are sites in which the subjective development of their imagined personae are grounded. For the initial construction of this framework, I draw on Sarah Bay-Cheng's "taxonomy of distortion," invested as this model is in not "ignoring or oversimplifying the complexity, or even the contradictions, within a single performance" (46). This framework reflects a remarkable fluidity and can be applied to a wide range of performances which, for our purposes, encompasses *actual play*. For my purposes, I am adapting Bay-Cheng's notion of distortion to apply to *imagined spaces* as themselves "virtual" within the context of *actual play*. This virtuality becomes an especially potent

¹⁰ See Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games* (2010) and Kawitzky, "Magic Circles: Tabletop Role-Playing Games as Queer Utopian Method" (2020).

¹¹ See Fine, *Shared Worlds* (1983)

analytical tool when discussing *actual play* series, considering their explicitly performative and theatrical aims.

I put this “taxonomy of distortion” in conversation with Jason Farman’s rejection of “the dichotomy of ‘real/virtual,’” which he sees as “a false opposition” (24). Farman goes on to say that if this dichotomy

were an accurate opposition, then that which is virtual would also be considered “not real.” Quite the contrary is true. That which we encounter as virtual—from chatting with a loved one via text or over video conferencing to playing a multiplayer online game—is often so “real” that it alters the very ways we identify ourselves, the ways we use language, and the ways we conceive of everyday space....an experience of the virtual is always an experience in conjunction with another concept such as the “actual.” (24)

It's this characterization of virtual spaces as themselves determinants of performances within the “actual” that I wish to expand upon and apply to the imagined locales collaboratively created in *Dungeons & Dragons*. These spaces require a kind of imagined embodiment as player characters move through these constructed imaginative realms. Thinking about the “virtual [as] always an experience in conjunction with another concept such as the ‘actual’” is especially helpful in accounting for moments in which “virtual” or imagined bodies mirror or are mirrored by the “real” or actual/material bodies of the players themselves during the simultaneous act of play and performance. As we see throughout this project, the “virtual” or “imagined” constantly echoes back into the material bodies of the performers, whose vocal and physical performances anchor the imagined in the real—even if only momentarily.

We can also use this model to evaluate moments of “bleedthrough” during play, when members of the cast embody through gesture and movement the imaginative performance they are narrating at any given moment. These moments of embodiment parallel what Gina Bloom has called the “retheatricaliz[ation of] gaming by harnessing human movement, putting bodily

gestures at the center of the gaming experience” (185). Such (re)theatricalization of the game allows for a more embodied experience of what Bloom has called “vicarious spectatorship,” wherein, in its original theatrical context, “plays engage spectators by cuing their desire to play” (6). Here, I am adapting this characterization of vicarious spectatorship to account for a central aspect of *Critical Role*—the presence of a “live” audience represented by an ever-flowing chat in which spectators can respond to cast members’ forms of play, sometimes enthusiastically, often critically. Indeed, it is this physical involvement in the game itself that helps to create a sense in players of what Gordon Calleja has termed “kinesthetic involvement” as well as “ludic involvement,” two of the six forms of involvement which aid in the development of what Calleja terms “incorporation” into the gamic context (170). Though, as I discuss in the first chapter of this dissertation, *Critical Role* has since moved away from this live-streaming model, it is nonetheless a helpful example for thinking about the role of vicarious spectatorship which is at the heart of the appeal provided by *actual play* series. Furthermore, this kind of vicarious spectatorship maps well onto *actual play* as a genre which *a priori* extends an implicit invitation to the viewer or listener into the affected “intimacy” of the table.

As part of this model, I also take for granted that embodiment is central for understanding how performance is at play in *actual play*, though such an assertion might easily be applied to roleplaying games more generally. When I speak of embodiment here, I am referring to two *distinct* kinds of embodiment which I see as unfolding simultaneously when players engage in the game. Daniel Mackay argues that, “in a participatory performance... the role-player’s body is *not* what is experienced as the aesthetic focus,” going on to say that “instead, fellow role-players participate in the creative assemblage of preexisting imaginary strips that, depending upon how they are assembled, may result in a unique, memorable event or in the tired sensation of having

been there before” (29). While I agree with Mackay in that the *narrative* focus of both players and player-spectators is in the “virtual” or imagined spaces they are simultaneously occupying alongside their material reality, I nonetheless would suggest that a vital aspect of what Bloom terms the “retheatricalization of play” can only be understood by engaging with players’ own materially embodied movements, gestures, and reactions while playing the game. In the final chapter of the dissertation, for instance, embodiment and costume serve to construct the personae of the Lord of the Wing, characters from *A Court of Fey & Flowers* which draw heavily from what Clara Tuite has described as Byron’s construction of “scandalous celebrity.”

Here, I am drawing on Farman’s argument that “the virtual,” and its *D&D* analog, the virtually imagined, “is not the opposite of the real; instead, it is a component of experiencing the real. The virtual serves as a way to understand the real and as a form of actualization that serves to layer and multiply an experience of that which is already realized” (25). Rather than seeing player bodies as that which is “*not* experienced as the aesthetic focus,” then, I argue that the aesthetic focus is simultaneously created by *both* the imagined bodies and spaces players collaborative construct *and* the bodies that are doing or allowing for this kind of construction. Put differently, physical embodiment can itself act as a kind of immersive practice, mirroring the imaginary kinesthetic involvement of the role-played body. This understanding is especially applicable to *actual play* shows like *Critical Role*, which foreground players’ bodies through the camera’s gaze.

But as I have alluded to above, not all *actual play* series have a visual component, however—*Worlds Beyond Number*, for instance, which is one of the case studies presented in the first chapter of this project, is an audio-only podcast, centering vocal performance in the creation of immersion and incorporation. Indeed, much of my engagement with the case studies presented

in this dissertation methodologically resembles a kind of textual analysis which prioritizes the voices and words of the characters. This approach is due in part to my own background as a literary scholar, but it is also inspired by how central the voice is to the *actual play* model first introduced by *Critical Role* itself—the tag line, after all, is that they are a “bunch of nerdy *voice actors*” who get together to play *Dungeons & Dragons*. Indeed, their voices act as *immersive markers*, with cast members often adopting accents or forms of speaking very different from their own. These vocal performances, themselves expressions of embodied experience, are also used to distinguish between the player and character, though moments of “bleedthrough,” where a performer might be discussing the game’s mechanics using the accent or speaking style of their character, are inevitable in a genre that’s so centrally about playing a role that is simultaneously distinct from, but also grounded in the self—the “stained glass” Mulligan describes in the opening to this introduction.

This kind of simultaneous embodiment also corresponds to a central simultaneity at stake in how *Dungeons & Dragons* (re)configures time and space. Players, after all, must occupy both their own embodied selves *and* the bodies and subjective experiences that are a vital part of roleplaying. Similarly, players also occupy material spaces and “virtual” or imagined spaces—where their material bodies actually are, and where their characters’ bodies are moving through. Additionally, players must often negotiate different temporal contexts—within the several hours during which a game session might unfold, player-characters might move through days, hours, or weeks in time. Conversely, in-game time slows to a crawl during combat encounters, with each round of combat representing a six-second increment of time. Players, then, might spend several hours navigating a combat that, within the in-game world, might “actually” take place over a

handful of seconds or minutes. These different experiences of time, space, and bodies are reminiscent of Bay-Cheng's taxonomy of distortion and its

three categories [that] remain fundamental to performance practice, even (and perhaps especially) when they are challenged. Media-performance intersections are frequently noted for their potential to radically reorganize space (e.g., telematics, live feeds, and virtual or augmented reality), time (e.g., prerecorded material, flashbacks, simultaneous action), and bodies (e.g., cyborgs, robots, prosthetics, extreme body modifications. (46)

For Bay-Cheng, "a taxonomy of media and performance may be best understood along the axes of distortion in space, time, and bodies" (47). Though Bay-Cheng envisions and constructs this taxonomy as a way of accounting for distortions in these three categories within the context of media and performance (and especially theater), I would suggest that such a perspective can also be applied to different performative contexts, such as *Dungeons & Dragons* more broadly and *actual play* in particular.¹²

Why Romanticism?

According to Gerard Nachtwey, some of the earliest scholars who write about *actual play* and TTRPGs more broadly "take as a commonplace the *novelty* and historic *discontinuity* of fantasy role-playing games from anything that came before" (11). But as Nachtwey goes on to assert, role-playing games (and especially *Dungeons & Dragons*) are "the intellectual and aesthetic descendent[s] of a number of numerous cultural practices that revolve around issues of literacy, leisure, spirituality, and gender and racial identity that stretch back to the beginnings of the

¹² Here, I have attempted to both clearly define the genre of *actual play* which I will be engaging with and to offer a theoretical framework for thinking about performance and embodiment in *actual play*. While no single chapter in this dissertation deepens this framework, it is one which quietly undergirds my juxtapositional approach throughout. In the second chapter of this dissertation, I return to and expand on the role of the voice as a tool for improvised remediation in *Dimension 20: Neverafter*. But as I have shown above, *actual play* is a complex assemblage of formal and disciplinary conventions rooted in other forms of media and entertainment. Thus, while this section serves as a brief primer on the nature of *actual play* through the context of performance, it has by no means exhausted this context's analytical possibilities, and I leave that work to scholars of performance, theater, and embodiment which might further deepen and complicate the framing offered here.

nineteenth century” (*Ibid.*). Nachtwey’s study offers an especially valuable contribution to our understanding of this “descendance” as he puts it when he argues that

late eighteenth-century Romanticism laid the groundwork for a reading paradigm of “immersion,” in which the underlying purpose for reading texts was not to develop “wit” or “reason”—as it had been through much of the Enlightenment—nor even to achieve the Romantic Sublime, but rather to get “lost” in the fictive world of the text. (12)

Nachtwey’s work reminds us of the complexity of sketching out a genealogical study of tabletop role-playing games, and I test and explore his assertion that tabletop role-playing games that rely on character and immersion are imaginatively and aesthetically indebted to the Romantic period. That being said, my project seeks to expand and concretize our understanding of the boundaries of Romantic influence on *D&D* that Nachtwey outlines above. Furthermore, Nachtwey largely does not engage with *actual play* series, and his focus is primarily historical and genealogical.

Ultimately, this dissertation asks—if we accept that *actual play* series and podcasts are an emergent and legitimate¹³ aesthetic genre, what critical and aesthetic language should we use to engage with it? What do we make of the degree to which subject-formation, heroism, and narrative immersion take center stage in so many of these actual play series? What is the role of the simulated intimacy created by player-performers who record themselves playing games which are inherently collaborative, social, and therefore, rooted in the language of friendship and camaraderie? And if, as Nachtwey reminds us, games like *Dungeons & Dragons* are not *exclusively* characterized by “novelty and historic discontinuity,” are there extant aesthetic and imaginative structures which we might use to better understand and talk about *actual play* as it is performed today? In this project, then, I seek to build on Nachtwey’s implicit call for scholarship

¹³ Here, I am alluding to the kind of anxiety inherent in early discourse about *actual play* as an emergent *narrative* medium which sought to present *actual play* as a fully realized aesthetic form capable of producing compelling and complex stories with driving themes.

that rejects framings of *actual play* as disconnected from the literary and aesthetic histories that came before and which instead foregrounds such histories.

In the first chapter of this thesis, heroism and the epic form act as the analytical “glue” between *actual play* and the Romantic period. Here, I am in conversation with the work of Robert Crossley’s book, *Epic Ambitions in Modern Times: From Paradise Lost to the New Millennium* (2022), who argues that

while popular phenomena like role-playing games and video games are outside the purview of this book, they undoubtedly have formed part of the epic consciousness of young gamers. *Dungeons and Dragons* in the 1970s and 1980s, the several iterations of Sid Meier’s *Civilization* games in the 1990s, and the products of the aptly named Epic Games company in the twenty-first century have primed several generations of adolescents and young adults in the romance side of epic: spectacular weapons and chases, subduing monsters and acquiring piles of treasure, the building and sustaining (and destruction) of cultures, virtual exploration of outer space. When asked why he spends so much time playing video games, one young gamer, *The Washington Post* reported, said simply, “I like to be the hero. I like to feel like I’m making a change.” (2)

Here, Crossley ties *Dungeons & Dragons* and role-playing games which position players as heroes as part of the “epic consciousness” of people today, a connection which he intimates but never fully realizes in his project. In this very same book, Crossley also suggests that we should read William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* (1850) as a kind of “autobiographical epic,” one in which “Wordsworth gives full rein to the autobiographical voice which Milton had startlingly though sparingly experimented with in *Paradise Lost*.... His voice, his experience, his fortunes and misfortunes are what motivate *The Prelude*” (71). Thus, Crossley sketches out a genealogy for *Dungeons & Dragons* indelibly marked by the history of the epic form, a genealogy that, as we have seen, includes Wordsworth’s own contributions to the epic. Put differently, the

autobiographical epic which Wordsworth adapts foregrounds the internal, subjective development of the poet-hero's soul and mind over the "action" and vast scope which characterizes earlier iterations in this genre. This shift in the epic form also mirrors and is partially informed by the earlier emergence of the *Bildungsroman* genre during the eighteenth century which similarly emphasized the development and formation of the self as central to the novel's driving action. And as we shall see, *actual play* as it is performed today similarly foregrounds player-characters' subjective development, a development mirrored by the ludic framework of *D&D*, in which character progression from lower to higher levels becomes one of the markers for experience.¹⁴

In his discussion of the Romantic epic, Crossley focuses exclusively on this Wordsworthian model of the epic form. This reading, however, neglects Lord Byron's own role in contributing to the evolution and development of the epic form during the Romantic period, especially through the mock epic *Don Juan* (1819-24). Thus, part of my intervention in the first chapter is first to establish the relevance of this Byronic model to the development of epic, a development I then juxtapose with Wordsworth's own framework for my own taxonomical purposes. Where Wordsworth's epic emphasizes and crystallizes his configuration of the Romantic hero, Byron's mock epic subverts these expectations. Indeed, according to Herbert F. Tucker in *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse 1790-1910* (2008), Byron contributed to the "annihilation of existing heroic ideals and radical redefinition," and "coopted mock-epic's critique of the weightier solemnities, with the aim of sustaining—over the years, over an absurdist abyss—a vantage that was *epic not in spite of its constituent irony, but on account of it*" (22 & 235, my

¹⁴ Indeed, tracking "experience points" from combat and social encounters is one of (though not the only) the ways through which the game signals character growth as they move from lower levels to higher ones, becoming increasingly powerful and knowledgeable with each "level up."

emphasis). This new “epic vantage,” reliant as it is on “its constituent irony” for the destabilization of heroic categories by Wordsworth (and, earlier, by Byron himself in his initial construction of the Byronic hero) becomes especially productive when applied to *Dimension 20: Fantasy High: Junior Year* (2024), which similarly reproduces and ironically destabilizes the model of the Romantic hero as articulated by Wordsworth and the Byron of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage I & II* (1812).

Ultimately, I draw from both of these models for epic-heroism in my construction of a taxonomical framework, a continuum of Romantic epic with Wordsworth on one end, and Byron on the other. As I emphasize in this chapter, I see all *actual play* series as simultaneously drawing from and expanding on both models of Romantic heroism, in part because all of them inherently position their player-performers as simultaneously occupying the roles of heroes *and* artists or storytellers, a decidedly Romanticist conflation. I take *Worlds Beyond Number: The Wizard the Witch and the Wild One* (2023—present) and *Fantasy High: Junior Year* (2024) as this first chapter’s case studies, adapting Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of polyphony and monology as markers which can aid us in determining just where on this Romantic epic continuum we might place these different examples of *actual play*. In drawing more from the Wordsworthian model of Romantic heroism, *The Wizard, the Witch, and the Wild One* liberates the Romantic hero from the bounds of white male subjectivity. And in its adaptation of the Byronic polyphony and constituent irony we see in *Don Juan*, *Fantasy High: Junior Year* better articulates its paradoxical critique of the heroic roles on which *actual play* relies.

As I have alluded to above, one of the central components of *actual play* is improvisation—while a gamemaster (GM) certainly starts out with ideas about where to drive the story, it is ultimately through the players’ improvised performances that the narrative

changes. In Chapter 2, I offer a brief survey of the history of improvisation, starting with *commedia dell'arte* and the figure of the Italian improvisor. There, I demonstrate the degree to which Romantic writers drew from this improvisatorial tradition as figures like Wordsworth devised theories of the poet that relied on spontaneity, genius, and originality (Esterhammer *Print and Performance* 61-60). Indeed, improvisation was conceptualized as representative of the height of poetic genius as the Romantics imagined it, even as their adoption of this practice necessarily becomes static and enclosed through print. In this chapter, I emphasize the parallels between these anxieties and contemporaneous debates about the role of orality between folklorists who were beginning to document oral storytelling cultures and traditions.

Dimension 20: Neverafter shares this interest in improvisation, media, and orality is one. This season of *Dimension 20* sees the player-performers playing out characters based on stock figures from folklore and fairy tales, such as Little Red Riding Hood, Sleeping Beauty, and others, a practice with direct ties to *commedia dell'arte*. One of the central concerns we see *Neverafter* explore has to do with the prescriptivist canonization of these fairy tales produced by their remediation into print, a canon the seasons' player-characters (PCs) go on to fight back against. Their actions as these characters—reliant as they necessarily are on the improvised interactions which characterize *actual play*—are themselves instances of canonical (and, by extension, Authorial) resistance which are primarily communicated through their embodied and, in particular, vocal performances. I see these moments of resistance as *voicings*, a term adapted from Walter Ong's book, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (1982). Ong sees voicings as the oral performance of what is already written. But in my analysis, I adapt the term to describe the players' performances as oral improvisations on a print canon, and it is through these liminal *voicings* that the PCs communicate their rejection of an established

authorial canon (one rooted in Romantic notions of authorship) and their reclamation of subjective agency.

Thus, improvisation in *Neverafter* in a sense *authorizes* and *facilitates* their adaptation and indeed remediation of the fairy tales and tropes in which the players' characters are grounded. I put this instrumentalization of improvisation as resistance to an established canon alongside a reading of Lord Byron's mock epic, *Don Juan*. In *Don Juan*, Byron frequently strikes an improvisatorial pose through the poem's use of *ottava rima* (traditionally associated with Italian improvisation) and its employment of Byronic digressions (ironic interruptions to the narrative which serve to both foreground the artificiality of the text *and* cultivate a kind of conversational intimacy). I read the poem's use of these improvisational tools as in a sense authorizing Byron's own adaptation of the "Don Juan" character first introduced by Tirso de Molina in the eighteenth century. Here, Byron uses improvisational irony to subvert the reader's expectations of this "stock character," namely through the inversion of the traditionally gendered roles of seducer and seduced. Similarly, *Neverafter* dramatizes this "authorization" through improvisation as the player-characters often subvert our expectations of their chosen "stock" characters.

But *Neverafter* also deploys improvisation in its critique of a model of authorship strikingly reminiscent of how Jacques Rancière describes the Wordsworthian model of Romantic authorship: "equality [in the Wordsworthian model] is given *from on high*, and the poem completes itself in a program of educating the people" (245, my emphasis). In *Neverafter*, one group the overarching "villains" are the Authors, beings characterized as simultaneously vast and remote. This kind of Authorship dramatizes the dynamics of power and hierarchy implicit in the Wordsworthian model of authorship which Rancière breaks down. In this second chapter, I

explore the means and consequences of this resistance in *Neverafter*, which ends on a seemingly emancipatory, radical redistribution of the means of (literary) production. Rather than dismissing print culture as inherently limiting and constraining their stories, the characters of *Neverafter* instead attempt to make of *everyone* an author—though questions of power and hierarchy still remain unresolved in its seemingly fairy tale ending. This ending mirrors TTRPGs more broadly, given that every player of a table-top roleplaying game becomes, to some extent, a quasi-authorial figure. Within the context of *actual play*, *Neverafter*'s ending wrestles with the influence of authorship in a form of media that prizes collaborative improvisation.

In the third and final chapter of this dissertation, I engage with one of the most explicitly Romantic seasons of *Dimension 20: A Court of Fey & Flowers* (2022), given its Regency-inspired aesthetics and its partial adoption of *Good Society: A Jane Austen RPG* (2018). Through a survey of the history and genealogy of fairies, I demonstrate the degree to which fairies, for the Romantics, become associated with both the natural sublime *and* with revolutionary potential. I also show how the “Feywild,” the canonical home of fairies in *Dungeons & Dragons*, is rhetorically and imaginatively indebted to Romantic constructions of the sublime. I take Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem, *Queen Mab* (1813), and juxtapose his characterization of the titular fairy as a figure deeply tied to both nature and revolution with the role played by the “Bloom” in *A Court of Fey & Flowers*. The Bloom, which acts much like a Regency season¹⁵, also works as a moment of intense magical (and, by extension, natural) renewal. As we come to learn, however, powerful (both magically and politically) fairies have been conspiring to keep that magic “enclosed,” with literally objectifying effects on those who remain outside the bounds of magical

¹⁵ Here, “season” refers to the social “season” in Regency life, a handful of months in the year of balls, countryside excursions, and all the other public, social networks within which Austen’s characters navigate the expectations of society, especially in regard to the so-called “marriage mart” of the period.

enclosure.

I put this narrative arc in conversation with Romantic responses to the phenomenon of enclosure in Britain, which begins in the early modern period, but which both intensifies and takes on new connotations during and in light of the Industrial Revolution. As I demonstrate, however, *A Court of Fey & Flowers* gives its own representation of enclosure a deeper, more troubling layer. The enclosure of the Bloom's magic is not without harm, and fairies who remain without its touch for too long literally become objects. This focus on subjectivity (and the potential for its alienation) is one which I juxtapose with Jane Austen's work, particularly through the lens of what Alex Woloch has described as Austen's inherent critique of the socioeconomic stratification which implicitly prioritizes some classes as worthy of being "centers-of-consciousness" or major characters over those deemed "minor." In my exploration of character, however, I demonstrate that *A Court of Fey & Flowers* hybridizes Austenian character-systems and sociality with the Byronic mode of scandalous celebrity. In this way, *A Court of Fey & Flowers* not only draws from Austen, Byron, and the Regency more broadly—it offers an adaptation of their ideas and models of characterization as it articulates its own unique critique of capitalist accumulation, income inequality, and industrial extractivism.

Conclusion

I have endeavored, through this introduction, to offer my readers both a framework for understanding the genre of *actual play* which this dissertation continually engages with *and* to outline my reasoning for putting artists and forms of storytelling separated by two centuries alongside one another. I will emphasize these moments of connection, even across such a large historical divide, through my consistent use of juxtaposition. Put differently, the driving methodology of this thesis involves continually putting scenes and moments from the *actual play*

series I am taking as my case studies alongside relevant examples from the Romantic period. By the end of this project, however, one thing will become clear—there is still so much more ground to cover. *Actual play* has, like Claude Lévi-Strauss’ *bricoleur*, “which builds up” new structures from the fragments of the old, drawn from a wide array of intellectual, cultural, aesthetic, and philosophical currents (14). Thus, my goal in this project is not to insist that Romanticism is the true, singular “key” through which we might approach and truly understand *actual play*. Indeed, there is no such universal key to be found. Rather, my aim is to demonstrate the adaptive complexity of *actual play*, and to simultaneously push back against the discourse of unprecedented newness or emergence which has characterized so much of the scholarship on this genre thus far. Furthermore, this dissertation seeks to show that these Romantic influences and parallels are not static, but rather form part of the dynamic toolkit available to the player-performers around whose commodified subjectivity *actual play* has been constructed.

Chapter I: Epic, the Romantic Hero, and *Actual Play*

Introduction

In 2018, CollegeHumor, a Los Angeles-based online content creation company primarily focused on comedic sketches, decided to attempt something new. Inspired by the surge in *D&D actual play* content that rose to prominence after 2015 with the success of *Critical Role* (2015—present), CollegeHumor approved a pilot season of their own *actual play* anthology series: *Dimension 20*. That pilot season was *Fantasy High* (2018), set in a world that humorously melds *Dungeons & Dragons* fantasy tropes with the kind of suburban, American high school setting which we might expect in John Hughes' films like *The Breakfast Club* (1985). Until the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, *Critical Role* streamed its episodes live, resulting in sprawling, 3- to 4-hour episodes that better simulated for viewers the sense that they were witnessing a genuine *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign¹⁶, warts and all. *Dimension 20*, by contrast, offered *actual play* content that was edited, scored, and much more limited in scope. Whereas *Critical Role*'s first campaign ran from March 2015 to October 2017, numbering a total of 115 episodes, the first season of *Fantasy High* is only seventeen episodes, running from September 2018 to January 2019. Eight years later, *Dimension 20* continues to record and release new content. Indeed, after CollegeHumor as a company was essentially shuttered, its streaming service, DropoutTV, survived and indeed thrived, with *Dimension 20* continuing to be one of its main sources of income even as the platform has expanded to include other forms of long- and

¹⁶ The term “campaign,” which is rooted in the miniature wargames of the 19th and 20th centuries, is a word used to describe the ongoing series of game sessions set within a particular world which follows a group or “party” of “adventurers” from beginning to end. The length of a campaign varies from table to table, with some going on for a handful of weeks or months and others extending into years or even decades. Anecdotally, I am part of a group which has been playing within our current “campaign” for the last six years.

short-form content.¹⁷

Today, *Dimension 20* is but one bright star in a wide constellation of *actual play* series, many of which have begun to focus on other tabletop roleplaying games beyond *Dungeons & Dragons*. But the appeal of *Fantasy High*, of its setting and its characters, persists—so much so that, from October 2019 to April 2020, *Dimension 20* ran its only ever “live” season in the style of *Critical Role* until COVID-19 restrictions forced a rushed, Zoom-recorded finale to wrap up the narrative. In 2024, *Fantasy High: Junior Year*, the 21st season of *Dimension 20* as a whole, was released. Earlier seasons of *Fantasy High* often poked fun at heroic tropes, and *Junior Year* emphasizes this comedic and often ironic representation of heroes and the heroic. As we will see below, heroism, and especially heroism within the context of the epic, is one of the central ways in which this chapter links *actual play* to Romanticism. But why epic? What is the relationship between *actual play*, a seemingly unprecedented emergent genre, and epic, a genre with so much cultural and aesthetic “baggage.”

While I will make these connections more explicit below, I would first like to begin by showing a brief snippet from relatively early on in the first episode of *Fantasy High: Junior Year*. Here, the GM or “gamemaster,” Brennan Lee Mulligan, explicitly alludes to the epic roots of a game like *Dungeons & Dragons*, focused as it is on episodic, iterative journeys which follow central heroic characters:

Mulligan: We enter pitched combat. This is it. Months of adventuring, near-death experiences, romances, betrayals, investigations, discoveries, battles, and how it comes to this.... We are starting in *media res*, so our PCs [player characters] are down spell slots, abilities, health, but so are the enemies in the battle... (“Summer Scaries”)

¹⁷ For a more detailed account of the company’s travails, see Max Willens’ “How CollegeHumor Lost Its Early Lead” (2020) on *Digiday* and “It Feels Like 2009 on Dropout” (2025) on *Vulture*.

Here, Mulligan explicitly “invokes”—to play off the epic convention—the genre of epic, the classic model of which begins, as he says here, in *media res*. During this opening, the performers exaggerate the disorientation a reader or, in this case, a viewer might experience when first encountering these unfamiliar scenes and characters by pretending deep knowledge of characters that are just as new to the players as they are to the audience at home. Given *Junior Year*’s interest in simultaneously presenting and destabilizing heroic narratives within the context of the epic, this opening scene neatly anticipates and emphasizes this interest. But to say that *actual play* series like *Dimension 20* follow and engage with certain epic conventions is not enough—or rather, the assertion is incomplete. As I contend below, the epic—and, in particular, the role of the hero within that epic—changes significantly during the Romantic period, changes and shifts which we can trace in how some *actual play* series today engage with these ideas.

I see this chapter’s intervention as one necessarily framed by the historical emergence of the Romantic hero, a figure marked by “the anxious self-consciousness that pervades all Romantic poetry, to the persistent effort of the Romantic poet to find in his own voice an aboriginal self that re-creates the world and that emblemizes the capacity for seizing meaning in the world” (Ross 26). Many of the canonical Romantic writers that we read to this day proposed a sort of interior turn within the context of the epic, and a common pattern of those Romantic writers who chose to write within this heroic genre is that they made poets their heroes.¹⁸ This elevation of the poet to a heroic, at times divine status, has far-reaching consequences, and understanding the ways in which the Romantic period shaped and changed

¹⁸ In *Romantic Epics and the Mission of Empire* (2023), Matthew Leporati cautions us against painting with too broad a brush, arguing that this approach “has often directed how we look at the period’s engagement with epic and has tended to eclipse the varied uses of the genre, including more conventional and outward-focused works” (6). That being said, Leporati does acknowledge that the Wordsworthian model seen in the *Prelude* works as an “archetypal Romantic-era epic, [and] critics have emphasized a poetic retreat from the world of action and towards the realm of the mind” (5).

the figure of the hero is central for any modern genealogy of the subject, though such a genealogy is beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, my argument here is twofold. First, I contend that *Dungeons & Dragons* and the *actual play* series which are partially responsible for this tabletop roleplaying game's recent resurgence engage in large-scale, episodic narratives that are epic in scope and ambition, and which invite rich readings through this genre's framing. But as I will demonstrate below, the epic—and, in particular, the role of the heroic subject within the epic—undergoes significant changes during the Romantic period. These shifts include what some critics have described as an “interior turn,” where the heroic figure's internal subjective development takes center stage, and an implied or outright collapse of the roles of poet and hero into the same figure—what Robert Crossley describes as William Wordsworth's model of the “autobiographical epic” (5). *Actual play* series which ask performers to simultaneously inhabit the roles of hero—their “player character”—and “poet” or artist more broadly (they are, after all, performers and see themselves as such) draw from this “autobiographical model,” adapting elements of this iteration of Romantic epic. In doing so, however, they implicitly engage with another epic tradition within the Romantic period—the Byronic mode that would begin with an early model of celebrity culture through Tom Mole's “hermeneutic of intimacy” and which would conclude with the much more skeptical representation of Romantic heroism in the mock epic, *Don Juan*.¹⁹

Thus the second component of this chapter's argument. To say that *actual play* series draw from Romantic models for epic and heroism is to connect this new form of entertainment to

¹⁹ Byron's initial rise to fame was due almost entirely to the first two cantos of *Childe Harolds' Pilgrimage* published in 1812. The eponymous protagonist, Childe Harold, offers the earliest model for the Byronic hero. According to Tom Mole, a central aspect of that hero's appeal was the impression of intimacy with the poet's “true” soul that might seemingly be accessed through the hero's subjective development. Byron maintains this model through much of his poetic career, until the mock epic *Don Juan*, where he seemingly subverts and in some ways rejects his earlier model of heroic subjectivity.

a nuanced web of interconnected but at times contradictory modes. In trying to navigate an *actual play* series' engagement with these potentially competing models, I would like to propose a taxonomical continuum for Romantic epic. On one end of this continuum, we have the Wordsworthian model, what Robert Crossley describes as the "autobiographical epic." This iteration is most interested in the development of the poet's mind and soul, and earnestly collapses the roles of poet and hero into one another. On the other end, we have the final evolution of the Byronic mode we see in *Don Juan*, one which maintains close proximity between poet and hero, yet ultimately subverts and complicates that proximity. All *actual play* series draw simultaneously from both, and these differing, contrasting modes each have unique narrative and aesthetic affordances.

In my engagement with these different affordances, I draw heavily from Mikhail Bakhtin's model of monophonic vs. polyphonic relationships between characters and authorial "intent." The degree to which the poet-hero of *The Prelude* earnestly frames an alignment between the heroic quest of self-discovery and the poetic world constructed around that quest reflects a singular yet composite "voice," a harmony of poet and hero—or, to draw from the language of roleplaying games, of character and player character. This earnest, *monologic* representation of the heroic journey contrasts sharply with the biting bathetic deflation that persists throughout *Don Juan*, and which is especially apparent in moments where the mock epic's hero attempts to be, well, heroic. As I will show below, critics like Philip W. Martin see in these juxtaposed moments of tonal conflict an example of Bakhtinian polyphony, which he frames as existing in Byron's *Don Juan*, much earlier than Bakhtin's own assertion that the polyphonic mode begins with Dostoevsky. Ultimately, I will demonstrate how we can apply this kind of hermeneutic continuum to *actual play* series as an emergent narrative genre through two

case studies: *Worlds Beyond Number: The Wizard, the Witch, and the Wild One* (2023—present) and *Dimension 20: Fantasy High: Junior Year* (2024).

I am interested here in applying this heroic, and especially epic framing to tabletop roleplaying games and the *actual play* shows that have so recently emerged as both artifacts of and models for roleplay. The success of *Critical Role*, *Dimension 20*, *Three Black Halflings*, and other *actual play* shows and anthology series like these has prompted scholarly interest in thinking critically about both roleplaying and *actual play* as a new art form.²⁰ Much of this recent interest, however, tends to frame this art form as just that—emergent, new, unprecedented. Indeed, “the majority of these studies take as commonplace the *novelty* and historic *discontinuity* of fantasy role-playing games that came before” (Nachtwey 11). Much like Gerard Nachtwey, then, I am interested in this project in emphasizing the reality that this “hobby is the intellectual and aesthetic descendent of a number of numerous cultural practices that revolve around issues of literacy, spirituality, and gender and racial identity that stretch back to the beginnings of the nineteenth century” (12).

Unlike Nachtwey, however, my goal here is not to articulate an exhaustive genealogy that traces the means by which these Romantic ideas on epic-heroic models are transmitted through time. Instead, I test and extend Nachtwey’s assertion that, for instance, “late eighteenth-century Romanticism laid the groundwork for a reading paradigm of ‘immersion,’” and further his claim to Romantic discourse surrounding the intimate relationship between the author (and especially the poet) and their hero(es) (12). Below, I will argue that the heroic models that we see many *actual play* series adopt can be at least partially understood as engaging with a continuum of Romantic epic heroism—on the one extreme, we have what scholars like Jacques Rancière have

²⁰ See, for instance, *Watch Us Roll: Essays on Actual Play and Performance in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (2021).

characterized as Wordsworth's totalizing, top-down model that hierarchically prizes the poet-as-hero above all others. On the other end, we have, drawing from Mikhail Bakhtin through Martin's framing of his work, the much more polyphonic, digressive, and ironically unstable mode(s) for the heroic most clearly illustrated in Lord Byron's mock epic, *Don Juan*. To be clear, my claim here is not a sweeping historical one. I do not mean to imply that this continuum is the only lens through which we can understand the epic during the Romantic period. Rather, I will suggest in this chapter that this continuum is an analytical framework that can be productively applied to *actual play* renditions of tabletop roleplaying games like *Dungeons & Dragons* as inherently rooted in the complex history of heroism and the epic.

In the oft-cited "Preface" to his *Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth offers the reader an exhaustive overview of the Poet's near-divine abilities of the imagination. Among these qualities, Wordsworth emphasizes that

However exalted a notion we would wish to cherish of the character of a Poet, it is obvious, that, while he describes and imitates passions, his situation is altogether slavish and mechanical, compared with the freedom and power of real and substantial action and suffering. So that it will be the wish of the Poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes, nay, for short spaces of time perhaps, to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs; modifying only the language which is thus suggested to him, by a consideration that he describes for a particular purpose, that of giving pleasure. (9)

For Wordsworth, the poet's ability to "conjur[e] up in himself passions" is central to the contemplative work of exploring "similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them" (8).

Though this kind of imaginative work is at the heart of artistic creation, Wordsworth's description of this creative process as a kind of "delusion" wherein the poet's identity is,

momentarily, subsumed by an imagined persona, is, I would suggest, reminiscent of modern role-playing's emphasis on inhabiting a similarly artificial persona, whose driving subjectivity may at times overshadow the player's.

Indeed, this characterization of the creative process as an absorbing illusion is consistent with Nachtwey's claim on the importance of Romantic aesthetics for thinking about the origins of "immersion" as it works in TTRPGs. Furthermore, we also see here the Romantic tendency to position its poets as heroic figures, and Wordsworth's words are part of the ancestral DNA of the role of the hero in TTRPGs and in *actual play*; the player, after all, is simultaneously an "author" *and* a distinct heroic persona, a simultaneity reminiscent of the Romantic understanding of the poet-as-hero. *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) has, for the last fifty years, provided players with an imaginative landscape in which to play heroes, providing a space for them to "slip into an entire delusion" in which they operate a similar role as the heroes of Romantic epics—a role in which the boundaries between poet and hero are blurred, and in which emphasizing and communicating the hero's interior subjectivity is almost as important as the epic-heroic action itself.

But what distinguishes the Romantic epic—and its associated model for heroism—with earlier modes? And what does this model preserve from earlier iterations of the epic form? The evolution of the Romantic hero is one deeply tied to the 18th-century reception history of the Homeric epics. The iterative, episodic nature of Homer's epics works as a kind of model for the approach to play and "adventure" which we see at stake in modern-day tabletop roleplaying games, and in particular *Dungeons & Dragons*. As we have seen above, the 2024 season of *Dimension 20: Fantasy High*, an actual-play show partially responsible for what some have called the Renaissance of the game, begins explicitly within the genre of the epic through an *in*

media res opening.²¹ This appeal to the deeper history of the game is especially timely, given the implications of my argument about the relationship between Romantic-era changes in epic heroism, and the role of this genre for understanding the heroic role that players of games like *Dungeons & Dragons* are asked to step into. While much of the scholarly attention directed at *actual play* series and TTRPGs more broadly emphasizes its fundamental newness, I claim that Romanticism can operate as a productive analytical framework for thinking about epic heroism in *actual play* series today.²²

Changes and experimentation with the epic form are part of a larger revival of the epic in Britain during the Romantic period and, as such, any discussion of epic heroism in *actual play* series should ground itself in this progression. As Matthew Leporati writes in *Romantic Epics and the Mission of Empire* (2023), “although the period is named for the romance revival, its vast and unprecedented production of epics suggests that writers found in this ancient genre unique tools to speak to the tensions of the historical moment” (1). This chapter’s interest is therefore twofold. Firstly, it seeks to explore the ways in which Romantic writers like Wordsworth and Byron reshaped epic heroism and its relation to authorship, with both figures acting as near-opposite ends of a “Romantic heroic continuum” through which we can eventually read the epic-heroic form in *actual play*. Secondly, I will also demonstrate how we can apply this framing to two different “texts”—*Dimension 20’s Fantasy High: Junior Year* (2024), and the first campaign²³ of the audio-only, podcast series titled *Worlds Beyond Number: The Wizard, the*

²¹ Interestingly enough, this initial episode was extremely controversial, in large part *because* of its more explicit connection to the epic genre.

²² This is not to suggest that I see *actual play* renditions of roleplaying games as near reproductions of Romantic epics—none have yet attempted roleplaying exclusively in rhyme. However, it is clear to me that epic and heroism are concepts central to *actual play* and traditional tabletop roleplaying games more broadly, and it is on this connection that this part of my argument revolves.

²³ A campaign is used by players to describe the games that are intended to run continuously for weeks, months, and even years. Thus, the epic is not only in scale, but also, in some cases, in duration. As an illustration, the first campaign of *Critical Role* (2015-present) is made up of over 370 hours and spanned two years from 2015-17.

Witch, and the Wild One (2023-present).

Neither of these series exists exclusively on one end of this continuum, but each are still positioned at different points along that spectrum. *Fantasy High: Junior Year* and *Worlds Beyond Number* both have a coherent story that drives their narratives, both are epic in scope, and both indulge in elements of the monophonic and the polyphonic. *Worlds Beyond Number*, however, tends toward greater tonal consistency and narrative immersion—episodes are tightly edited and musically scored, and the story has time to unfold more gradually given the greater number of episodes (over fifty for the first campaign of *Worlds Beyond Number*, run by Brennan Lee Mulligan with Aabria Iyengar, Lou Wilson, and Erika Ishii as players). *Fantasy High: Junior Year*, by contrast, moves rapidly and often between pathos and bathos, between the immersively emotional and the comically ironic, with moments where players briefly but literally “usurp” Mulligan’s role as the Gamemaster, drawing on the destabilizing, irreverent polyphony of Byron’s mock epic.

To demonstrate these distinctions, I’d like to juxtapose two very different scenes from these two different (but partially overlapping) shows—a moment from the first campaign (*The Wizard, the Witch, and the Wild One*) of the audio-only podcast *Worlds Beyond Number*, and another scene from one *Dimension 20: Fantasy High: Junior Year* (2024). Both scenes engage deeply with one of the central concerns of this genre and, indeed, of *Dungeons & Dragons* more broadly: heroism, and the relationship between the heroic, fantastical self and the “true” persona that inhabits that artificial self. As I will articulate later in this chapter, this central concern is itself rooted in the complex literary history of the epic as it was remediated and reconceptualized by Wordsworth and Byron in particular. For now, however, I will focus first on the work of juxtaposing these two moments from *Worlds Beyond Number: The Wizard, the Witch, and the*

Wild One, and *Fantasy High: Junior Year*. In exploring this juxtaposition, I seek to demonstrate the applicability of the continuum of epic Romanticism I have described above.

The Wizard, the Witch, and the Wild One is the founding narrative arc of the *Worlds Beyond Number* anthology podcast. This audio series is an ongoing collaboration between names that will, as this dissertation progresses, become increasingly familiar—Aabria Iyengar, Brennan Lee Mulligan, Erika Ishii, and Lou Wilson, a quartet whose credentials include acting, improvisation, comedy, writing, and, of course, tabletop roleplaying *actual play* series. Mulligan and Wilson are part of the original group of seven known as the “Intrepid Heroes” with whom *Dropouttv*’s (then *College Humor*) first launched their *Dimension 20* anthology series in 2018, *Fantasy High*, the first in a series of *Fantasy High* installments leading up to the most recent season set in this world released in 2024, *Fantasy High: Junior Year*. Iyengar and Ishii have also participated in other seasons of *Dimension 20*, with the former serving as the gamemaster for a variety of other, shorter seasons of *Dimension 20* not featuring the full “Intrepid Heroes” cast.²⁴ Ishii has starred in a range of *Dimension 20* seasons, beginning with their appearance in *Escape from the Bloodkeep* (2019), a parodic reimagining of the aftermath to Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, where the players’ characters work toward restoring the fallen “dark lord” that acts as Sauron’s stand-in in this comic retelling. Thus, while I will be speaking about some of the key aesthetic and poetic differences between *Dimension 20* and *Worlds Beyond Number* in some length below, these distinctions need to be framed through an acknowledgement of the overlapping thematic and generic interests shared by both. Indeed, this framing implicitly suggests that some of the key divergences between the two projects are intentional and a result of distinct (if interrelated) approaches to and goals concerning the epic

²⁴ These include *Burrow’s End* (2023), *Misfits & Magic* (2021-22), and *A Court of Fey & Flowers* (2022), the last of which features centrally in the second chapter of this dissertation.

heroic mode.

Before leaping into the closer, more granular analysis of two scenes from two climactic moments in these different projects, a note on their distinct constraints. *Dimension 20* is, as I have laid out above, an anthology series with well over a dozen completed arcs available for viewing on the *Dropouttv* streaming service. Within this increasingly rich constellation of different genres, game mechanics, and players, we have two primary categories—those seasons which involve the “Intrepid Heroes”²⁵, and the “side quests”²⁶ which do not. “Intrepid Heroes” campaigns tend to have longer, more narratively complex stories that unfold over the course of fifteen to twenty episodes per season. As the label itself suggests, “side quests” tend to be shorter, ranging from four to, at the most, ten episodes per release. But to describe the “Intrepid Heroes” seasons as lengthy would be misleading—even in campaigns where characters have more room to develop, there is still a tight filming and production schedule. Unlike the original, years-long first, second, and third campaigns of *Critical Role*²⁷ (2015—present), *Dimension 20* is an edited *actual play* series with musical scoring, visual effects, and physical props and miniatures.²⁸ Therefore, even “longer” seasons of *Dimension 20* are fairly limited in length and scope, especially when compared to much of the current *actual play* content out there, much of which follows that original *Critical Role* model, even as *Critical Role* itself has moved away from live streaming its games to recording them and editing them *before* release to the wider

²⁵ These (relatively) short-form campaigns consistently feature Ally Beardsley, Brian Murphy, Emily Axford, Lou Wilson, Siobhan Thompson, and Zac Oyama as the players—the “intrepid heroes”—and Brennan Lee Mulligan as the GM or gamemaster.

²⁶ A suggestive term that has become interchangeable with *Dimension 20* seasons that do not include the “intrepid heroes,” and that often, though not always, have a different GM than Mulligan.

²⁷ *Critical Role* is widely credited with popularizing *actual play* as consumable entertainment. Their original model was one which relied on livestreaming their episodes on the streaming platform, *Twitch*. Starting during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Critical Role* began to move away from the livestreaming model into one where episodes are shot in advance and lightly edited.

²⁸ *Dimension 20* has a longstanding collaboration with artist and creator Rick Perry, who designs carefully crafted custom miniatures and maps for series.

public.

Worlds Beyond Number: The Wizard, the Witch, and the Wild One shares some of these constraints, though not others. Like *Dimension 20*, *Worlds Beyond Number*—itself an anthology series—boasts episodes that are similarly edited, though in the case of the latter, these edits are most often in the service of auditory and narrative immersion. Thus, while episodes of *Worlds Beyond Number* still employ the ludic framework of, in the case of the first season, *Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition*, this framework is often allowed to fade into the background as the series seeks to foreground roleplaying itself and its aesthetic and subjective affordances for artistic expression. Indeed, when *The Wizard, the Witch, and the Wild One* engages more explicitly with the game’s mechanics, it often does so in the service of the narrative and its central thematic concerns. Additionally, as a podcast with no available visual component, *The Wizard, the Witch, and the Wild One* often pushes its players toward greater narration and description, and their performances as their characters are fundamentally vocal, reminiscent of the poet’s voice. These structural distinctions tie back into the different aesthetic concerns that drive *Dimension 20* and *Worlds Beyond Number* respectively. In the case of the former, the greater temporal constraints tend toward a representation of heroism—and, as the term “Intrepid Heroes” suggests, heroism is also at the heart of this project—that is much more parodic and, at times, satirical.

This tendency is especially true of all three seasons of *Fantasy High*, the original premise of which is that of a story that follows a rag-tag band of teenagers attending their first year of high school at the Aguefort Adventuring Academy. From the very first episode of this series, we see GM Mulligan’s interest in unpacking—and, in some ways, satirizing—common representations of heroism through the first address of the school’s principal, Arthur Aguefort.

Upon welcoming the newest class of students to his school, Aguefort begins a rambling description of an “adventurer,” a.k.a., a hero:

But what is an adventurer? One who goes on adventures? I say *an adventurer is a hero*. And what is a hero? A hero is someone with the strength of heart, courage of spirit, and the might of will to go to strange lands and enact violence on things there. We go to places where there are things that must be destroyed, and we destroy them.... A hero is a violent wanderer who enacts their will, bloodily, and with strange magics, upon the world. (“The Beginning Begins”, my emphasis)

This comical speech—delivered early on in the first episode of the first ever season of *Dimension 20*—neatly encapsulates some of the driving concerns that Mulligan in particular is interested in exploring through collaborative storytelling. For Mulligan, it would seem, there are two sides of heroism, contrasting faces on a coin that spins on the axis of power.²⁹ Thus, Mulligan sets the tone here for the years that will follow: even as *Dimension 20* draws from extant heroic models, it simultaneously parodies and satirizes these models by foregrounding the dynamics of power which these games often invisibilize. In doing so, *Dimension 20* takes on an attitude and position regarding heroism and the stability of extant heroic modes that bears striking similarities to Byron’s own deconstructive project in *Don Juan*. Through the mock epic’s titular character, a deeply passive figure with pretensions of heroism that the narrative frequently frustrates, *Don Juan* seeks to problematize earlier conceptions of the Romantic hero—and, in particular, the Wordsworthian model I will describe more below. By contrast, *Worlds*

²⁹ I allude below to the Rancière’s conception of Wordsworthian subjectivity as a kind of hierarchical, top-down model that extends to Wordsworth’s conception of the poet-as-hero. Here, though, I am also reminded of Fulford and Kitson’s edited collection, *Romanticism and Colonialism: Writing and Empire, 1780-1830* (1998) and Samriti Chander’s *Brown Romantics: Poetry and Nationalism in the Global Nineteenth Century* (2017). They demonstrate the degree to which Romanticism’s history cannot be separated from Britain’s colonial expansion at the turn of the 19th century, and the work that poets such as Henry Drozio and Egbert Martin did to adapt Romantic-era notions of the poet’s role for ultimately more liberatory purposes.

Beyond Number: The Wizard, the Witch, and the Wild One ultimately takes heroism—and, in particular, Romantic heroism—much more seriously, even as it seeks to expand the definition of the heroic beyond Romanticism’s originally limited (white male) constraints.

But how do we see these ideas in practice? For that, we should reflect on two deeply climactic moments from each series. Both of these moments occur toward the final episodes of their respective narrative arcs—the end of the first “chapter” of *The Wizard the Witch and the Wild One*, and the third installment in the *Fantasy High* series, *Junior Year*. In the case of *The Wizard, the Witch, and the Wild One*, I will be analyzing the moment in which Eursulon, the eponymous “Wild One”³⁰ played by Lou Wilson, achieves one of his longstanding goals of the chapter—acquiring the magical sword “Wavebreaker,” which will allow him to break a curse on Ame, the “Witch” alluded to in the series’ title. Eursulon is originally from the realm of the Wild Ones—a spiritual realm reminiscent of the lands of Fairy, with which I engage more fully in the third chapter. Unlike most of his fellow spirits, however, Eursulon ran away from his spiritual home as a child to explore the world of mortals after initially wandering into that realm by accident and encountering a knight by the name of Sir Curran.

In that first encounter with the knight, Curran eventually offers up a piece of his armor—a pauldron—to the young spirit, and introduces Eursulon to the idea of “honor,” a word he finds simultaneously strange and enticing. Eursulon briefly returns to the spirit world, then leaves once again in search of Sir Curran. Upon his return to the mortal world, however, he encounters not Sir Curran, but two other children: Ame, played by Erika Ishii, and Suvi, played by Aabria

³⁰ In *Worlds Beyond Number*, the term “Wild One” is one of many which alludes to spiritual beings that bear striking similarities to European fairies, even as they also draw from other traditions like the *Shintoism* that we see in many of Miyazaki’s films. In the case of Miyazaki—which both Ishii and Mulligan frequently allude to in discussions of the art that has influenced them in their own creative pursuits—these spiritual beings are also tied to a composite version of the Romantic sublime. For more on Miyazaki’s adaptation of Romanticism, see Brendan C. Walsh’s article, “A Modern-Day Romantic: The Romantic Sublime in Hayao Miyazaki’s Creative Philosophy” (2019).

Iyengar. They take him into the cottage they call home and, thinking they are being kind, offer Eursulon food, a bath, and a warm blanket by the fire. These acts serve to—unbeknownst to Eursulon—cut him off from his nature as a Wild One, and when he attempts to return to his home, he finds that the gate will not open for him. Eursulon has become “wayshadowed,” the term the series gives to spirits that, through one reason or another, have been cursed to remain exiles from the spirit world. Eventually, Eursulon leaves the cottage in search of “honor,” but learns that several hundred years have passed since his encounter with Sir Curran. The age of knightly romance is over, putting into question whether or not Eursulon will ever truly achieve his goals. Here is where the prologue to *The Wizard, the Witch, and the Wild One*, an early arc known as the *Children’s Adventure* that tells the story of how all three protagonists met as children, ends.

Eursulon’s origin—and his eventual trajectory in the series proper—is deeply reminiscent of the Romantic-era attitude toward the chivalric or quest romance. Walter Scott’s historical fiction frequently explores knightly romance, with *Ivanhoe*³¹, for instance, putting its protagonist in conflict with a fallen Britain crying out for the just return of its chivalrous king. Similarly, in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, the epic’s heroic protagonist is of “lineage long,” of a family that “had been glorious in another day,” but who are, at the poem’s opening, much diminished, much like Byron’s own family at the time that he wrote the poem (Byron *CH* I.iii-iv.). Eursulon’s journey, then, can best be understood as a quest romance unfolding in a world that has fallen away from chivalric ideals, and the castles that knights once fought for have become moldering ruins reminiscent of the Gothic decay we see in *Manfred* (1818), *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), and many other texts from the Romantic century. Eursulon himself could be said to be descended

³¹ Like the original Walter Scott novel, the 1952 film adaptation of *Ivanhoe* is credited with renewing interest in tales of chivalric romance, and in the idea of medieval settings for tabletop games. For a fuller account of these influences, see Jon Peterson’s *Playing at the World* (2012), p. 22.

from a kind of aristocracy—his father is the Great Bear, a powerful Great Spirit from whom he has become separated from during his years of exile. While Eursulon’s quest is in some ways reminiscent of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* (1605), the story takes seriously Eursulon’s journey toward finding “honor,” even as it reveals Eursulon’s early failures on that quest before the beginning of the podcast’s first chapter.

By the time we meet him toward the end of the first chapter, however, those failures have been somewhat mitigated by the reunion of the three childhood friends. The curse-breaking blade, Wavebreaker, was given as a childhood gift from Ame and Suvi to Eursulon, who were unaware of its magical ability. When the witch Ame suffers a curse upon the passing of her mentor, Grandmother Wren, she and Suvi set out to find Eursulon, who, he reveals, lost the blade during his early wanderings through the world. Throughout the course of this first season of *The Wizard, the Witch, and the Wild One*, Ame and Suvi aid Eursulon in reclaiming his own personal sense of honor, in achieving, in a sense, his childhood dream of becoming a proper knight. These efforts culminate in the thirteenth episode of this season, “Of the Gentle Sea,” and it is to this moment I would like us to turn now:

Brennan Lee Mulligan: You raise the sword high. You feel pure emotion rippling, the blood, still flowing in your own veins, of this Great Spirit. Describe for me what happens, as Eursulon touches his Breath, for the first time in years. You can feel the edge of it again, finally. There is a part of you that has been hidden away, for years and years and years, because you have been trying to hide in the world of mortals. You're not trying to hide in this moment, and you feel that you can access something of yours, which is from a realm that is eternal and infinite.

Lou Wilson: The feeling starts in Eursulon's hands, right at the fingertips.

[Mystical horns slowly building to a crescendo.]

Lou Wilson: It is, I think a mixture of life, and joy, it is an energy, an enthusiasm, an excitement. I think Eursulon has spent so much of the last, some odd years since he found himself in the mortal world, hiding, Glamoured. And it is in this moment, this feeling, is, I think, very much attached to being in his body again, and knowing that his body, and his being, and who he is, is not of this world. And so I think it's a consciousness, almost like a body scan in meditation, of feeling his fingers again, and them feeling alive and more of that feeling progressing into his hands, feeling the sword, really feeling the sword, feeling that it is not of *this* world, but of *his* world, where *he* comes from.

Lou Wilson: That is the energy, that is of him, that is coursing through him, that *he* wields, up the arms, into the shoulders, filling his chest with the warmth, the feelings of play, the feelings of community and family, that were shared amongst his brothers and sisters, and the Great Bear, the feeling of his home, where he is from, I think, resonates deeply in his chest, as he brings the sword down against the spear.

Brennan Lee Mulligan: You bring the sword high overhead. It cuts through water swifter than through air, this sword was made for a Great One of the Sea, and nothing of the water can slow the swiftness of its blade. It comes ringing down.

[Swell of horns, a low explosion, ringing steel.]

Brennan Lee Mulligan: You immediately become a level 2 paladin. ("Of the Gentle Sea")

Here, we see Eursulon's first true step in the reclamation of his "Breath,"³² a kind of driving spiritual force or ideal that is, as Mulligan describes here, connected to "a realm that is eternal and infinite." The performances here by both Mulligan and Wilson—earnest, vocally resonant, seemingly awed—help to further cement the almost divine transcendence of this moment as Eursulon occupies the subjective space of a hero, of a knight who fights for the chivalric ideals of honor and freedom. The Great Spirit that he is freeing, Naram, has been bound by wizards tied

³² Again, the voice remains centrally important here with its animating "Breath."

to one of the series' overarching antagonists, the Kehmsarazan Empire. Naram is a powerful spirit associated with the ocean, and he has been trapped by mortals in what Mulligan describes as a kind of "derrick." There, the wizards incessantly bleed Naram, using the powerful blood to devise new magical artifacts and weapons.

The parallels with the kind of runaway industrialism that Romantics like Wordsworth feared might overtake and destroy the natural world are unmistakable. Naram is both a sentient being *and* a spiritual force of nature reminiscent of the Romantic sublime. Mulligan describes the derrick as "a structure that has four inclined, massive steel beams that all come to a central point," at the center of which there are small platforms ascending up, "covered in lights" ("The Catch"). While the term "derrick" can have multiple meanings, this description suggests less "a hoisting apparatus employing a tackle rigged at the end of a beam," and more its secondary definition, that of "a framework or tower over a deep drill hole (as of an oil well) for supporting boring tackle or for hoisting and lowering" (*Merriam-Webster* "Derrick"). It is from this coded, extractive entrapment that Eursulon ultimately releases Naram and, in so doing, reclaims an essential, key part of himself—the Breath that connects him to the "eternal," to the supernatural, and, crucially, to the Romantic sublime through a moment of sustained heroism. Indeed, so powerful is this moment narratively that it is reflected in the game's mechanics when we are reminded that Lou Wilson's description is not simply a story, but, fundamentally, a game, a kind of play. Here, the mechanics do not impinge upon the narrative weight of the moment—they add to it. Thus, not only does Eursulon here live out what we might describe as a Romanticist fantasy of nature's liberation, he does so in a way that does not participate in the parodic problematization of heroic subjectivity which we often see in *Dimension 20*. Though all roleplaying games are inherently and literally polyphonic, we see through this scene from *Worlds*

Beyond Number a kind of momentary agreement between what Eursulon represents as a character, and what the world of Umora itself implicitly reinforces.

The snapshot from *Fantasy High: Junior Year* is in sharp contrast to the much more earnest representation of the heroic pose struck by Wilson's Eursulon in *Worlds Beyond Number*. The 2024 installment of Dropout's flagship *Fantasy High* franchise continues to poke fun at heroic expectations, much as Aguefort's speech alluded to above suggests. This trend continues to unrelentingly comic effect in *Fantasy High: Junior Year*. As I alluded to earlier, *Fantasy High: Junior Year* is the first installment of the *Fantasy High* series which explicitly acknowledges the epic roots of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Unlike *Fantasy High* and *Fantasy High: Sophomore Year*, this season begins—both narratively and mechanically—in *media res*, foregrounding its epic indebtedness. But *Fantasy High: Junior Year* is not an epic that is solely in the style of, say, Homer, or in the style of the Neoclassicals who imitated him in the lead-up to the Romantic period. In many ways, *Fantasy High: Junior Year* is, like most seasons of *Dimension 20*, most akin to the mock epic genre that, at least for the Romantics, reaches its apex with Byron's *Don Juan*. Much like *Don Juan*, *Fantasy High: Junior Year* frequently juxtaposes moments of intense heroic potential with bathetic deflations of those expectations, and in so doing, it subverts and ultimately destabilizes the narratives of heroism that its players and the gamemaster are themselves rooted in.

It is one such moment that I would like to draw our attention to here. One of the central narrative threads explored in *Fantasy High: Junior Year* has to do with the relationship between Kristen Applebees, played by Ally Beardsley, and their deity, Cassandra. Cassandra is a reborn goddess of mystery who, in *Fantasy High: Sophomore Year*, was resurrected in part through Kristen's newfound faith and help. At the start of *Junior Year*, however, the relationship between

the two has begun to sour due in large part to Kristen's neglect of her goddess. This neglect is, from a human perspective, understandable; Kristen is a young adult who struggles with expectation and responsibility. But it also complicates the seemingly neat resolution to the end of *Sophomore Year*, and Kristen's own positionality as an adventurer—and, by extension, a hero. Eventually, Cassandra seemingly dies, though there seems to be some part of her remaining while her last worshipper, Kristen, persists. Much of Kristen's journey is, as Beardsley himself says in promotional materials for *Junior Year*, that “chaos isn't cute,” and a large part of how that idea is explored is through Kristen's relationship to Cassandra (“Behind the Scenes: Ally Beardsley”). But while these might be the expectations of the narrative, of the world, even of the player and gamemaster, they are just that—expectations. In true *Dimension 20* style, “Rock the Boat,” episode 18 of *Fantasy High: Junior Year* offers us a subversion of those expectations, one that is both deeply comical *and* which literalizes what Bakhtin sees as the (to him, uniquely) polyphonic relationship between the characters of Dostoevsky's novels and the author's own views and intent. Here, the game's mechanics help to subvert rather than reaffirm the performance of heroism.

In this scene, the “Bad Kids,” the name for the group of characters played by Beardsley, Wilson, et al. are faced with the potential that they will fail to stop a ritual that would destroy their home. In a moment of high narrative tension toward the end of the episode, Beardsley attempts a character ability available to clerics known as “divine intervention,” a powerful feature that allows for momentary and concrete aid from a deity in a game where such aid is not commonly available. To do so successfully, Beardsley must roll less than their character level (14) on percentile dice, an unlikely event. In this scene, Mulligan bends the rules a little and allows Siobhan Thompson's character, Adaine, to give Kristen the “help action,” which would

allow Beardsley to “roll with advantage”—in order words, they could roll their dice twice and take the more favorable result. But at this point in the narrative, another strange scenario has occurred—Thompson’s character has used a powerful wizard ability to create a temporary simulacrum of Kristen Applebees, known as K2 or “British Kristen” as a way of teasing Thompson, who is English. After Beardsley fails the roll with the original Kristen, they ask if K2 could cast that instead. This exchange then ensues:

Mulligan: Getting the Help action. So go ahead and roll again. This is just for the first Kristen.

[die rolling]

Beardsley: Two. Goddammit.

Mulligan: I know. Okay. K2.

Beardsley: Mm-hmm.

Mulligan: Can also get the Help action here. If this is how this works, I don't know that this show will ever recover.

[Siobhan laughing]

Beardsley: British Kristen runs up and says,

K2: What are we doing?

[die rolling]

Beardsley: That's an eight.

Mulligan: Okay. Also a Help action, so-

Beardsley: And then she says-

Mulligan: Now if this is a zero or a one, I could see a world where I quit.

[all laughing]

I could see a world where I quit the show.

Thompson: Look.

Beardsley: British Kristen looks right into the camera and she says,

K2: Blimey.

[die rolling]

Beardsley: That's a one! That's a one!

Mulligan: Now, what that means is that means there's a one. Which means- you're 14th level. So you're gonna roll another d10. If it is a zero, one, two, three, or four, so there's a 50% chance that the act of divine mystery that saves the world is British Kristen saying blimey.

[all laughing]

Beardsley: She says,

K2: I don't know if you heard me. I said, blimey.

[die rolling]

Mulligan: That's a two!

("Rock the Boat")

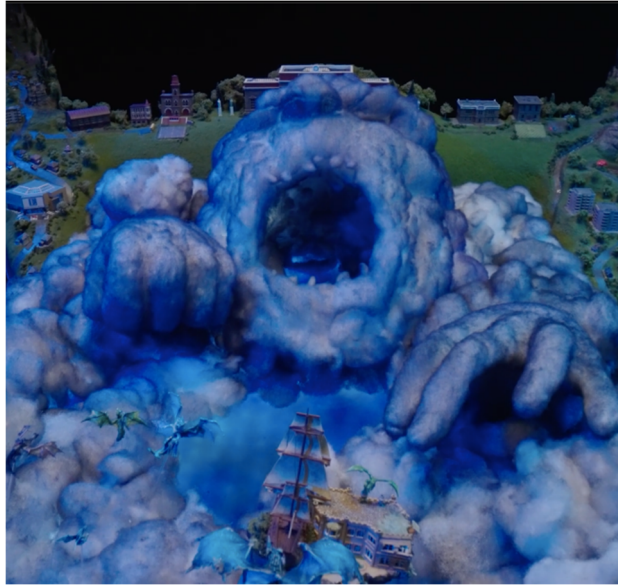


Figure 1: The "Epic" Stakes of K2's Roll

Immediately after this moment, the players erupt in laughter, and Mulligan humorously suggests that it is time for him to leave the show. During this comedic *digression*, he steps outside the dome that *Dimension 20* uses to record its campaigns, shouting repeatedly that he “need[s] a ride.” During this brief interruption, Zac Oyama steps into Mulligan’s chair:

Oyama (in the GM seat): British Kristen.

Mulligan: Do it. For real, do it.

[all laughing]

Oyama: You're in the ship.

Thompson: How's it going?

Oyama: You don't really know what's happening or who any of these people are.

Beardsley: No. Yeah, I agree.

The humorous exchange continues, and actually occurs a second time during a similar unlikely chain of events involving K2. Obviously, this exchange is ironic, but I am nonetheless struck by the intense dissonance between the emotional narrative lead-up to this moment and a result in which, however briefly and ironically, Mulligan vacates his GM’s chair in protest. Here, the

game's mechanics invite and emphasize the polyphony that is inherent to all *actual play*, exaggerating it to such a degree that we see a character literally “displace” the “authorial” voice represented by the gamemaster in this instance.

In *Fantasy High: Junior Year*, this more explicitly polyphonic structure goes hand-in-hand with *Dimension 20*'s more (humorously) skeptical conceptualization of heroism. We could compare this moment, for example, to a similar instance of bathetic subversion of the heroic mode in *Don Juan*, where the protagonist's heroic impulse to speechify as he leaves his native soil is subverted by a carnivalesque allusion to embodied discomfort:

‘Farewell, my Spain! a long farewell!’ he cried,
‘Perhaps I may revisit thee no more,
But die, as many an exiled heart hath died,
Of its own thirst to see again thy shore:
Farewell, where Guadalquivir's waters glide!
Farewell, my mother! and, since all is o'er,
Farewell, too, dearest Julia!—(Here he drew
Her letter out again, and read it through.)

‘And, oh! if e'er I should forget, I swear—
But that 's impossible, and cannot be—
Sooner shall this blue ocean melt to air,
Sooner shall earth resolve itself to sea,
Than I resign thine image, oh, my fair!
Or think of any thing excepting thee;
A mind diseased no remedy can physic
(Here the ship gave a lurch, and he grew sea-sick).

‘Sooner shall heaven kiss earth (here he fell sicker),
O, Julia! what is every other wo?
(For God's sake let me have a glass of liquor;
Pedro, Battista, help me down below.)
Julia, my love! (you rascal, Pedro, quicker)—
O, Julia! (this curst vessel pitches so)—
Beloved Julia, hear me still beseeching!’
(Here he grew inarticulate with retching.) (Byron *DJ* II.17-23)

These digressions frustrate Juan's ability to fully occupy the heroic pose appropriate to this kind of situation. As Juan attempts to clearly express his subjective-heroic farewell to Julia, the swaying of the ship leaves him unable to articulate this model of heroism, a heroic subversion Byron continues to explore and adopt throughout *Don Juan*. Indeed, for Byron, these moments often respond clearly to extant models of Romantic heroism as espoused by other Romantic-era writers, or even himself in his first attempt at an epic, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. In the first canto of that latter poem, its protagonist has no issue doing what Juan here fails to do—Harold actually sings his farewell to his “native shore” in a long-winded ballad that momentarily departs from the otherwise consistently Spenserian style of the epic poem. In mirroring but undermining this scene in Juan's own failed leave-taking speech, Byron destabilizes and problematizes extant ideas of heroic subjectivity that he himself had drawn from for much of his career.

Ultimately, I see *Worlds Beyond Number: The Wizard, the Witch, and the Wild One* and *Fantasy High: Junior Year* as concerned with widely overlapping interests, especially as it regards the role of heroism and heroic subjectivity in *actual play*. But the different constraints around genre, tone, and overall length lead to radically different expressions of these ideas. In what follows, I will review the history of the epic during the Romantic period, focusing on what I see as the two “ends” or poles of a continuum of Romantic epic: the more stable representation of heroic subjectivity that we see in Wordsworth on one end, and the destabilizing exploration of heroism that we see in Byron on the other. It is not my claim here, however, that these *actual play* series are reproducing these ideas unproblematically. Rather, these different poles on the continuum of the Romantic epic are used productively in both instances. In the case of *The Wizard, the Witch, and the Wild One*, Wilson adapts models for subjective heroism that were traditionally limited to white male writers during the Romantic period, expanding these modes to

encompass his identity as a Black man, much as the titular “brown Romantics” of Manu Samriti Chander’s book did in their own individual aesthetic and political journeys. In the case of Byronic polyphony in *Junior Year*, this awareness of the heteroglossic interplay between gamemaster and player gives us language and tools for thinking further about the role of character and heroism in parodic *actual play* series like *Dimension 20*. Ultimately, they serve to illustrate *Dimension 20*’s underlying critique of the very thing that lies at its commercial heart—heroism.

I. The Romantic Epic – Emergent Forms

Though originally hailed as a revolutionary and liberatory turn, the new model of the poet-as-hero that was developed and popularized during the Romantic period also occurred during a time of intense British imperial expansion and a still-robust slave trade. Romantic responses were, of course, varied and at times explicitly anti-imperial, but Wordsworth’s hierarchical and surveyistic vision³³ of the poet-hero eventually emerged as a dominant form, given in part its compatibility with Britain’s imperial trajectory throughout the nineteenth century *and* the intervention of Victorian anthologists and thinkers in determining how Romanticism would be remembered. This chapter also sees these emergent forms of Romantic heroism as indivisible from the cultural process of individuation anticipated by the rapid popularization of the novel as an increasingly accepted art form. By briefly reviewing the specific history of the heroic reconfigurations of the Romantic period, this section of the chapter will show just how fundamental this “interior turn” was to the development of a specific kind of *white* heroic subjectivity, one eventually co-opted into and absorbed by the British imperial project. This

³³ See Jacques Rancière, “The Politics of the Spider” (2011).

exploration will begin by engaging with the reactionary impulses that drove much early Romantic poetry, particularly vis-à-vis Augustan neoclassicism. Because Romantic writers often saw themselves as explicitly responding to and often rejecting the poetic standards of the eighteenth century, my project seeks to approach this response through the lens of the Romantic epic and the ways in which this emergent form engaged with the heroic models of the classical, Homeric epics which writers like Alexander Pope had recently retranslated, and against which the Romantic epic often arrayed itself.

Pope's translations of the *Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were quickly and "almost immediately" hailed as "quite possibly the greatest monument[s] of English literary translation *tout court*" (Gillespie 299). Like the translations themselves, Pope's commentary—sketching out both his own process of translation as well as reflecting his engagement with other, earlier translations of these epics—"attracted superlatives, and still today constitute the most sustained set of observations on a single literary text ever compiled by a major English poet" (Gillespie 300). Though varied and exhaustive, Pope's commentaries on these epics were gradually omitted from future editions: "from Pope's editorial material they presented the Preface only" (Gillespie 314). Accordingly, I will primarily focus here on the ideas about Homeric poetry that Pope introduces in his preface, specifically as these ideas relate to the genre of the epic and the ways in which Pope understands the intersection of character, action, and the narrative presence of the poet themselves. Pope saw his preface as a vehicle through which he could communicate both specific observations about Homeric poetry *and* the role of these observations in the contemporaneous discourse surrounding literary production more generally.

Through his commentary on Homer, Pope sketches out what he understands to be the strengths of Homer's poetry. In comparing Homer to Virgil, Pope says: "We oftener think of the

author himself when we read Virgil, than when we are engaged in Homer, all which are the effects of a colder invention, *that interests us less in the action described*. Homer makes us hearers, and Virgil leaves us readers” (“Preface”, my emphasis). Here, Pope values the invisibilization of the poet in Homer’s work, a vanishing that serves to better present the action itself. This tendency to prize Homer’s emphasis on narrative action is reflected in what Pope sees as Homer’s relationship to the characters his poems describe:

We acknowledge [Homer] the father of poetical diction; the first who taught “the language of the gods” to men. His expression is like the colouring of some great master, which discovers itself to be laid on boldly, and executed with rapidity. It is, indeed, the *strongest* and most glowing imaginable, and touched with the greatest spirit.... There are in him more *daring figures* and metaphors than in any good author whatever. *An arrow is “impatient” to be on the wing, a weapon “thirsts” to drink the blood of an enemy...* (“Preface”, my emphasis)

Homer’s “daring figures” are, to Pope, a vital component of what the latter sees as the former’s genius. This reading of the Homeric epics, then, prizes external action over personal poetic meditation. Even in his analysis of Homer’s compound epithets, Pope presents these descriptors as important and effective insofar as they do not detract from the action of the scene itself:

To throw his language more out of prose, Homer seems to have affected the compound epithet. This was a sort of composition peculiarly proper to poetry, not only as it heightened the diction, but as it assisted and filled the numbers with greater sound and pomp, and likewise conduced in some measure to thicken the images.... We see the motion of Hector’s plumes in the epithet *Korythaiolos*, the landscape of Mount Neritus in that of *Einosiphyllos*, and so of others, which particular images could not have been insisted upon so long as to expose them in a description (though but of a single line) without diverting the reader too much *from the principal action or figure*. (“Preface”, my emphasis)

Again, we see how Pope's praise of Homeric language and descriptors is oriented through an understanding of the epic as primarily focused on *external* action and images. Epithets are helpful insofar as they offer detail "without diverting the reader too much from the principal action or figure" of the scene. For Pope, Homer's genius is at least partially in his tendency to present his subjects as deeply exterior, to leave nothing wanting or suggested underneath the surface.

Such an understanding of classicism persisted well into the following century. Indeed, it was in opposition to this kind of stringent externality that some writers like Heinrich Heine understood the rise of what he terms "the Romantic School," saying that the difference between Classicism and the Romantic³⁴ "consists in this,—that the plastic figures in antique art are identical with the thing represented, with the idea which the artist seeks to communicate. Thus, for example, the wanderings of the *Odyssey* mean nothing else than the wanderings of the man who was a son of Laertes and the husband of Penelope, and was called Ulysses" (14). Heine goes on to say that

it is otherwise in romantic art: here the wanderings of a knight have esoteric signification; they typify, perhaps, the mazes of life in general. The dragon that is vanquished is sin; the almond-tree that from afar so encouragingly wafts its fragrance to the hero is the Trinity, the God-Father, God-Son, and God-Holy-Ghost, who together constitute one, just as shell, fiber, and kernel together constitute the almond. When Homer describes the armor of a hero, it is naught else than a good armor, which is worth so many oxen... (14)

While scholars of antiquity might justly complicate Heine's rather simplistic reading of the opposition between the Homeric epic and the art of the middle ages and, eventually, that of the

³⁴ While Heine initially uses the term "Romantic art" to refer to much of the art produced in the middle ages, he nonetheless sees the Romanticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as invested in and founded on the definitional guidelines he sketches out here.

Romantics, it is nonetheless important to point out that this attitude was not just specific to Heine. Pope's Homeric translations were completed in 1726, and Heine published "The Romantic School" in 1835. Both authors, then, neatly bookend an age of intense poetic debate which saw a fundamental reconsideration of what poetic (and, for our purposes, especially epic) art was intended to do. Vitally, these debates were mirrored and extended with the introduction of the various Romantic heroes of writers like Wordsworth and Byron, Romantic poets who numbered among those who most explicitly approached the imagined shift in poetry that they were proposing through the lens of heroism and, eventually, the epic itself. As I have already alluded to, I understand Byron and Wordsworth as occupying different ends of the epic-heroic continuum as it was first developed during the Romantic period, a continuum I offer here as a taxonomical framework for thinking about the role of Romantic epic in *actual play* today.

Eric Auerbach has described the foregrounding impulse of the Greek or Homeric epic in his oft-cited *Mimesis* essay, "Odysseus' Scar," claiming that the aim of the Greek epic is "to represent phenomena in a fully externalized form, visible and palpable in all their parts, and completely fixed in their spatial and temporal relations" (3). Interestingly, Auerbach's gesture towards Biblical writing and the Judeo-Christian approach to literature was anticipated by Heine's own comments on the distinctions between Homer's writing and the art produced during the middle ages, a shift that Heine specifically attributes to the rapid expansion of Christianity during the medieval period. For Heine, it is the "Christianized, spiritualized brute force" that "draws us down into the weird depths of medieval mysticism," depths which the Romantics would later plumb in earnest (Heine 12-13). This characterization is in sharp contrast to how Heine, Pope, and, eventually, Auerbach describe the Homeric style. On the central scene of Odysseus' scar—which gives his essay its title—Auerbach argues that the way in which Homer

inserts this scene into the present of the story is inconsistent with “any... subjectivistic-perspectivistic procedure, creating a foreground and background, resulting in the present lying open to the depths of the past, is entirely foreign to the Homeric style... [which] knows only a foreground, only a uniformly illuminated, uniformly objective present” (7). This reading of the Homeric epic as “uniformly illuminated, uniformly objective present” is consistent with Heine’s own reading of Homer and, indeed, of Classical literature more generally, and it acts, for Heine, as a model against which Romanticism arrayed and defined itself.³⁵

In a close reading of Wordsworth’s poem, “Prospectus,” Gerald N. Izenberg claims that

...we are [here] at the heart of the Romantic enterprise and the Romantic claim: the finitude of the unique individual, inviolate in his or her self-contained individuality, is consistent with the individual’s infinity and fusion with the cosmos in the one great life.... Individuality is not only compatible with infinity, it is the very vehicle for realizing the union with infinity. (15)

Such a claim is consistent both with this poem, and with similar sentiments expressed by Wordsworth in the “Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*,” where he describes the figure of the poet as “a man speaking to men,” essentially describing the poet as the only individual within the context of a wider (masculine) collective—“man” in the singular speaks to “men” in the plural. This individuality is measured through Wordsworth’s ideals on poetic subjectivity and sensitivity: “[The poet is] a man... endowed with *more* lively sensibility, *more* enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a *greater* knowledge of human nature, and a *more* comprehensive soul...” (my emphasis, 13). What we are seeing here, then, is the construction of a poetic figure that is

³⁵ To be clear, whether or not Greek classical poetry lacks “any... subjectivistic-perspectivistic procedure” is, to me, less important than the historical perception of in particular the epics as so organized. I see my intervention in building this historical genealogy as primarily invested in understanding the narratives that were in place at the time that Romantic writers began to reevaluate the relationship between author and text.

intrinsically like and yet superior to others, a figure whose interior qualities, their “lively sensibility” and “more comprehensive soul,” act as both engine and vehicle for a poetic expression that has as “its object... truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive *into* the heart by passion” (15, my emphasis). Thus, whereas Pope’s praise of Homeric poetry was, as we have seen, at least partially defined by what he saw as the poet’s ability to invisibilize his presence in deferral to the heroic action, for Wordsworth and his strain of Romanticism, the poet’s presence, their emotional interior, is precisely what poetry should display, as it is only through this unique interiority that one can, according to Wordsworth, arrive at truths both “general and operative.”³⁶ Thus, the role of the poet within the epic context shifts from a perceived investment in rigid externality to what critics like Izenberg and Leporati characterize as the Romantic turn toward poetic and subjective interiority. This shift in turn has consequences for Romantic heroism, given the emergent proximity between the roles of poet and hero during the period.

II. Romantic Epic and the Wordsworthian Mode

It is as part of this process of centering the poet as a kind of heroic, at times divine figure³⁷ that the poet eventually takes on a vital form, in contrast to earlier models in which, “up through the Renaissance and beyond, the poet was generally subordinate to the man of action; the poet’s highest subject was not himself but heroic deeds in the public sphere” (Cantor 375). Through the construction of a specific kind of Romantic individuality, however, “at some point... the poet became his own hero. We are so much the heirs of this revolution that we think it quite natural

³⁶ Of course, there is here a tension between the poet’s individuality and the universal truths they are supposed to uncover, a topic which Izenberg explores more fully in *Impossible Individuality: Romanticism, Revolution, and the Origins of Modern Selfhood, 1787-1802*. Princeton UP, 1992.

³⁷ See David G. Riede, *Oracles and Hierophants: Constructions of Romantic Authority*, 1991.

that a poet should write, not about the heroic world of war and politics, but about his own feelings as a private individual” (Cantor 376). As we have seen above, of course, that the poet writes about their “own feelings as a private individual” is, for writers like Wordsworth and, later on, Percy B. Shelley exactly how one can arrive at making imagined interventions in the real world through the communication and interpretation of supposedly divine, universal truths about human nature.³⁸ This conflation of the poetic and heroic modes is not only central to understanding the evolution of the Romantic epic, however. For in *actual play* shows like *Worlds Beyond Number*, the performers themselves act as both heroes in the traditional sense *and* as poets or artist-performers. In the case of *actual play*, however, this conflation is tempered by the polyphonic nature of the genre, an element more in keeping with the Byronic epic mode we see in *Don Juan*.

In what follows, I will be further investigating the context within which these evolutions in poetic (and therefore heroic) subjectivity took place, primarily through engagement with William Wordsworth’s relationship with the muse of his *Recluse* and an exploration of how Wordsworth plays with heroic identity in *The Prelude*. Central to this imaginative play is the poet’s imagined ability to inhabit other subjective experiences, experiences which the poet can then, in a sense, transform into a commodified form for the reader’s experiential consumption. Such commodification of subjective individuality is mirrored and extended in *actual play* today, which similarly relies on this model’s appeal. This play with identity is shaped in large part by 17th- and 18th-century debates regarding the extent to which theatricality and artifice are part of everyday life, in part stemming from Bernard Mandeville’s *The Fable of the Bees*, which

³⁸ *Ibid.*

consolidated a revolution in the understanding of the relationship between motives and acts largely begun in France by viewing commerce and sociability as reciprocal and historically decisive features of the modern dynamics of self-regard. Mandeville showed that the aggressive pursuit of wealth had now to be understood not as an activity properly confined to marginalized minorities but as central to the self-definition of large urban and commercial populations. Mandeville for the first time systematically comprehended from the perspective of society itself the consequences of the behavior of persons for whom opportunities for consumption and display encouraged forms of self-presentation which were in effect the vehicles through which individuals established their identities. (Hundert 145)

In viewing social relationships as performative assemblages rather than as indicative of a person's inner truth, Mandeville's thinking would go on to disturb a generation of writers, among them Henry Fielding (Hundert 149-51).

For Mandeville, this increasing performativity at the heart of social discourse was intellectually productive and had wide applications: "Theatricality served for him as a conceptual instrument for the examination of modern consciousness, rather than merely as a convenient metaphor for social relations that derived from the playhouse" (Hundert 152). Crucially, Mandeville's unsettling claims are explicitly responding to an increasingly commercialized society in which public consumerism is increasingly the norm. These complex exchanges birth such performances, fundamentally questioning the relationship between actions and desires. It is within this context that Romanticism's focus on the inner self is conceived, a focus tied up in discussions of the epic and the epic hero. We will return to this anxiety surrounding artifice and subjective instability in our discussion of polyphony and the carnivalesque in Byron's *Don Juan*.

Though Wordsworth's *The Recluse* remained unfinished, its epic pretensions are clear in lines 754-860, which primarily consist of a lengthy invocation of a Muse in preparation for the work of looking "into the Mind of Man— / My haunt, and the main region of my song" (793-4).

The Recluse, however, is not just imagined as an exploration of the human mind (in this case, Wordsworth's)—it also positions spirituality and the poet's soul as being of vital importance to the mind's edification:

—To these emotions, whenceso'er they come,
Whether from breath of outward circumstance,
Or from the Soul—an impulse to herself—
I would give utterance in numerous verse.
Of Truth, of Grandeur, Beauty, Love, and Hope,
And melancholy Fear subdued by Faith;
Of blessed consolations in distress... (763-69)

The inclusions of these lines in a poem that also contains an invocation of “Urania... / ...or a greater Muse, / If such descend to earth...” suggests a deeply spiritual connotation to the poetic qualities that this book of *The Recluse* takes as its objects, a spirituality we might tie to the Romantic sublime. Wordsworth is clearly writing within an epic tradition here, and the invocation of Urania connects *The Recluse* to Milton's own *Paradise Lost* (1667).³⁹

Wordsworth's emphasis both here and in his *Prelude*, however, is primarily on the poet's relationship to himself, the “growth of the poet's mind” that Wordsworth dedicated so much of *The Prelude* to exploring—what Wordsworth himself described as the “hard task [of analyzing] a soul” in Book 2 of this poem. Thus, I agree with Robert Crossley's assessment that Wordsworth's version of the Romantic epic, where “grandeur is characterized by an inward turn,” is a kind of autobiographical project where “self-study *is* the stuff of epic” (72).

In a sense, this interest mirrors different aspects of tabletop roleplaying games and in particular *actual play*. “Self-study” and the “autobiographical project” are mechanically

³⁹ See Milton's invocation of the Muse in Book VI of *Paradise Lost*.

reinforced by the game itself—in *D&D*, player-characters progress over time (for a longer campaign, a player-character might start at first level, with characters reaching the height of their abilities at twentieth level), learning more and becoming increasingly powerful, so much so that they can even reach sublime, near-godlike status. As we’ve seen above, in *Worlds Beyond Number*, Mulligan, the “GM” or “gamemaster” incorporates these mechanics into the narrative realm of the game itself—a player character cannot “level up” until Mulligan, or, in some cases, the players themselves—deems that they have “earned” that level through a narratively significant moment. Thus, the “growth” of the player-character’s mind and soul is implicitly reinforced by the game’s mechanics, a growth also rooted in and framed by the player’s own inner subjectivity.

Wordsworth continuously centers and foregrounds the poet in his own experimentations with the epic form. Indeed, the poetic heroism of his own persona in *The Prelude* outlines the poem’s portrayal of “through later years the story of my life. / The road lies plain before me...” (639-40). In tracing the development of his poetic sensibilities, Wordsworth offers us a vision of the poet’s imagination as one which can allow the poet to subsume themselves in different subjective experiences:

Sometimes the ambitious Power of choice, mistaking
Proud spring-tide swellings for a regular sea,
Will settle on some British theme, some old
Romantic tale by Milton left unsung;
More often turning to some gentle place
Within the groves of Chivalry, I pipe
To shepherd swains, or seated harp in hand,
Amid reposing knights by a river side
Or fountain, listen to the grave reports

Of dire enchantments faced and overcome

By the strong mind, and tales of warlike feats... (*The Prelude* Book I, 166-76)

Here, the poet's subjectivity becomes malleable as it inhabits these imagined stories, and the descriptions reflect a prioritization of the poet's "ambitious Power of choice." Though Wordsworth ultimately rejects these and other potential scenarios as the subject of his epic, he nonetheless presents his earlier explorations of these other worlds as themselves examples of a kind of early poetic play. This play often involves a personal subjective perspective that is, paradoxically, simultaneously fluid in its scope but rigid in its focus. Put differently, the poet's ability to be moved and changed by the subjectivities they inhabit can only exist within a theorization of the self that is ultimately stable and secure in its poetic, and therefore heroic, qualities. Furthermore, these fancies and potential distractions are ultimately overcome by the speaker, who sees instead more glory in an exploration of the self—embarking on the "autobiographical epic" that I have described above. Finally, the allusion to dreamy "groves of Chivalry" also reminds of Eursulon's quest-romance in *The Wizard, the Witch, and the Wild One*, and the Romantic medievalism prevalent in *Dungeons & Dragons* more broadly.

III. Romantic Epic, Comic Irony, and the Byronic Mode

I have already alluded to *Don Juan* as presenting an alternative epic model, a style that I have described as more firmly grounded in Bakhtin's notion of polyphony and the carnivalesque. *Don Juan* broadly preserves many of the central characteristics of epic: it follows a central figure that is at least *described* as heroic; it is an iterative text divided into cantos; it often, through comic accident, involves and it makes several references to the epic genre. Even as it makes these references, *Don Juan* already begins to destabilize them:

Most epic poets plunge ‘in media res’
(Horace makes this the heroic turnpike road),
And then your hero tells, whene’er you please,
What went before—by way of episode,
While seated after dinner at his ease,
Beside his mistress in some soft abode,
Palace, or garden, paradise or cavern,
Which serves the happy couple for a tavern.

That is the usual method, but not mine--
My way is to begin with the beginning;
The regularity of my design
Forbids all wanderings as the worst of sinning,
And therefore I shall open with a line
(Although it cost me half an hour in spinning)
Narrating somewhat of Don Juan’s father,
And also of his mother, if you’d rather. (Byron I.vi-vii)

Here, Byron immediately signals for readers his intention to experiment with this form both explicitly and implicitly. “This is the usual method,” but not Byron’s, whose “way is to begin with the beginning.” These lines seemingly suggest a level of harmony with Wordsworth’s own approach to epic—both poems are interested in beginnings, in education, in the development of the central heroic figure.

But whereas Wordsworth’s poem fully integrates this interest into an imagined poetic ideal, *Don Juan*’s narrator already suggests instability. The Byronic digression here—a common and central device in *Don Juan*—both reminds the reader of the poem’s textuality and suggests that the poem’s narrator is dishonest, either with himself or with the reader, when he says that the “regularity of his design / Forbids all wandering as the worst of sinning.” The ironic assertion that taking the time to “begin at the beginning” has already “cost [him] half an hour in spinning”

anticipates the narrator's various "wanderings," most often in the form of Byronic digressions that interrupt the narrative. These digressions can also serve, I would suggest, as a helpful model for thinking about similar interruptions to narrative and immersion in *actual play* series, where comic asides or embodied needs (such as eating, "bio breaks," etc.) frequently (if humorously) "interrupt" the momentary immersion of player (or, for our purposes, "poet") in character by reinforcing the *player's* own embodied position. Such digressions and interruptions are central to *Don Juan*, just as they are ultimately central to the cultivation of intimacy in *actual play* series, where viewers frequently develop parasocial relationships with the projection and performance of close, "real-life" friendship between the players themselves.⁴⁰ They are also tied to the language of improvisation which my second chapter will engage with more fully.

But beyond differences in tone (and in tonal consistency), what else distinguishes *Don Juan* from the other model of Romantic epic described above? What does it mean to say that *Don Juan* is polyphonic, or that its digressions are grounded in a tradition of the carnivalesque that frequently centers the comic action around the body? In an insightful reading of *Don Juan* through the framework of Bakhtin's notions of polyphony and carnival, Philip W. Martin suggests that

Byron, perhaps more than most [Romantic-era poets], writes in many voices, and to us they can be obscure. As has been acknowledged, he is a ventriloquist of a kind. These simple observations are most crucial and might accumulate further: *Don Juan*... is essentially comic, and its rhetoric is harnessed to the project of laughter, ridicule, and what I will call here prematurely (and refine later) the carnivalesque. Further, if it is

⁴⁰ See, for instance, Robyn Hope's "Critical Role and Audience Impact on Tabletop Roleplay," or Mariah E. Marsden and Kelsey Paige Mason's "Consumable Play: A Performative Model of Actual Play Networks," both available in the edited collection *Watch Us Roll: Essays on Actual Play and Performance in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (2021). This parasociality, mediated as it is in part through the act of artistic creation through play, is itself deeply suggestive of what Tom Mole has described as Byron's "hermeneutic of intimacy" that I allude to elsewhere in this project.

perceived as a unified text, as one work, then that act of unification exists only in the material process of writing, in a highly literal sense. To make this one unified text in the act of reading might be to elide its many differences, deliberately not to investigate the derivation and connotations of its *bricolage*—the visible signs of its eclecticism that is both part of the poem’s aesthetic (the mixing of modes) and a material result of its intermittent composition and publication. (93)

Here, Martin lays out the essential claim that this “eclecticism” at the heart of Byron’s epic can be read through Bakhtin’s of both the carnivalesque and the polyphonic style. For Bakhtin, “genuine polyphony” requires “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses,” a plurality that Bakhtin sees as distinctly Dostoevskian (6-7). For Bakhtin,

what unfolds [in Dostoevsky’s novels] is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event. Dostoevsky’s major heroes are, by the very nature of his creative design, not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse. (*Ibid.*)

Polyphony, for Bakhtin, is in contrast with “what he calls the *monologic* novel: a novel whose discourse is overtly ordered and controlled according to a particular authorial point of view, however this is manifested” (Martin 99). Though the narrator of Byron’s poem at times suggests this monologic view, Martin reminds us that “[his] odd and careful aloofness is only one character within the many represented in the narrative voice: it is precisely this kind of mistake—essentially a privileging of one voice over others—that inhibits the poem’s interpretation” (100). Put differently, the narrator is deeply *mobile*, and Byronic mobility⁴¹ is

⁴¹ Mobility, which *Don Juan* describes as “a thing of temperament and not of art,” is a critically thorny term that different scholars have adapted in unique ways. In his recent biography of Lord Byron, *Byron: A Life in Ten Letters* (2024), for instance, Andrew Stauffer, like some critics before him, sees in Byronic mobility the “key” to Byron himself: “We have seen Byron as someone subject to mood swings and unpredictable changes of tone, a *method-actor* who took on various characters, each of which would become, for a time, the ‘real’ him” (287, my emphasis).

central for understanding the role of polyphony in *Don Juan*.

This description of polyphony is itself immediately reminiscent of *D&D* itself, and many tabletop roleplaying games more broadly which similarly adopt a group, collective structure for the game, a collectivity that enters into tension with the narrative authority represented by the “hub-player” or game facilitator—otherwise known as the “game” or “dungeon” *master*. This tension between player agency and the “hub-player’s” discursive authority is part of how *actual play* and TTRPGs more broadly negotiate their position on the epic continuum I have described above. To clarify, “in the case of pen and paper RPGs, one player is given more discursive power and authority than the others.... It is thus not surprising that the DM is very close to the traditional author and their almost unlimited discursive power:” (117, 119). While, as critics like Schaller point out, different game systems have sought to curb this monologizing role, in *Dungeons & Dragons*, at least, the Gamemaster remains largely in control of the world itself, and, consequently, that world is largely conceptualized through that particular individual’s perspective on the setting. Changes to this setting are continually negotiated between players and the GM, with different GMs inviting different degrees of creative collaboration or divergence from their intended narrative arcs. Thus, there exists a continuum along which different GMs may or may not incorporate these different, polyphonic contributions. This model, I would suggest, also corresponds with the continuum of Romantic epic that I have described above.

Conclusion

Stauffer argues that, like a method actor’s, Byron’s performances were total and complete, consuming him and overwriting his “true” self in any given moment. Of this mobile tendency on Byron’s part, Stauffer suggests that “past a certain point, such mobility starts to dissolve the self altogether, fragmenting it into a kind of schizoid multiplicity” (288). This multiplicity, then is part of how *Don Juan* resists the monologizing impulse Bakhtin describes above.

In the case of *Worlds Beyond Number: The Wizard, the Witch, and the Wild One*, listeners are nonetheless presented with moments of digression and heroic instability. These moments, however, are comparatively few and far between when placed alongside the much more explicitly ironic and destabilizing framing of heroism we have seen *Dimension 20: Fantasy High: Junior Year*. *Actual play* itself is, after all, polyphonic, as is roleplaying—there are always multiple voices involved at the table. These different characters and their perspectives and, “behind” or “within” the characters themselves, the different players collaboratively construct, alongside the GM, their version of a heroic adventure. As I have demonstrated, however, *actual play* series like the ones I have engaged with in this chapter can at least be partially understood through this taxonomical continuum of the Romantic epic-heroic mode. Here, it is helpful to once again draw from Claude Lévi-Strauss’ notion of *bricolage* in our evaluation of the degree to which Romanticist conceptions of epic heroism are adapted in *actual play*. My claim, then, is not that this taxonomy of the epic-heroic mode is the only way to think about *D&D* or *actual play*. Rather, I am offering here a model for discussing certain aspects of the varying representations of heroism and the self that we see in this emergent aesthetic form.

Here, I have based that taxonomy on a combination of historical and literary research *and* on the juxtaposition of select scenes from *Fantasy High* and *The Wizard, the Witch, and the Wild One*. Within my reading of Romantic epic, I have constructed a taxonomical continuum for understanding the role of this epic-heroic model with Wordsworth on one end and Byron on the other. As I have shown above, I think about the Wordsworthian model as inherently monologic and, in some ways, hierarchical, especially given its earnest interest in the “hard task [of analyzing] the soul.” Opposite this iteration of the autobiographical epic I have positioned Byron’s *Don Juan*, an ironic mock epic which consistently places its protagonist in heroic

situations only for circumstances to inevitably subvert or frustrate any heroic attempts or ambitions. In my analysis of the Romantic afterlives of epic and heroism in *actual play*, I have also reflected on how some of these series not only adapt these Romantic after-images, but ultimately build on and deploy them for different aims. In the case of *Worlds Beyond Number: The Wizard, the Witch, and the Wild One*, Romantic heroism is expanded to encompass other forms of subjectivity originally outside the Wordsworthian scope. And in *Dimension 20: Fantasy High: Junior Year*, comic irony and Byronic polyphony serve as tools in the series' broader critique of heroism—a critique which is itself ironic, given that the anthology series *Dimension 20* remains a core part of *Dropouttv* to this day.

Heroism, and the (often conflated) roles of hero and poet (or player-performer) will continue to be of interest to this project. In what follows, however, I will also emphasize some of the other ways in which we continue to see fragments or after-images of Romanticist ideas, aesthetics, and even forms in *actual play* today. Given the emphasis critics have often given to the “newness” of *actual play* as an emergent medium, I suggest that it is necessary that we emphasize the vital elements of continuity and indebtedness to earlier periods and modes on which *actual play* is built. As critics like Natchwey and others have demonstrated, there is a wide constellation of influences that have come together in the emergence of *actual play*, influences well beyond the Romantic. Thus, I see my project as contributing but one piece of a larger puzzle as scholars continue to develop language and tools for talking about a form of popular entertainment that continues to draw in millions every year. Next, we will reflect on the relationship between improvisation, orality, and print in *Dimension 20: Neverafter*, framing the discussion through the similar, nineteenth-century concerns of poets and folklorists during the Romantic century.

Chapter II: Media, Narrative, and Romantic Improvisation in *Dimension 20*:

Neverafter

Introduction

In the introduction to this dissertation, I offered a framework for thinking about *actual play* from the perspective of embodied performances, with player-performers simultaneously occupying material and “virtual” or imagined spaces. As part of that discussion, I emphasized the importance of improvisation to understanding *actual play* as an emergent genre, and it is this subject that this chapter will engage with most fully. *Actual play* shows can, after all, best be described as a hybrid genre that encompasses a variety of aesthetic and mediatic influences which include the history of improvisation. For my purposes, I agree with Erik Kersting’s characterization of *actual play* as “part game, part theater, and part improv” (90). Kersting goes on to say that “if we consider a live stream of the game as just theater, we risk removing the stochastic contingencies that the dice offer, and if we consider the game as simply improv, we risk undercutting the ways in which players role-play as characters with narrative continuity and a desire to see goals met” (90). Thus, while *actual play* series draw from and builds on improvisational practices, it does so in ways that remain unique to the media landscape(s) these series occupy. For instance, improvisation is often described by scholars as inherently ephemeral, an ephemerality rooted in notions of what Philip Auslander challenges as “liveness” in *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (1999). But *actual play* series explicitly record and circulate their improvisations for consumption, implicitly limiting what many improvisors see as the emancipatory potential of their art form (Lewis & Piekut 7).

It is this anxiety which we see alluded to in the sixth episode of *Dimension 20: Neverafter*, “The Curdled Web,” after the main cast of player-characters have defeated a

corrupted version of the Little Miss Muffet, a character from Charles Perrault’s 1697 collection of folktales and fairy stories, *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités* or *Contes de ma mère l'Oye* (*Stories or Tales from Past Times, with Morals* or *Mother Goose Tales*). After breaking the hold of the *Neverafter*’s corruption on this character (a corruption I expand on below), we’re presented with the following interaction between Ally Beardsley’s character, Timothy “Mother” Goose, and the Miss Muffet of this distorted storyworld:

Mulligan: You see she reaches up a hand, touches the book. And I think as she does so, all of you here have this moment of watching. You've all changed pretty monstrously, too. And I think some of you have even had conversations, especially like Rosamund, the conversation you had with Cinderella about like, do these stories belong to us or not? And you see she touches the book and you see the illustration appears. And the illustration appears of her running away from a spider on a hill and her bowl sort of falling to the side. And it's just like a little spider coming down. And she looks at it, and you see a door start to open up, golden light in the book. And then she looks, and you see Muffet takes a second of looking like, [*gasps*] like oh, I could get out of this nasty cave with this terrible spiderweb. But she stops for a second. She goes,

Mulligan (as Miss Muffet): Am I always supposed to be scared?

Beardsley (as Timothy): No.

Miss Muffet’s question here—“am I always supposed to be scared?”—is born from her awareness of the way her story “should” go, at least according to an established canon anchored in and perpetuated by the crystallization of oral folktales into print. In his narration, Mulligan foregrounds this anxiety, alluding to an earlier conversation between Rosamund du Prix (a.k.a. Sleeping Beauty), played by Siobhan Thompson, and the non-player character (NPC), Cinderella: “*do these stories belong to us or not?*”

Mulligan’s performance as Miss Muffet here foregrounds the troubling nature of this

question; his expression is tight, and his vocal performance emphasizes Muffet's confusion in the face of a prescriptive canon. As Mother Goose's Book—a symbol of the canonizing force of print culture—begins to glow, Beardsley's improvised response as Mother Goose to Miss Muffet is *not* to allow the book to subsume her. Indeed, at this point in the season of *Neverafter*, the player-characters are becoming increasingly aware of the tension between orality and print, a tension the season returns to again and again. Ultimately, though Mother Goose records Miss Muffet's story in his book, he invites her to remain outside of it. Muffet, then, remains in the liminal space between orality and print, in what *Neverafter* frames as the conflict between the radical freedom of the literally unwritten and the prescriptive enclosure allegorized through ink, a liminality facilitated by the role of improvisation in *actual play*. Moments like these, which I call *voicings* below, help to illustrate the degree to which *Neverafter* explores and engages with some of the same anxieties surrounding spontaneity, print, improvisation, and media during the Romantic period.



Mulligan as a conflicted Miss Muffet 1

In a 2025 dossier titled “*In Focus* Introduction: Actual Play as Actual Art,” Maria K.

Alberto and Emily C. Friedman describe *actual play* series as “sites where the centuries-old pleasures of oral storytelling meet the modern fascination of reality television, in a rare example of creative intellectual property (IP) both created in public and generally owned by its creators” (151). I agree with this characterization, especially as it connects *actual play* to oral storytelling practices. In Western Europe, many of these practices underwent significant changes during the “Romantic century,” a period that saw, among other things, the rise of an era of mass communication facilitated by the increasing industrialization of print culture. As I will show below, this period coincides with the recording and eventual standardization of folkloric accounts led by figures like the Brothers Grimm, Walter Scott⁴², and others. Though such records allowed for the wider distribution of fairy tales and folklore, they also produced anxieties centered around the loss of authenticity as an attendant possibility to these efforts.

In parallel to these debates, we also see Romantic poets like Lord Byron drawing from Italian traditions of improvisation and *commedia dell’arte* as a means of cultivating spontaneity, originality, and, in Byron’s case, a sense of intimacy between reader and poet. For Byron, this interest in the revitalizing potential of improvisation is most evident in *Don Juan*, where his use of *ottava rima*, “the traditional stanzaic form of the Italian *improvvisatori*” clearly places his poem within this aesthetic and performative tradition (Esterhammer 17). This improvisational style—and its ability to cultivate the impression of intimate conversation—is present throughout *Don Juan*. In a fragment attached to the manuscript of Canto I of his mock epic, for instance, Byron writes the following lines:

⁴² Scott was part of a broader network of writers and folklorists with whose help he published *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, an anthology of Border and literary ballads edited by Walter Scott and first published in 1802, with an expanded, final edition released in 1830. For a deeper account of Scott’s involvement in the collection of fairy stories in particular, see Chapter 3: Fairies, Enclosure, and the Sublime in *Dimension 20: A Court of Fey & Flowers*.

I would to Heaven that I were so much clay,
As I am blood, bone, marrow, passion, feeling—
Because at least the past were passed away,
And for the future—(but I write this reeling,
Having got drunk exceedingly to-day,
So that I seem to stand upon the ceiling)
I say—the future is a serious matter—
And so—for God’s sake—hock and soda-water! (“Dedication”)

Here, Byron playfully collapses the distance between himself and the poem’s narrator through the allusion to “real-world” drunkenness, to use the parlance of *actual play*. The parenthetical digression describing his state of inebriation presents us with a seemingly improvised interruption to the poem that serves to further cement the impression of conversational proximity. In Canto XV, *Don Juan*’s narrator continues to strike this improvisatory pose:

I perch upon an humbler promontory,
Amidst life’s infinite variety:
With no great care for what is nicknamed glory,
But speculating as I cast mine eye
On what may suit or may not suit my story,
And never straining hard to versify,
I rattle on exactly as I’d talk
With any body in a ride or walk. (XV, 19)

Once again, Byron’s narrator affects an improvisational approach to this story—he “never strain[s too] hard to versify” and always “rattle[s] on exactly as [he’d] talk / with any body in a ride or walk.” And yet, as Christine Kenyon Jones points out, we know that this impression is rooted in a pose (117-18).

The reader of *Don Juan* encounters the poem in a printed, edited form, a form of media which crystallizes a performance that ostensibly relies on ephemerality. But even if we set aside

the thorny issue of “liveness,” Kenyon Jones reminds us that “the desultory and comic tone of... these stanzas serves to divert attention away from aspects of the irritation and pain which are clear in Byron’s acknowledgement [in a letter to friend and fellow poet, Thomas Moore]... that [Byron’s] poetic composition is the result of a compulsion to empty his mind of ‘rage’ and ‘torture’” (118). Even as Byron performs and affects improvisation in public as a means of signaling genius, he privately describes his own writing process as difficult and torturous, at times compulsively so. Yet while we can and should complicate the degree to which we might call Byron’s writing as improvisational, we should not dismiss the fact that Byron, like other Romantic poets who turned to improvisation as a tool for cultivating an impression of Romantic genius and spontaneity, *adapts* and remediates this genre to great success.

In this chapter, I will be juxtaposing this idea of Romantic improvisation—prizing as it does originality, genius, and a kind of liberatory spontaneity—with the role that improvisation plays in *Dimension 20: Neverafter*. Given its emphasis on storytelling, media, and the tension it explores between what it sees as the formless freedom of orality and the limiting stability of print, this season serves as a particularly effective case study for demonstrating the applicability of an analytical lens grounded in Romanticism toward the scholarly study of *actual play* shows. To be clear, my claim here is not that this binary representation of orality and print is fundamentally true, nor does this oppositional characterization remain stable throughout *Neverafter*. Rather, I argue that, through this positioning, *Neverafter* dramatizes the anxieties shared by nineteenth-century folklorists around their efforts to document and record fairy tales and other stories. It is a season in which the players and their characters struggle to navigate different, seemingly corrupted versions of their stories, with each player’s character based on a notable figure from folklore like Sleeping Beauty or Pinocchio. Even as these characters seek to

address the corruption of their stories, all of them take issue with the canonical versions of their tales, a canon literally rooted in print and ink. Thus, improvisation in *Neverafter* takes on a kind of doubled significance. On one level, the improvisation in *Neverafter* works similarly to how it is employed in other forms of *actual play*—a genre that is, as we have seen, inherently improvisational. At another level, improvisation in *Neverafter* is more than a structuring ludic principle—it is also, ultimately, the only way that the season’s protagonists can resist the canonical versions of their own stories.

Here, Byron’s improvisational mode is once again relevant. Like *Neverafter*, *Don Juan* is a story about adaptation, one in which improvisation plays a vital role in charting for Juan a course different from that which earlier writers had previously prescribed. For example, the first recorded instance of the Don Juan story is Tirso de Molina’s 1630 play, *El burlador de Sevilla y el convidado de piedra* (*The Trickster of Seville and the Stone Guest*). I will not here recount in detail such a well-known story, but suffice it to say that, in this original model of the character, Don Juan Tenorio is represented as a man who enjoys “mocking” unmarried women by sleeping with and then abandoning them. This misogynistic version of Don Juan gleefully and consistently tricks and otherwise deceives the women in the play, such as the Duchess Isabela, either through promises of marriage he promptly breaks, or through impersonation. For the most part, this Juan does not express remorse or regret, and I include below a mere sample of his speech:

Venturoso en esto he sido,
Sevilla a voces me llama
el burlador, y el mayor gusto
que en mí puede haber
es burlar una mujer

y dejarla sin honor.

....

Gana me da de reír... (II.269-77)⁴³

On the surface, this model would seem to bear some similarities to Byron's Don Juan, given the latter's tendency to become involved in a variety of romantic and sexual affairs throughout the mock epic's seventeen cantos. But a crucial distinction here is that Byron consistently reinforces Don Juan's *passivity* during these moments of seduction. Put differently, Byron's Juan does not go out in *search* of seduction or affairs, and is instead *himself* pursued by women which include his tutor Donna Julia, the pirate's daughter, Haidee, and even, the poem suggests, Catherine the Great. Indeed, the poem's narrator implies that it is this passivity which makes Juan so desirable when he says that Juan's "manner was perhaps the more seductive / because he ne'er seem'd anxious to seduce" (XV.12). Instead, "with women he was what / They pleased to make or take him for," a kind of blank canvas onto which project their own "imagination[s]" (XV.16). Byron's improvisational pose in *Don Juan*, then, serves to simultaneously frame and authorize his novel adaptation of the stock character. And though Byron once joked in an 1821 letter with his publisher John Murray that Juan might, in the poem's final canto, end up either married or in hell, Byron perished before he could complete the epic. In a sense, this open-endedness works to serve and strengthen the poem's overall impression of improvisation as it attempts to build on and subvert extant expectations surrounding a stock character that, by the nineteenth century, had been around for several centuries in the popular imagination.

⁴³ "In this I've been adventurous,
And Seville loudly calls me
the trickster [lit., mocker], and the greatest delight
that in me can be
is to trick [lit., mock] a woman
and leave her without honor.
....
It makes me want to laugh."

Finally, the ends of improvisation for Byron cannot be fully understood without discussing the oft-cited notion of *mobility*. For my purposes, I will focus primarily on the definition of mobility offered in *Don Juan* specifically, then adapt that definition into the framework of Byronic improvisation I have outlined thus far. In a description of the Lady Adeline, who will soon join the list of Juan's pursuers, the mock epic's narrator declares that

So well she acted all and every part
By turns—with that vivacious versatility,
Which many people take for want of heart.
They err—'tis merely what is call'd mobility,
A thing of temperament and not of art,
Though seeming so, from its supposed facility;
And false—though true; for surely they're sincerest
Who are strongly acted on by what is nearest

This makes your actors, artists, and romancers,
Heroes sometimes, though seldom—sages never;
But speakers, bards, diplomatists, and dancers,
Little that's great, but much of what is clever... (XVI.97-8)

Mobility here is paradoxically described as a kind of sincerity *and* a kind of performance—"so well she *acted all and every part*." Rather than a marker of Adeline's lack of depth, her ability to rapidly take on different affective modes codes her as more *dynamic*, more, in some ways, *real* through this "genuine" performance. In this context, mobility tackles the Romantic-era anxieties surrounding originality, spontaneity, and genius through the lens of committed improvisation. The facility to be "strongly acted on by what is nearest," for instance, mirrors sites of collective improvisation such as jazz or comedy, in which performers must simultaneously emphasize their individual selves within a collective, collaborative context (Lewis & Piekut 8). Byronic mobility, then, offers a helpful tool for thinking about how *actual play* series like *Neverafter* adapt and

draw from the history of improvisation. In the case of *Neverafter*, mobility is how I understand the role of roleplaying as the season's player-characters, like the Romantics who experimented with and drew from improvisational modes, ideologically prioritize spontaneity, originality, and individual freedom as they navigate the anxieties of print culture and the canon(s) this culture creates.

Ultimately, improvisation in *Neverafter* takes on similar connotations as those we have seen explored by Romantic "improvisers"—namely, it similarly functions as a marker (whether genuine or not) of a kind of liberatory spontaneity. Because these improvisations are most clearly communicated through the cast's vocal performances, I frame these attempted interruptions to the canon through improvisation as *voicings* that share much with the unfettered possibilities of oral (and thus ephemeral, unrecorded, potentially improvised) storytelling. As this chapter will show, I argue that the parallels between Romantic improvisation and the improvisatory *voicings* we see in *Dimension 20: Neverafter* are not accidental—the history of improvised, character-based play is one that cannot be told without acknowledging the role of Romanticism in mediating and shaping that history. Furthermore, *Neverafter* is, like *Don Juan*, a "text" which relies on the crystallization of a "single" (i.e., season-wide) performance of improvisation. In the end, *Neverafter* never fully resolves the tensions and anxieties borne out of this loss of ephemerality and possibility through the very act of recording spontaneous play, much as Romantic writers like Byron can "play at" but never fully reproduce the experience of improvisation through print.



I. *Dimension 20: Neverafter*, Improvisation, and Play

This section will offer a case study of a specific season of *Dimension 20*—*Neverafter* (2022), the sixteenth season of the anthology actual play series, *Dimension 20*, in part because this season reflects the series’ most extensive exploration of narrative and mediation. As its name suggests, *Neverafter* is set in a dark and ontologically corrupted fairy tale world of the same name. Though nearly all seasons of *Dimension 20* reflect on elements like narrative, storytelling, and genre, *Neverafter* is particularly invested in exploring the histories of European folklore even as it adapts them. Furthermore, *Neverafter* consistently raises questions and anxieties about media and (re)mediation in a variety of ways. As I have already alluded to above, *Neverafter* seemingly constructs a binary of orality and print that corresponds with ungrounded freedom on the one hand and prescriptive enclosure on the other. But as I have also suggested, *Neverafter* problematizes and unsettles this framing in ways that parallel Romantic-era discourse on

spontaneity and improvisation.

For instance, ink (and, by extension, print culture) as a tool for both the diegetic and non-diegetic correction of the world of *Neverafter*'s perceived corruption is a recurring motif. Much of the story of the series revolves around the player characters' deepening understanding of a magical (also called a "true") book which, we come to learn, is strongly associated with notions of a specific—and therefore fixed—literary canon. This canon exists in tension with the corrupted world of the *Neverafter*, and with the player characters themselves, a tension that is primarily mediated through the relationship between improvisation, orality, and print. As a series deeply interested in media and remediation, then, *Neverafter* shares "Romantic culture's ubiquitous fascination with media/tion" (Burkett 3). As Andrew Burkett points out, "Romantic authors continually murmur about the nature and function of *media* and *mediation*" (*Ibid.*) In this chapter, I will delve into this "continual murmuration," tying the role of orality in storytelling in *Neverafter* to some of the same media-oriented questions that accompanied the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century phenomenon of Italian and, eventually, European and British improvisation.

As I hope to show, Romantic improvisation serves as a useful lens through which to approach actual play shows, in part because of the complex ways in which Romanticism and improvisation drew from and built upon one another. Furthermore, *Dimension 20* is a series that relies exclusively on (mostly) extemporaneous, improvised performances as the vehicle through which narrative and character development are progressed. Because *Dimension 20: Neverafter* is centrally and quite explicitly about stories and storytelling, this season of the actual play anthology series provides an especially useful case study for understanding some of the ways in which *actual play* adapts earlier aesthetic and ideological structures even as it seeks to establish itself as a distinct and legitimate form of storytelling. Furthermore, *actual play*'s crystallization

of tabletop games that are typically unrecorded mirrors Romantic-era debates surrounding canonization of originally oral forms of storytelling, as well as the inherent contradiction in calling printed, recorded poetry “improvisational.”

In *Neverafter*, the main cast (otherwise known as the “Intrepid Heroes”) play a specific “iteration” of different characters and figures from folklore. Siobhan Thompson plays Rosamund du Prix, a version of Sleeping Beauty that awakens after a century of magical sleep to find her homeland overrun by briars and thorns from which she must extricate herself and escape. Emily Axford plays Ylfa Snorgelsson, a lycanthropic Little Red Riding Hood from a story where the Hunter never arrived and Little Red Riding Hood was forced to consume the flesh of the Big Bad Wolf⁴⁴. Zac Oyama is a Puss in Boots down on his luck after his kingdom fell to giants, a trickster spirit traveling in the company of Pinocchio, played by Lou Wilson, who has been *returned* to his wooden puppet form after lying to save his father’s life. Brian Murphy’s character, Prince Gerard of Greenleigh, exists past the natural “end” of his own story (a characteristic shared by Pinocchio, Puss in Boots, and Little Red Riding Hood), and though once a prince turned frog turned prince again, he slowly (re)loses his humanity throughout the course of the season.

Finally, we have Timothy Mother Goose, played by Ally Beardsley. Their character adapts the titular Mother Goose of Charles Perrault’s 1697 collection, *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités* or *Contes de ma mère l’Oye* (*Stories or Tales from Past Times, with Morals* or *Mother Goose Tales*), which contains early iterations of the stories of “Cinderella,” “Little Red Riding Hood,” and “The Master Cat, or Puss in Boots,” among others. In this way, Ally Beardsley’s character this season occupies a similar position to both the

⁴⁴ In *Neverafter*, the Big Bad Wolf represents the ending of stories or, more generally, death itself.

Romantic-era folklorist and the Romantic author more broadly. Very early on in the season, it is revealed that there are many versions of the Neverafter, with each version seeming to extend on an iterative continuum toward the “Times of Shadow” on one end, and a tendency toward plenty and happiness—often associated with an established canon—on the other. An added ludic mechanic to this season is that each time the player characters die or fall in combat, they are transported to an even darker, more warped version of their story further down this continuum of shadow.

While there are many different factions at play in the season, the perceived canon of these fairy tales—the way these stories “should be”—is enforced through specific agents, such as the Fairies (who possess a meta-textual, transcendental understanding of their worlds *as* stories), the Authors (mysterious, titanic figures of pure “true” ink that makes up the lifeblood of the Neverafter and who act as distant, alien gods)⁴⁵, and, to a lesser extent, the magical book in the possession of Mother Goose. This book allows for the preservation of stories as they “ought” to be, a canon reflective of golden stability *into* which characters and objects can be subsumed, thereby preserving them forever. Of course, in so doing, these stories are made static rather than dynamic, an anxiety that becomes increasingly significant as the player characters discuss how to best navigate the tools at their disposal for the repairing (or reshaping) of their world. Such anxieties are reminiscent of the discourse surrounding early and in particular nineteenth-century efforts at documenting folklore, such as in the case of the Brothers Grimm’s *Children’s and Household Tales* (1812). For folklorists like the Grimms, the oral traditions which their tales purported to document were

⁴⁵ I will return to the Authors later in this chapter, as there are interesting parallels between how they are imagined in the series and some of the ways in which Romantic genius (especially the kind of transcendental, almost divine idea of genius shared by Coleridge and Wordsworth) was often represented and discussed during the Romantic period.

extremely seriou[s], for they regarded [these stories] as relics encoding knowledge about humanity's earliest beliefs and thinking patterns.... In part 2 of their first edition (1814), they singled out one of their sources, Dorothea Viehmann, as a model narrator who "retained old stories clearly in mind..." Her narration "was taken down verbatim and no one will fail to recognize its authenticity." (Lindahl 14)

In time, of course, this fidelity became less and less important, and "the Grimms changed the wording of their tales in every subsequent edition; as a result, the seventh (1857), now the standard edition, differs greatly from the first" (Lindahl 14). The tension between the literary fairy tale and the oral folktale, then, is not only present in *Neverafter*, it is also a key element of the genealogy of the fairy tale that persists throughout the genre.

As this chapter will show, *Neverafter* revisits this tension through a unique avenue—that of *improvised* roleplay. Though *Dimension 20* is not an exclusively oral medium, orality and performance are nonetheless central to the roleplay that occurs in *Neverafter*. The fluid, organic, and associative nature of how the players inhabit and project their characters lends them new and powerful life, life which is primarily mediated through the voice. Here, I am speaking both literally and figuratively, as a central conceit of the season is that the only reason that the players' characters can make the decisions that they do—decisions that often see them departing from the established literary canon that other forces are pushing them toward—is because of the *Neverafter*'s "corrupted" state. As becomes clear in the case of characters like Pinocchio, players and their characters are often in negotiation with the established canon of their story. In a sense, it is through their *improvised* performances that cast members offer viewers a simulacrum of the character's voice and, crucially, choice. These performances are, I argue, rooted in Romantic notions of play, mobility, *and* improvisation. This kind of play is linked to what Weber characterizes as Kant's attitude toward poetry:

Poetry, as such, is meta-play, that is, play with and about the reflective judgments that constitute the aesthetic experience and contribute to the formation of an individual subject that feels liberated from the physical determination of the body, from the preoccupation of conceptual understanding, and from the burdens of the worldly existence in general. (19)

I am struck here by the aesthetic and imaginative parallels between Weber's breakdown of Kantian poetics and the way in which individual subjectivity is modeled and performed in tabletop roleplaying games, where performers simultaneously occupy roles that are both heroic *and* creative in the artistic sense. In this sense, then, roleplay as a form of *play* which prioritizes the realization of an individual identity mirrors what Friedrich Schiller describes as the "play-drive," through which Schiller envisions a road toward a "complete intuition of [one's own] human nature," a process he sees as inherently liberatory (126). In the case of *Neverafter*, the creation of fully realized (and liberated) selves through improvised play makes of Schiller's play-drive a kind of driving, dynamic motivation for fairy tale characters seeking to escape the tight boundaries of their canonical stories.

In this chapter, I examine the ways in which improvised roleplay arises in *Neverafter* as a means of reclaiming subjective agency on the part of the main cast of characters. Because it is through the act of roleplay itself that characters like Pinocchio and Rosamund conflict with or even outright reject their canonical destiny, the performances act as improvised oral interventions in traditionally (though not originally) written stories. These improvised, momentary "voicings" (to draw from Walter Ong's concept in *Orality and Literacy*) further draw attention to the tension between orality and print culture in *Neverafter*, a tension that the characters themselves must also navigate throughout the course of the season. For Ong, *voicings* can encompass "purely oral art

forms, ‘verbal art forms,’ (which would include both oral forms and those composed in writing, and everything in between), and the like” (14). *Neverafter* explores orality and print, but it is also an *actual play* series, a unique medium that does not fit neatly into orality or television, either. Thus, for our purposes, I am here adapting Ong’s idea into an understanding of *voicings* to describe these improvised performances as places “in between” orality and, within the context of *Neverafter*’s fictive universe, print.

Furthermore, improvisation is, as we shall see, a central component of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourse, especially as this form evolves from its Italian roots in *commedia dell’arte* and extemporaneous, sideshow improvisations into an imported version of improvisation that had the potential to revitalize (broadly) traditional Romantic ideals like genius, spontaneity, subjectivity, and the relationship between these concepts and media. Unlike *commedia dell’arte*, however, the improvisation we see even in *Neverafter*—which, with its use of literal stock characters is perhaps one of the closest seasons to this originally Italian genre—is distinct in that it occurs within the context of an extended and sustained narrative arc, one that relies on virtuosic expressions of a character’s subjective experience as distinct (insofar as that is possible) from that of the player’s.⁴⁶

II. Romanticism, Improvisation, and Play

According to Angela Esterhammer, a critic who has written extensively on the role of improvisation in Romantic poetics, aesthetics, and philosophy,

as the word *improvisation* entered English and other European languages around 1800, the concept of improvisation had wide-ranging influence in the domains of aesthetics,

⁴⁶ See, for instance, William J. White’s “Player-Character is What You are in the Dark: The Phenomenology of Immersion in *Dungeons & Dragons*” and Rob Candall’s “To My Other Self: Reflection and Existentialism in *Dungeons & Dragons*” in the edited collection, *Dungeons and Dragons and Philosophy* (2014).

poetics, and socio-political thought. In some ways, improvisational practices during the “Romantic century” (1750-1850) resembled the modes of improvisation that would become dominant during the 20th century.[this period] also saw the rise and decline of a distinctive type of improviser: the *improvvisatore* (male) or *improvvisatrice* (female), a solo poet-performer who spontaneously composed verses on subjects assigned by the audience. (“The Improvisation of Poetry” 239-40)

The growing popularity of this kind of art form in Continental Europe during the “the Romantic century” led contemporaneous writers and thinkers to reflect on the relationship between poetic genius as traditionally understood within Romantic circles, and the kind of extemporaneous inspiration that seemed to drive these popular performers (Esterhammer *Print and Performance* 61-60). Indeed, improvisation became a kind of locus for a variety of simultaneous, Romantic-era anxieties around originality and genius.

Alongside the development of modern, industrialized celebrity culture and Romantic-era notions surrounding orality and media/tion alluded to above, we must also take into consideration the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century phenomenon that was European (and originally Italian) improvisation. Indeed, improvisation during the “Romantic century” is also tied to explorations of orality, print, and remediation, as “many of the qualities to which Romantic ideology assigned a high value—inspiration, spontaneity, orality, sensibility, and emotional expressiveness—seemed to be manifested in the performances of improvising poets” (Esterhammer “The Improvisation of Poetry” 240). For audiences of the early nineteenth century, “the improviser appeared to embody inspiration,” and in letters and other written accounts of these improvised performances, high-Romantic writers “suggest that these performances allow the listener to witness first-hand the operations of poetic genius” (*Ibid.*). Thus, certain Romantic writers like Byron, whose improvisational efforts we described above, began to adapt this practice for their own aesthetic and ideological needs.

Romanticism and improvisation, then, are closely linked and “make up a crucial part of the stories that the era told itself about the meaning of genius, the process of subject-formation and socialization, and the valorisation of different national cultures” (Esterhammer *Romanticism and Improvisation* 7-8). Not only are these elements of Romantic aesthetics and history important in and of themselves, they also, as Simpson reminds us, represent “the Romantic roots of many later cultural modes—from minstrel troops to world music, from jazz and hip-hop improvisation to popular songbooks—[which] reveal a different, less commonly discussed genealogy that, for better and for worse, connects Romantic poetry and novels to the popular and mass entertainments of the following two centuries” (386).⁴⁷ This genealogy, then, serves as one of the many indirect links between the Romantic period and the kind of structured improvisation we see in *actual play* series like *Neverafter*. Furthermore, the players-characters’ quest this season is in part about reclaiming agency, spontaneity, and originality *through improvised play*, further emphasizing its parallels with Romanticism’s own instrumentalization of improvisation.

Improvisation and orality, then, are helpful lenses through which to approach *Dimension 20: Neverafter*, emphasizing—as this approach does—the connection between the improvised storytelling of this actual play season and Romantic notions of creation, originality, self-fashioning, and subject-formation. Furthermore, the history of Romantic-era improvisation is also deeply tied to contemporaneous debates around the role of play in the act of self-development. In an 1816 treatise titled “Dello Sgricci e degl’improvisatori in Italia,” Pietro Giordani characterizes improvisation as “nothing but LUDUS IMPUDENTIAE,” an “impudent

⁴⁷ In his brief genealogy of Romantic orality and improvisation, Simpson goes on to point out how minstrelsy and minstrel shows were themselves born from this earlier interest in improvisation, an interest that is eventually (though not originally) and explicitly put into the service of racist blackface performances in the United States, Britain, and further abroad (10).

game” or “game of impudence” (quod. in Esterhammer *Romanticism and Improvisation* 8-9).

Indeed,

As the nineteenth century progressed and the poetic improviser became a familiar figure to novel-readers and theatre-goers in Europe, real and fictional improvisers increasingly turned into focal points for questions about the construction and stability of personal identity. The improvising performance seems to create not only new verses, but a *new identity* [sic], on each occasion and for every audience, in a manner that may strike spectators as impetuous, opportunistic, or too overly performative.... The persona of the improviser *thus becomes a lightning rod for anxieties about the construction and consistency of identity itself—issues that first appear in nineteenth-century novels, then re-appear a century and a half later when modern cultural and sociological theory adopts the notion of improvisation as an analogy for subject formation.* (Esterhammer *Romanticism and Improvisation* 7)

The improviser, then, is not only a figure at play, but one that plays with the very idea of improvisation as a tool for exploring different kinds of subjectivity. In this way, the improvisation of the “Romantic century” is a part of the connective tissue that ties modern-day tabletop roleplaying games with the Romantic period. In *Neverafter*, the players’ improvised voicings serve to literalize the concept of “improvisation as an analogy for subject formation” as they seek to construct individual subjectivities free from the constraints of their own stories as calcified by print culture.

Dimension 20: Neverafter deploys improvisation and orality as a means of exploring and resisting what it initially represents as the static nature of print culture, a form of media which remediates dynamic oral storytelling. Much as the improvisations within *actual play* shows have a ludic framework (the dice, the mechanics of whatever tabletop role-playing game they are using, the rulings of the GM if applicable, etc.) which determines the improviser’s performance, so, too, did the improvisers of the Romantic century often find themselves in negotiation with

audiences which, as described above, might offer up the subject of an *improvvisatrice*'s or *improvvisatore*'s declamation. That being said, a distinction remains: live improvisers respond with much more immediacy to their audiences, and, for the most part, do not maintain the kind of sustained narrative continuity we see in *actual play*. Furthermore, the scale of production in *Dimension 20*, which can generally film seasons up to a year before release, means that its performers' audience is fundamentally the other players at the table, the GM, and, in some occasions, the surrounding crew. There is also a vital framing element at play in determining improvisational decisions: the dice themselves. As I have mentioned above, part of what makes *actual play* unique is its reliance on chance to structure its narratives. Player-performers often allude to this importance through a common, now clichéd saying: "the dice tell a story," a refrain I analyzed more closely in this dissertation's introduction.

In the case of *Dimension 20: Neverafter*—as in the case of Byron's *Don Juan*—this improvisation is rooted in subjective experience, in what Marie-Laure Ryan has called the "worlds" of "media-produced representations," which "should no longer be defined as 'everything that exists,' but should rather be conceived in cognitive or phenomenological terms, as corresponding to the extent of an individual's experience" (15). This conceit is especially "true" for the ludic subjects that the players enact through improvised play, especially given the narrative trajectory of *Dimension 20: Neverafter*. After all, the "world" that the players' characters inhabit is made up of the improvised subjectivities through which they engage with and drive the narrative. Their bodies exist both in the real and the "virtual" or imaginative, but the voice is what ties both subjectivities together, bridging the divide of distortion.

Romantic improvisation is also central to the writing and poetic self-fashioning of female poets, thinkers, and writers like Felicia Hemans, Anna Jameson, and Letitia Elizabeth Landon, in

part because of Germaine de Stael's influential novel, *Corinne* (1807). De Stael's 1807 novel, *Corinne*, is "a text that exploits the topos of poetic improvisation to tell the story of an artistically gifted woman. In the process, however, *Corinne* radically alters the representation of the *improvvisatrice*," as de Stael makes Corinne half Italian and half English, expanding and complicating "the *improvvisatrice*'s national affiliations." (Esterhammer *Romanticism and Improvisation* 84-92). This expansion of the female improviser—the *improvvisatrice*—from her original national constraints is mirrored by de Stael's contention "that she herself has purified and re-invented the tradition [of improvisation]," making *Corinne*'s contribution to Romantic improvisation twofold (*Ibid.* 85). De Stael's novel "begins to delineate the conflict between the subjectivity of the poet and the objectification of the (female) performer," and de Stael's "depiction of an *improvvisatrice* whose artistry resembles an on-going conversation with her audience makes improvisation into a form of sociability, [while also emphasizing] the role of the audience and the performer's vulnerability to construction by the spectators' gaze and response" (*Ibid.* 91). *Dimension 20: Neverafter* similarly explores the aforementioned "conflict between the subjectivity of," in this case, the player-character or the ludic self, Vella's "i-in-the-gameworld," and the "objectification" and instrumentalization of women in much of the folklore that the series is rooted in. As we shall see, this tension becomes especially apparent in Rosamund du Prix's (a.k.a., Sleeping Beauty) arc throughout the course of the season, a narrative and thematic trajectory deeply tied to the Princesses and their own efforts at resistance. More broadly, we see in this emergent awareness of improvisation as a kind of sociability which can help to co-create subjectivities a seed that will, in time, blossom into how player-performers collaborate with one another in *actual play*.

Another important aspect of the history of Romantic improvisation and its particular

relevance to *Dimension 20: Neverafter* has to do with the extemporized performances of *commedia dell'arte*, which form part of the history of the transmission of Italian improvisation abroad. Though there are accounts as early as the thirteenth century attesting to *commedia dell'arte*, this improvisatorial art form reached the height of its popularity from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth century (Esterhammer *Romanticism and Improvisation* 129-30).

Commedia performances, which were put on by professional companies, featured “a group of stock figures—some masked, others not—whose roles in each performance were extemporized within the parameters allowed by the traditional character-types” (*Ibid.*) Given this format of structured improvisation that we see at play in *commedia dell'arte*, I would suggest that the genre of *actual play* more generally is culturally and historically rooted in the *commedia* of the period described above. In *commedia dell'arte* performances, “stock figures” might have proper names or simply be described by their function, and were often part of a wider cultural consciousness that audiences could reasonably identify and engage with. The parallels between *commedia dell'arte* and *Dimension 20: Neverafter* become especially apparent when we take into account the fact that

traditionally, *commedia* was based on outlines or *scenarii* that circulated among players and companies, providing the framework within which action and speech could be improvised; thus, the improvisation of a character was never completely free, but involved ‘plundering printed and inherited materials.’ This could, at times, result in stale and unoriginal dialogue. However, the habit of addressing extemporized soliloquies directly to the audience maintained an emphasis on audience feedback and responsiveness as essential elements of the performance, just as in the case of the solo improvvisatore. (*Ibid.* 130)

Much like the *commedia* performers of old, then, each player in *Neverafter* has chosen a “stock character,” each drawn from different traditions within European folklore. Their own

performances do not necessarily rely on the immediacy of an audience's response—with the exception of live shows, which are their own performative phenomenon with parallels and divergences from their recorded format—and are instead shaped consistently by the ludic structures alluded to above (the dice, the mechanics, the rulings) as well as through the improvised choices of their fellow performers. In the case of *commedia dell'arte*, stock characters could only act within their culturally or aesthetically determined constraints, even if improvisers might play at the edges of those constraints. In *Neverafter*, the players often opt toward subverting these stock expectations, much as Byron deploys improvisation to facilitate his subversion of the reader's expectations of *Don Juan*'s protagonist.

This form of improvisation is grounded, I argue, in Romantic narratives of poetic genius and spontaneity. It serves to signal to the audience the degree to which a player can “inhabit” their character's subjective experience, the “narrativist”⁴⁸ side of the *D&D* equation and an example of Byronic mobility. This kind of improvisation further ties us to what we see at play in Byron's *Don Juan*, which relies on an improvisatory pose to generate an original interpretation of a stock character. In the case of *Don Juan*, the use of *ottava rima* is just one of the ways in which the mock epic incorporates at least the *impression* of improvisation into the poem. In *Neverafter*, it is through the characters' improvised choices and conversations, determined and facilitated by dice rolls, that they can produce sites of resistance to the canon—the improvised *voicings* I have alluded to above. As I discussed in introduction to this dissertation, dice rolls determine the broad tracks on which a player-performer's improvisation might unfold, preserving a true “random factor” that distinguishes this form of storytelling from other narrative

⁴⁸ See Brian Upton's *The Aesthetic of Play* (2021), in which he distinguishes between three different kinds of playstyle within a roleplaying game like *D&D*: narrativist, gamist, and simulationist. For a fuller discussion of these concepts, see “Introduction.”

genres. That being said, the agential connotations that have come to be associated with the dice in common discourse—which are sometimes imagined as representative of some kind of inscrutable, quasi-divine force invested in storytelling, comedy, or both—tie this genre, to my mind, back to the Romantic period. Much like Coleridge’s Aeolian Harp, the dice in *actual play* are often infused with sublime potential. Ultimately, given that *Dimension 20: Neverafter* emphasizes the importance of the ludic subjectivities being explored each season, their own adaptation of improvisation and *commedia dell’arte* is necessarily shaped by the Romantic interest in improvisation as a (often unstable) tool for the development and (re)presentation of subjectivity.

This emphasis on Romantic improvisation and subject-formation bears further exploration. Here, I am partially engaging with L.J. Swingle’s claim that Romantic poetry

involves a restructuring of traditional conceptions about what poetry is supposed to offer to a reader. (Thus we often find the Romantic poet considering his work as “experiment.”).... Romantic poetry teaches by questioning the reader’s answers. It guides by producing rather than relieving tension. It does not present the result of a quest, but instead forces the reader to experience the act of questing himself. (976)

Though McGann famously took umbrage with Swingle’s rejection of Romantic poetry as doctrinal, even he acknowledges that, in his account of Romanticism, Swingle has “correctly... responded to a special feature of Romantic style which is quite different from the style of earlier verse... traditionally, it has been called ‘sincerity’ or Romantic ‘spontaneity’” (63). McGann goes on to say that

these now old-fashioned terms point to a set of stylistic conventions developed by the Romantics to give the *illusion* of ‘spontaneous overflow’ to their verse.... In Romantic poems, we will characteristically follow the *play*... of ideas, the movement of consciousness in search for what it does not know that it knows. (63, my emphasis)

This *illusion* of “spontaneous overflow” which McGann tellingly characterizes as a form of play is heavily indebted to the history and development of improvisation as a practice that was seen by some Romantic writers as a crucial tool in the development of this “illusion.” For McGann, the performance of spontaneity and authenticity acts as a core characteristic of what he calls Romantic ideology, and I emphasize his dated exchange with Swingle in order to further illustrate to my readers the unspoken importance of play and improvisation throughout the history of academic and scholarly writing focused on the Romantic period. In what follows, I will engage with the improvised voicings of *Neverafter* as reproducing and responding to some of the same debates around spontaneity, oral storytelling, improvisation, and media we see during the Romantic period. As we will see, there are aspects of these voicings which draw from Romantic improvisation, though *Neverafter* does ultimately end on a democratized representation of authorship seemingly inconsistent with Romantic narratives about poetic genius, even as it never fully decenters print culture.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ See, for instance, David Riede’s *Oracles and Hierophants* (1991), in which Riede lays out how William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge constructed a vision of poetic authority which implies hierarchical distance between the poet-as-oracle and the common individual. According to Riede, Coleridge takes on an interpretative, almost priestly role in relation to the poetic truths of the poet.



Timothy "Mother" Goose

III. True Books: Improvisation, Print, and Orality in *Neverafter*

Timothy "Mother" Goose's book is the central device that drives the season's narrative arc. Acquired through an ill-omened pact with the physical representation of "the Times of Shadow," the Gander, Mother Goose's book unambiguously identifies him as a kind of authorial figure himself. Though he has spent most of his life as a storyteller dependent on orality, the tool that he is given after he wishes for something that would help to repair and address the "wrongness" of the Times of Shadow is specifically one that relies on print media, on the recording of these stories into an original canon. In this way, Timothy's trajectory mirrors that of Romantic-era folklorists and editors: "beginning in the eighteenth century, ballad collectors increasingly moved from citing fellow antiquarians to documenting the oral tradition and instances of recitation. This

documentation allowed them to accrue ‘vernacular cultural capital’” (Simpson 4). In the case of Timothy’s own editorial efforts, his book will only write that which is reflective of the “true destinies” of the canon, and so his initial successes with this artifact are not only preservative, they are also prescriptive in that they subscribe to a belief in an original or “master” story (“Origins” 4:15). All other words or stories written in the book with ink from within the world of the Neverafter (a distinction which will become of especial importance later on) that do not reflect these canonical “master” stories eventually fade from the book’s pages.

In a sense, the Book’s resistance here positions Timothy “Mother” Goose in a similar role to that played by the Romantic writer as envisioned, for instance, by the poet John Keats in his discussion of negative capability: “that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats 48). Negative capability describes the state into which an artist must enter in order to write that which is beautiful. For Keats, “Poetry should surprise by a fine excess and not by Singularity—it should strike the Reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a *Remembrance*. . . .if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all” (Keats 78, my emphasis). Like the “true” rhymes and stories of Mother Goose’s Book, Poetry, according to Keats, can and should not be forced—it must come “as naturally as the Leaves to a tree.” But, crucially, it should also have the effect of a kind of “remembrance,” as “a wording of [the reader’s] own highest thoughts,” suggesting perhaps a Platonic realm where poetry “exists” to be discovered. In the case of *Neverafter*, these ideas are made literal—to fill up his Book, to develop its power and, perhaps, to “save” the world of the Neverafter, Timothy’s own writing cannot be forced, and it is an *actual act* of remembrance insofar as these stories do exist in the higher world of the “Authors” who will become one of the season’s main antagonists.

We first see the book's ability to (re)create canon early in the series, when the player-characters interact with Old King Cole of the British nursery rhyme first documented in 1709.⁵⁰ Depicted as the former monarch of the fallen kingdom of Jubilee, Old King Cole himself has fallen on hard times. But Cole reflects a sort of meta-textual awareness at some instinctual level when he has this following conversation with Timothy about the Times of Shadow and the corruption of the gander:

Mulligan (as Cole): They were the greatest in all the land. Nowhere in any of the realms of the Neverafter could you have found three musicians more skilled. It's such a strange thing to be born into royalty and to be a king. So much war and bloodshed, and yet Jubilee was small enough and seemingly tucked away from the matters of the larger world. It felt as though we had gotten away with something. A small and merry kingdom. We spent our time in festivals, harvests, the people were fed and happy, and my days were filled with... ordering plays and orchestras and letting leave of the castle to any musicians or bards that wished to use it. And I certainly enjoyed my share of kingly amenities. I certainly had a pipe collection, many, many... Perhaps I probably partook of tobacco more than I should, but, it was a merry place. And I know that there have always been troubles in the Neverafter that befell one place or another. But something feels wrong. Doesn't it?

Beardsley (as Timothy): Mm-hmm.

Mulligan (as Cole): And it feels so cruel to say from a man who knew so little of hardship before the war came, but I couldn't shake the feeling that... something was

⁵⁰ Though this initial recording has a unique set of lyrics, I include below the version cited in the series:
Old King Cole was a merry old soul,
And a merry old soul was he;
He called for his pipe, and he called for his bowl,
and he called for his fiddlers three.
Every fiddler he had a fiddle,
And a very fine fiddle had he,
Oh, there's none so rare as can compare,
With King Cole and his fiddlers three. (Opie and P. Opie, *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*, Oxford University Press, [1951] 1997 pp. 156–8).

different. These times came, I took up the sword off the mantle, and there was a moment before I took the sword off the wall that I wondered if it would even come off. If perhaps it had always just been there as... something... that should have stayed... (“Mirror Mirror” 10:53-13:00)

Here, recounting his background, Cole first lays out the structure of his daily life within the “canon” of his story—merriment, joy, plenty, all of these elements flowed freely in his kingdom. As he recounts the encroachment of the Times of Shadow, he expresses a kind of confusion that is further emphasized by Brennan Lee Mulligan’s improvised performance in this moment. The king’s voice is low, gruff, and distant. As he speaks, the sound of a fiddle can be heard playing in the background. Mulligan’s performance here is primarily vocal and facial—his body otherwise remains, for the most part, stiff and unmoving as he plays a saddened and confused Old King Cole. This confusion, it would seem, stems from Cole’s “knowledge” that, deep down, something has been fundamentally broken in his story, a “wrongness” that he cannot quite shake.

In Cole’s description of his gesture toward the sword, the confusion deepens, and there is an inherent skepticism as to if the sword “would even come off,” given that, in the canonical past, any blade in his kingdom would be by its very nature decorative, added “texture,” if you will, to the story of Old King Cole, and to the *image* of Old King Cole. For Mother Goose’s book does not only record a story, it also allows for pictographic representations that arise from and are attached to the stories that he begins to add to his book, doubling the work of remediation. In the case of Cole, as he engages in the oral act of storytelling, of recounting his own canonical past and his now corrupted present, Timothy’s book reacts, first with music, then with light as the book opens. Within that light, Timothy begins to see images of Cole’s past, happier self, his kingdom, his fiddlers. And as Cole continues to recount the story and Timothy begins to *record* it in his book, Cole is drawn into the book. His present, “corrupted” self vanishes, and the book

reflects an image of Cole's canon, along with the words of his nursery rhyme. Interestingly, when Timothy Goose records "true" stories like Cole's, his own handwriting changes and becomes "illuminated" as it is given permanence and, ultimately, transformed from a purely oral tale to a stable print record. In this way, Timothy becomes representative of the Romantic-era chronicler of folktales and ballads alluded to above, and begins to reflect on many of the same anxieties about the remediation of orality into print that were common during the Romantic period.⁵¹



Old King Cole

These anxieties are alluded to early in the season. Though the book is presented initially

⁵¹ Some of these anxieties include, but are not limited to, a kind of "nostalgia for a time before the written word had usurped the seemingly unmediated relation between the speaking bard or minstrel and his listening audience" (Marlon B. Ross, qtd in Simpson 5).

as a potential solution to the problem of the Times of Shadow, it is precisely its role as a *static* record that the player's "ludic selves"⁵² begin to identify as an issue:

Mulligan (as Goose): Well, I speak now to the man who has brought a sliver of hope to the realms of the Neverafter.

Beardsley (as Timothy): The book!

Mulligan (as Goose): Clever wish.

Beardsley (as Timothy): It's worked!

Mulligan (as Goose): Or, rather, it has begun to work.

Beardsley (as Timothy): Okay.

Mulligan (as Goose): As I'm sure you might've fathomed by now, these lands of the Neverafter are lands of magic, lands of wonder and mystery, and indeed, they are lands of story, and all creatures of these lands know many versions of their tales. Or, rather, each version knows itself. But hanging in the balance of harmony, they simply live the wanderings of their stories, tell the tales they tell, but occasionally, there are some whose tales involve the collecting of tales, and therein lies a potential gateway into what some might call the true reality of our world, horrifying as it is to consider that there are as many Mother Gooses as there are Little Red Riding Hoods, as many Frog Princes as there are Sleeping Beauties. These people that are friends of yours exist again and again and again, not within the same land, but upon different times, and the Neverafter is more than just the few kingdoms surrounding Pottingham, but rather the Neverafter is even larger than most folk expect or know. Some few have glimpsed the true reality. Some fairies, I believe all witches, and as of late, some princesses as well. But more to the point, also you, Timothy, have glimpsed it. You have found a way to bring your son back from the fate that the gander had befall him. While he is not fully back, you have preserved a version of him.

⁵² See Daniel Vella, *The Ludic Subject and the Ludic Self: Analyzing the 'I-in-the-Gameworld'* (2015).

Beardsley (as Timothy): Is that good for him, though? Does he like... What happened to King Cole? Is this a good thing that I'm providing for them?

Mulligan (as Goose): I leave that up to you to decide. I can tell you this, they are happy.

Beardsley (as Timothy): Okay.

Mulligan (as Goose): I understand the horror of placing someone in this book, but the truth is, you and I are somewhat in a book right now. ("Once Upon a Time" 2:07:20-10:14)

In this scene, Timothy Goose has died in one of the worlds alluded to above and, due to the nature of his book, is allowed to travel to another, bringing with him his memories and experiences, and preserving the memories and experiences of the rest of the player characters who interacted with the book as well. But though, up until this point, the book has been consistently coded as a wondrous, positive space, we see here for the first time a sliver of doubt concerning the nature of this "preservation." Here, too, the nature of the Neverafter is revealed as not a singular, static universe, but rather as layers upon layers of different "realities," variations upon a story or theme reminiscent of orality's dynamic potential. When the Golden Goose—who is associated with times of plenty and happiness and, for the most part, the canon—speaks of the "horror of placing someone in a book," they echo some of the concerns of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century folklorists, minstrels, balladeers, and, of course, poets, given its necessary curtailment of spontaneity, dynamism, and originality. This moment is also the first time that we see a player character pushing back on the idea of the canon as inherently good, even as the canon is what allows Timothy Goose to protect those who have suffered greatly from the Times of Shadow—such as Old King Cole—and even those who have been killed or destroyed by it, which is the case with Timothy Goose himself and of his son Jack who, in the world of the

Neverafter, is the Jack of so many stories and rhymes.⁵³ This discussion also reflects the Golden Goose’s meta-textual knowledge of the “true nature” of the Neverafter, knowledge which they then impart on Timothy “Mother” Goose as a storied collector of tales.

This awareness ultimately facilitates Timothy’s role as a collector of stories, even as it opens up avenues of possibility for new and, crucially, *dynamic* tellings that the season expands upon as it progresses. The improvised “voicings” of the different storybook characters that each player produces simultaneously arise from and are at odds with the inherently static nature of print as opposed to orality. In a sense, the entire narrative arc of *Neverafter* could be described in this framing as a series of improvised *voicings* that seek to reassert and recenter the unique subjective experiences of the players’ characters. Though Old King Cole is subsumed into Mother Goose’s book, this is not a fate shared by most of the other fairy tale characters encountered by the protagonists as Mother Goose and the others become increasingly suspicious of the power of the canon to control and prescribe. Similarly, Romantic poets like Byron draw from the language and structure of improvisation as a means of re-investing their work with a sense of creative and poetic spontaneity—the key characteristics of the poet-as-genius.



⁵³ Some of the stories and rhymes referenced in the season include, but are not limited to, the story of Jack and the Beanstalk (and the golden egg that ensues from this encounter), and the nursery rhyme “Jack be Nimble.”

Neverafter continues to explore this tension in many ways, but perhaps most centrally in its depiction of the space known as “The Lines Between,” a castle and world that acts as the repository of all *written* stories. Though the castle of the Lines Between is described as vast and elaborate, it is made small by the surrounding “emptiness” which is in fact a sea of sound and storytelling known as the Auroratory. This expanse acts as both a sky and an ocean surrounding the relative smallness that is the Lines Between, and it is within the Auroratory that shifting, dynamic tales are told and retold in endless variations made possible only by the nature of orality and oral storytelling itself. To take a step outside of the fictive universe of the *Neverafter* for a moment, the presence of the Auroratory begs the question—where in this liminal space would we place the improvised voicings of the player characters and their ludic selves? To ask the question more directly—where do the stories produced by *actual play* exist within this fictional universe?

This question is one that haunted the history of improvisation, particularly given that this originally Italian form of storytelling and play co-emerges alongside industrial print culture:

With few exceptions, poetic improvisation on the Romantic stage, in salons, or in more casual venues such as the marketplace, was an oral phenomenon. Yet this mode of oral poetry was thoroughly embedded in a culture of print, from the often clichéd literary topics that were usually assigned to improvisers to the widespread practice of recording extemporized poetry in shorthand and publishing it after the performance to the extensive promotion and reception of *improvvisatori* and *improvviatrici* in print media. Like the bards, ballad-singers, and minstrels who proliferate in Romantic literature, the Romantic-era improviser is in this sense a conscious anachronism. (Esterhammer “The Improvisation of Poetry” 241-2)

Dimension 20 itself parallels this “embedding” of an ephemeral medium within a more ostensibly permanent one, given that the improvised, orally-oriented performances of playing *Dungeons & Dragons* are recorded, edited, and distributed to a mass audience that, as with a book, can choose to pause, restart, skip, and otherwise manipulate this intermedial record of what is normally an impermanent performative act of play. In this way, *Dimension 20: Neverafter* mirrors the anxieties and concerns that arose from this tension between orality, print, and improvisation during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while also engaging with issues of “liveness” and taxonomies of distortion within the field of performance studies.⁵⁴

There are other important aspects of the *Lines Between* that merit further study. First, as a (comparatively) small island of print media within a wider sea of oral storytelling, the *Lines Between* implicitly privileges the dynamism of oral storytelling. In this universe, this castle made of parchment and ink was first constructed and established by the aforementioned Authors, who are characterized as alien, distant, uncaring, and deific in their power. The fairies of the *Neverafter*, aligning themselves as they do with the canon (often also termed “destiny” throughout the season) attempt to “repair” the corruption of the *Neverafter* from within the stories primarily to avoid drawing the attention (and ire) of the distant Authors. The canon literally anchors the *Lines Between*, and the Canonade—a kind of sanctum of the canon and the source of the so-called “true” ink which can effect real change within the world of stories—is described as follows:

Mulligan: Mother Goose.... Looking through the keyhole... you see, brightly illuminated, the chamber within, which you can actually get on a knee and look through the keyhole into the chamber within here. A vast shrine, enormous, sweeping staircases,

⁵⁴ See Bay-Cheng, “Taxonomy of Distortion: Along the Media Performance Continuum” in *Performance and Media: Taxonomies for a Changing Field* (2015): 39-64.

platforms, all composed of glorious pillars of text and parchment and books and scrolls. And at a tall pedestal at the very top, swirling and hovering in space as though weightless, is a perfect glass inkwell, and ink flows and spirals out of it, covered in light. Something profound... As you gaze at it, almost awestruck by what you behold, you see something within the ink. ("The Lines Between" 1:03:03-1:04:21)

Here, we see the Canonade (and the ink that it contains and is the source of) described using language reminiscent of the divine.⁵⁵ In this sense, the Authors that wield and shape the ink are themselves part of a canon that is initially conceptualized as a source of destiny and transcendental wonder. The light that allows Timothy Goose to perceive this space at all is one that emanates from his book, and from the book of his fellow storyteller, Scheherazade,⁵⁶ further tying the source of the book's power to the canon itself.

This canon, however, is overwhelming for Mother Goose. After a failed dice roll in response to witnessing the Canonade, even indirectly, Mulligan narrates what happens to Mother Goose:

You stare into the ink, and you think about how often you've been able to write these sort of perfect poems, these things that just feel so right, exactly as they should be, going into your book. Where has that been coming from? You've been a witch your whole life, but you never felt a magic like that, like the universe was confirming something while you were doing it. You didn't have to wait until after to know that you did the right thing. How amazing, how incredible, to know that you were doing the right thing in the moment of doing it. What a gift and what a rare thing in lands as troubled as the Neverafter. You stare in that ink, and really quickly, it's your whole field of vision. You don't need to see the keyhole, the peripheral light. You don't even need to see the rest of the shrine in there,

⁵⁵ A clear allusion to the tradition of the literary canon itself, and its origins in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See, for instance, David G. Riede, *Oracles and Hierophants: Constructions of Romantic Authority* (1991) for an account of how Romantic poets like Coleridge and Wordsworth co-opt the language of divine inspiration in their constructions of Romantic authorial authority.

⁵⁶ The storyteller of *One Thousand and One Nights*' frame narrative, Scheherazade occupies the role of Timothy "Mother" Goose within her own world, a land called "the Endless Nights" that neither the audience members nor the player characters ever see. It is in large part due to the "corruption" of the Times of Shadow that the walls between realities that would have normally separated these two storytelling traditions from one another thin enough for communication to take place between them and, eventually, for Scheherazade to pull Timothy Goose and the rest of the player characters into the Lines Between in the first place.

just that ink fills your whole vision. You start to feel so good about the things you've done right that it's hard to notice at first that you're trembling. Suddenly, you start to feel a little flat, a little bit like... maybe the most important things about you are things that have nothing to do with who you think you are. And you feel a sort of thundering emptiness, a deep, profound shadow, and you wonder if perhaps you and everything that's ever happened to you and everything you've ever cared about is pretty frivolous. There are things looking at you, and they're real. They're real, and you now understand how terrifying that is. They're real and you're not, and you were a fool to come here, because now they can see you. And if they can see you, there's nothing that can stop them from doing whatever they want to you. And now you know your whole body is shaking, but what the hell is a body? That's not anything. That's an idea. It's a joke, and you're nothing more than scratches of ink on someone else's piece of paper. ("The Lines Between" 1:05:45-1:08:10)

Here, as Mulligan narrates Timothy's existentially fraught response to what he is witnessing, Mulligan also describes Timothy's experiences of writing in the Book using language reminiscent of Romanticism. Mulligan describes Timothy's writing as "perfect poems," as "these things that just feel so right, exactly as they should be," as, in a sense, the *remembrances* that Keats describes in his account of poetry and negative capability. Furthermore, the framing of Timothy feeling as if "the universe was confirming something" while he was "doing it," as an experience which flowed naturally as if from a higher truth is reminiscent of Wordsworth's poetic theory of writing as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth 4). Thus, though *Neverafter* ultimately complicates a Wordsworthian notion of writing as only achievable by "a man... endowed with more lively sensibility... than are supposed to be common among mankind," Timothy's relationship with the Book in the first half of the season nonetheless engages with and draws from this Romantic tradition.

The intensity of the "realness" of this canon and the realizations associated with it shake Timothy Goose to his core, rendering him, quite literally flat: "Looking at your hands, they are flat. You're a piece of parchment. You're just a piece of paper, and you're looking at an illustration of yourself, and that's your body" (1:08:08-10). Thus, though the Authors are, for

Timothy and his friends, for all intents and purposes gods, they are not benevolent, and there is an apathy and detachment to them that Brennan Lee Mulligan emphasizes again and again throughout the season. Timothy Goose's "flattening" here parallels the "flattening" of oral declamation and improvisation through the keeping of written records and the associations of print culture alluded to above. This interaction sets the tone for the players-characters' relationship to the Authors, a relationship which is fundamentally antagonistic insofar as the Authors limit and curtail the characters' agency. And yet part of the horror that Mother Goose experiences in this moment is that *he himself wields the power of the Authors* through the "true" book that he has acquired. The moments of "things that just feel so right," the moments in which Timothy has encoded and preserved the stories of people like Old King Cole, are themselves rooted in and born from this greater cosmic horror. It is in this instance in which Timothy's relationship with his book fundamentally changes. His earlier anxieties about the potential limitations imposed on stories through their translation into print are brought to the forefront, and much of the rest of the season is dedicated to the *resistance* of the canon and the forces of destiny arrayed around it, even as the players navigate a variety of other crucial challenges that similarly seek to shape or alter the canon or, in the case of the faction known as the Princesses, destroy it altogether.

Ultimately, it is the voice once again which brings Timothy's disassociation, this time Scheherazade, who, thanks to a positive die roll⁵⁷ on the game master's part, says this to Timothy: "Real? I don't give a shit. I don't come from a nice story. I believe in you, and I believe in me, and I think we're just real enough" ("The Lines Between" 1:10:00). In this moment, the

⁵⁷ A "natural" 20 on a 20-sided die, which is, of course, the highest one can roll. Within the history and tradition of *Dimension 20*, natural 20s are considered to be an automatic success at an attempted ability check, saving throw, or any other roll that uses this die.

dice facilitate the liberatory effects of this improvised voicing, lending a ludic structure to the improvised performances of *Neverafter*. Here, the natural 20 on Mulligan's part as Scherezade attempts to "dispel" the flattening effect on Timothy, facilitating as it does the reclamation of narrative authority from the Authors themselves, further cements the importance of improvisation to this season both diegetically and at the level of game mechanics. And of course, it was also a dice roll (a failure rather than a success) which *allowed* Timothy this insight into the Authors, the *Neverafter*, and his own place in it, knowledge which proves vital to the Intrepid Heroes' ultimate aims for their world. Thus, success *or* failure can both strike the proper "chord," can "tell a story." This aspect further emphasizes the degree to which *actual play does* constitute a fully emergent medium, even as it draws from and remediates earlier narratives, media, and aesthetics. After this moment, Timothy and the rest of the player-character spend the rest of the season trying to provide an answer to the question—what is the alternative to these established canons which act like chains binding characters to stories that they may have no agency in?⁵⁸ The answer that they ultimately posit is one that does not fundamentally defy the ink, but rather redistributes it. During the season finale, "The Ending of All Things (Part 2)," Mother Goose, having entered the Canonade to stop an attempt at the destruction of the world(s) of stories, is able to use his book to fundamentally reshape their fictive universe. In the attempt, when asked by the GM, Brennan Lee Mulligan to describe the casting of this reality-altering spell, this exchange occurs:

⁵⁸ A key concern of the faction known as the Princesses, which is made up of fairy-tale-princesses like Snow White, Cinderella, and Rapunzel who have chosen to actively defy their stories in an act of radical reclamation of subjectivity.

Mulligan: Tim, Mother Goose, what do we begin to see as the ink spreads?

Beardsley (as Timothy): A small piece, almost like communion, a small piece of the true book and a small drop of ink find each person... (2:02:22)

Though this description leads to a brief interruption⁵⁹ of the players' immediate immersion in the storyworld⁶⁰ of *Neverafter* as they joke about the parallels between this moment of narrative emancipation and the act of Christian Communion, it is nonetheless a striking characterization of the change that the character of Mother Goose sees himself as enacting upon the world as a radical transformation much like Transubstantiation. Later, this description is further clarified, and the "small drop of ink" becomes a pen for every character in every story ever written, quills composed of the "true" ink of the Canonade for writing in the scrap of the "true" book that each individual suddenly receives. In a sense, this decision does not ultimately challenge neither Authorship *nor* print culture—instead, Timothy "Mother" Goose here democratizes and distributes both more widely. With this act, the season signals a departure from the Romantic (and primarily Wordsworthian) understanding of the role of the poet as a distinct individual separate from and in some ways superior to the non-poetic masses.⁶¹

Though this shift might initially seem initially utopic, it is nonetheless one that is rooted in print, in the material act of writing. What Timothy Goose and his companions have done, the implication seems to be, is allow for a fluidity to the arc that that path can take, a fluidity reflective, of course, of our own reality. It is unclear from the epilogue what the role of orality and oral storytelling has become at this point—does the Auratory still exist? What about the

⁵⁹ These brief interruptions bear interesting parallels to the role of Byronic digression in *Don Juan*, where the poem's speaker and narrator interrupts the dramatic flow of the poem with his own reflections, interjections, jokes, etc. In the case of *Don Juan*, these digressions serve to further cultivate the poem's improvisatory pose.

⁶⁰ See Marie-Laure Ryan, *A New Anatomy of Storyworlds: What Is, What If, As If* (2022).

⁶¹ See Jacques Rancière, "The Politics of the Spider" (2011): "Equality [in the Wordsworthian model] is given from on high, and the poem completes itself in a program of educating the people..." (245).

Lines Between? Ultimately, *Neverafter* never fully resolves the anxieties that it raises about the tension between different forms of media, and the question of what is lost when a story is recorded and, therefore, made static and unchanging. Might we find this resolution in the act of improvised roleplay itself, especially within the contexts of self-fashioning and subject-formation that tie this game, however distantly, to the “Romantic century”? In what follows, I will offer one further case studies from *Neverafter*—that of the aforementioned Princesses and the role of improvisation in their own efforts at independence and (gendered) agency.



The Canonade



The ink at the heart of the Canonade.

IV. The Princesses: Endings and Ephemeral Improvisation

As described above, another major faction within the narrative of *Neverafter* is known as the Princesses, sometimes also called the “Daughters of the Crown.” Their number includes darker iterations of folkloric figures, a darkness (and, remember, a corruption or distortion of print) that is simultaneously a sign of the destabilization of reality within the world of the *Neverafter* and a road toward their own personal awakening as to the true nature of their world. An undead Snow White leads the group, accompanied by core allies that include a Cinderella garbed in glass armor, a spiderlike, manipulative Rapunzel, and *La Bête*. This latter character—the Beast—is from a version of the story where, rather than agree to live with the original male Beast in romantic bliss, Beauty consumed the prince, thereby absorbing his curse and wielding it for her own personal empowerment. In this section, I will explore some of the ways in which *Neverafter* engages with the patriarchal roots of fairy stories like “Sleeping Beauty,” “Snow White,” or “Cinderella,” further unsettling an already-disrupted canon. This engagement is specifically mediated through the improvised “voicings” that I have described above, and the Princesses represent the only other group in the *Neverafter* that centers resistance to the canon in their

efforts, as our main adventurers begin to do.

Rosamund du Prix, played and improvised by Siobhan Thompson, is courted by this group from early on in the season, and Rosamund acts as a lens into the experiences of these other women. As Rosamund eventually says, her issue with her original tale is not only the story itself, but “the stories within the stories,” the deeply gendered meta-narratives that shaped and continue to shape her life:

because if my parents hadn't told me that my entire existence was to find true love, then maybe I wouldn't hurt so bad about it. Then I would've gotten up out of the thorn bush and I would've gotten out myself, and I would've been fine with that, and I would've met my friends, and then I would be here. But it's the stories within the stories that have really broken my heart. (“Daughters of the Crown” 1:35:03)

These meta-textual narratives that “have really broken [Rosamund’s] heart” are, of course, reflective not only of historical (and specifically for this context, Euro-American) and contemporaneous ideologies, but also of a larger, static, unchanging canon, the same canon that prompts Timothy’s own anxieties described above. As Cinderella communicates to Rosamund during the latter’s travel through the liminal spaces between life and death,

[i]f destiny was real, then so many of the things that happened didn't need to happen, and that would be a bitter pill to swallow if destiny was unfeeling or unthinking. We don't believe that destiny is unthinking and unfeeling. *We believe that destiny is a project*, and that there are entities responsible for it. Namely, the ones who gave you your curse, and the one that showed up to guide me towards my happily ever after. (“Once Upon a Time” my emphasis)

Within the universe of the Neverafter—a storyworld simultaneously made up of the individual consciousnesses of each of the world’s fictional inhabitants *and* the meta-textual consciousness of the Authors themselves—destiny is indeed a project, one that perpetuates larger cultural

narratives that are necessarily embedded in our stories. Much as Timothy “Mother” Goose eventually opts for a path toward the resistance of some of these narratives, the Princesses—including Rosamund—seek to reclaim their agency through resistance of the canon, a resistance that is literally, visually, and orally represented to viewers through fluid, dynamic acts of improvised performance.

In the end, however, the Daughters of the Crown prove a deeply antagonistic force in the story of the Neverafter, in large part because their own response to the question of canon is *not* one of resistance through reclamation, subject-formation, and improvisation, but rather through the absolute destruction of all stories, the drowning of all the pages that ever were in “true ink.” In a sense, there are certain parallels between the Princesses’ plan and that of the player-characters’: for one, both posit a radical redistribution of the “true” ink, and both would be departures from an established canon. But where the player-characters seek to redistribute the *ability to tell improvised stories even in a world of print*, the Princesses instead seek to destroy not just the canon, but *all* stories altogether:

No matter how hard we fight, the fairies will always have that castle on their side. They will always have what our stories *were*. And even if we try to tell a new story, and we try to fill it with all of the things that would make it *feel* good, it will still be just a reflection. It will be a shadow of the old thing, because you know and I know and Cinderella knows that things weren’t good before the Times of Shadow. So, we are fighting for an end—we are fighting for an end to these stories. (“Daughters of the Crown” 1:39:00-1:40:11)

This statement, spoken by Snow White to Rosamund du Prix in the moment where she reveals her faction’s ultimate goals, is not only reflective of a tragic, nihilistic despair, but also problematizes print culture specifically—“the fairies will always have that castle on their side. They will always have what our stories *were*.” As we know, the castle is a construction and

extension of the Authors themselves, the designers of the stories and the “stories within the stories” that Rosamund alludes to above, the stories which inherently alienate women like Rosamund and Snow White from their agency.

Of course, what the Princesses’ plan enacts is also, ironically, what they take fundamental issue with—the removal of agency. It is specifically (and humorously) along these lines that Rosamund attempts to rebut or at the very least delay the Princesses in their endeavor, asking for time to “experience” the world of the Neverafter before its ultimate dissolution (“Leap of Faith”). By insisting on the importance of agency and subjectivity, Rosamund implicitly argues for the kind of improvisational storytelling that has allowed the players’ ludic subjects to momentarily “defy” or move beyond the limits of the canon. Siobhan Thompson initially adopts many of the traditional tropes surrounding fairy princesses in her performance of Rosamund during the first few episodes, consistently representing her as obsessed with the “true love” that she was promised. But much as Hemans, de Stael, and Landon at times deployed improvised personae through which to explore—and, in some cases, resist—patriarchal expectations, so, too does Rosamund’s arc allow for a problematization of her story’s meta-narratives through improvised voicings. But improvisation in her case allows for the kind of resistance that, at least for Snow White, seems to remain inaccessible or inconceivable to the Princesses, a fundamental difference that leads to the final conflict between the player characters and the Daughters of the Crown.

Ultimately, Rosamund du Prix chooses to sacrifice the certainty of true love to the Baba Yaga as part of an exchange with the archetypal witch for information that will prove vital to the player characters’ final victory. Though, after the redistribution of ink alluded to above, it remains unclear whether this promise remains in effect, Siobhan Thompson’s description of

Rosamund's life in the epilogue is one that rejects the central narrative model of "Sleeping Beauty." Instead of being raised to fear and avoid spinning wheels, this new version of Rosamund du Prix is taught from a young age how to safely handle these objects. Rosamund goes on to travel through the newly (re)formed lands of the Neverafter, eventually freeing a reconstituted Snow White from her own slumber, further breaking with the gendered conventions of both of their stories. Rosamund's resistance is ultimately made possible only through the improvised voicings I have described above, though the unresolved tension of authorial (re)distribution and print culture still persists in haunting the season. Much as Byron's use of an improvisational style in a sense *authorizes* his adaptation of *Don Juan*, so, too does the improvisation at *Neverafter*'s heart allow for the exploration of these gendered alternatives.

How, then, should we resolve this seemingly unresolvable tension? Given the importance of ephemerality to the stories we tell ourselves about improvisation, isn't the ending of *Neverafter* moving even further away from that dynamic proto-state? Or is this narrative about improvisation as inherently live, ephemeral, and unrooted itself problematic? It is this subject—the question of the relationship between improvisation and ephemerality—which Gary Peters tackles in his book, *The Philosophy of Improvisation* (2009). In this book, Peters attempts to reframe improvisation: "Instead of situating [improvisation's] freedom in a future yet to be attained," Peters "follows Immanuel Kant in tracing the origin of freedom to the *prior* play of the cognitive faculties, a sense common to all (*sensus communis*) and one that the artwork helps us *remember*" (2). Put differently, Peters does not see improvisation as groundless or fully ephemeral, because "improvisation has always already happened. The decisiveness of a beginning, the marking of an unmarked space, always comes after a multitude of false starts, erasures, and abortive attempts to get things going" (1).

For Peters, all improvisation has a “prehistory [to] the work, thought in terms of its origin and the aesthetic process of origination” (2). In other words, improvisors do not reach into empty voids to improvise, even when performances are ephemeral and unrecorded. Rather, improvisation resembles the task of the *bricoleur* which Claude Lévi-Strauss first described, a kind of (re)assemblage of extant tropes, histories, identities, and so on which necessarily inform and to some extent determine the shape of the improvisation. Thus, the Princesses’ plan of total destruction would *not* allow for a new age of unbridled improvisation uninformed by the “master narratives” of Rosamund’s story. Instead, their “solution” would instead destroy any possibility of improvising on the extant themes which give Rosamund and the other players’ characters in this season the material necessary to construct what they see as liberatory subjectivities which prize improvised recombinations of narratives and tropes over their total decimation. Erasure curtails improvisation’s revolutionary potential, rooted as it is in its recombinant nature.



Rosamund du Prix, a.k.a., Sleeping Beauty

Conclusion

Thus far in this chapter, I have endeavored to emphasize the connections between improvisation, orality and print, and Romantic aesthetics, all in an effort to establish some of the ways in which Romantic-era thinking has shaped (and continues to shape) the tensions and anxieties that remain very much alive in twenty-first media cultures and are explored in recent *actual play* series. Furthermore, by showcasing here the applicability of some of the analytical tools available to Romantic scholars to *actual play*, I have demonstrated the indebtedness of TTRPGs as performed in *actual play* series to many of the ways in which Romantic-era writers thought about and constructed their poetic personae. As an entertainment genre that brings together improvisation, long-form, collaborative storytelling, and, crucially, the projected exploration of externalized subjectivities, *actual play* bears further analysis through the framework of Romanticism and Romantic writing. Here, I have focused primarily on the relationship between orality, (re)mediation, and Romantic-era anxieties about folklore, improvisation, and spontaneity. As a story about stories, *Dimension 20: Neverafter* is rich with layers of meaning.

In *Neverafter*, I see an after-image of the role that improvisation played for Romantic writers, in particular Lord Byron. As I have shown, *Neverafter* deploys improvisation as a response to anxieties about media, orality, and print culture that Romantic-era writers and folklorists similarly wrote and debated about. The steady rise of a mass reading public throughout the nineteenth century created the kind of demand which fueled the efforts of those who sought to chronicle forms of storytelling that were traditionally oral. During that process, anxieties about the potential loss of authenticity and originality suggested that something, perhaps, would be lost in the remediation of these stories. At the same time, Romantic-era writers like Lord Byron sought ways to revitalize poetry through the incorporation of Italian improvisation, all in the service of projecting a sense of poetic originality and spontaneity

consistent with the period's debates about the role of the poet.

In this chapter, I argued that Lord Byron's use of improvisational techniques in *Don Juan* (the *ottava rima* structure, the digressions, the introduction of and emphasis on mobility) helped to facilitate and authorize his ironic representation of the mock epic's titular character. The sense of an improvised conversation ("I rattle on exactly as I'd talk / With any body in a ride or walk") aids the poem's destabilization of Don Juan as a stock character akin to those improvised in *commedia dell'arte* performances (Byron *DJ* XV.19). Similarly, *Neverafter* draws on the inherently improvisatory nature of *actual play* to dramatize and further reinforce the characters' defiance of an established canon. These moments of defiance are signaled by what I here have called *voicings*, the improvised performances of the players through which they construct individualized subjectivities that serve to dramatize the emancipatory role of improvisation in *Neverafter*. Through the figure of Timothy "Mother" Goose, these *voicings* become accessible to all through a democratization of authorship—everyone can now simultaneously write and speak or voice their own story in a hybridization of print and orality. In this act of democratization, *Neverafter* ultimately problematizes the Romanticist model of authorship championed by figures like William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Lord Byron, opening the door to a more collectivist understanding of intersubjective creation. Thus, though *Neverafter's* engagement with these ideas in many ways parallels that of the Romantic poets I have here outlined, it is not a simple reproduction of these ideas or anxieties. *Actual play* draws from and is indebted to a variety of aesthetic and formal practices, but it continues to afford storytellers with unique and expansive possibilities.

Chapter III: Enclosed Subjectivities and Revolutionary Fairies in *A Court of Fey & Flowers*

Introduction

Dimension 20: A Court of Fey & Flowers (2022), the fifteenth season of Dropout's long-running *actual play* series, *Dimension 20*, begins with a wager. Lord Squak Airavis, played by Lou Wilson, and Lady Chirp Featherfowl, played by Emily Axford, make an early bet with Dellosa de la Rue, played by Oscar Montoya, that they will find "true love" by the end of the Bloom (i.e., the "season" in Regency Britain), setting up a marriage plot that never fully coalesces. As these three characters are all Archfey, powerful fairies in their own right, the wager is sealed with a burst of magic, an everyday act for them which implicitly signals a wealth of power. As gamemaster (GM) Aabria Iyengar concludes her description of the scene, she turns to another player—Surena Marie, who is secretly playing Binx Choppely, an outsider to the Fairy Courts lately come from the Material Plane:

Iyengar: ...you all feel a pulse of energy because Fey deals are powerful, and powerful most here and now, at the center of the surge of magic that you're all here to celebrate. You [toward **Marie**] feel that pulse just like everyone does, that everyone here at the Bloom felt at some level, but you're in it, you're around it, you are suffused with the gravity of the magic that these Fey toss about for fun. ("A Bloom to Remember")

Here, Iyengar anticipates what will be one of the dominant narrative threads of *A Court of Fey & Flowers*: enclosure, capital accumulation, and, through these elements, the curtailment of the individual, subjective identities of Binx Choppely's own fairy friends, who, due to the lack of fairy magic flowing back into the Material Plane, have all turned into what Binx terms "sacred objects" ("The Rule of Sneakery"). Iyengar signals a tonal shift here through her performance—

her voice deepens, her body moves, and her expression changes to one of bitter contempt (see figure below). While *A Court of Fey & Flowers* begins riotously and playfully, then, this moment gestures toward the deeper systems of inequity which make the Courts' idle games possible—all at the expense of Binx's own fairy Court.



Figure 2 ("*A Bloom to Remember*")

Though I will discuss this series' notion of "sacred objects" and its implications for thinking about enclosure further below, what I wish to emphasize here is the way in which access to magic and magical power in *A Court of Fey & Flowers* clearly map onto structures of income inequality, deepening the season's ties to Romantic narratives about enclosure and its consequences. That inequality, grounded though it is in narratives of industrial extraction, is also an inequity framed through the access (or lack thereof) to a free, individualized subjective experience. In this way, *A Court of Fey & Flowers* revitalizes and expands upon Romantic-era anxieties about the consequences of enclosure to encompass forms of subjectivistic alienation borne from the inherent inequity of extractive capital accumulation. Furthermore, *A Court of Fey*

& *Flowers* adapts the role of the Romantic fairy for its own purposes: where the eponymous fairy of Shelley's *Queen Mab*, for instance, can only offer prophetic dreams of an unrealized, utopian return to nature and individual liberty, the fairy player-characters of *A Court of Fey & Flowers* enact revolution.

Thus, I will be exploring the ways in which *A Court of Fey & Flowers* adapts from and builds on Romantic ideas concerning fairies, the sublime, and the perceived dangers of enclosure. As we will see, I tie these concerns to the role of class and class difference in this season of *Dimension 20*, an analytical lens further strengthened by the similarities between the “character-systems” of *A Court of Fey & Flowers* and those which rose to prominence during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries starting with Austen's work (Woloch 35). Here, I am drawing on Alex Woloch's argument that

industrialization and economic stratification harden a division of labor that constricts full human beings to increasingly specialized roles. Such specialization underlies both the engulfing and exploding of minor characters, the worker, and the eccentric, as both conditions result from the disjunction of (exterior) surface and (interior) depth. (36-7)

Woloch goes on to suggest that novels from Austen onward tend toward an “asymmetric character-system [which] allows the novel to juxtapose [the main or major characters'] development with the conjoined processes of social stratification” (38). Woloch defines “character-systems” as “the arrangement of multiple and differentiated character-spaces—differentiated configurations and manipulations of the human figure—into a unified narrative structure” (27). For Woloch, major characters are “figures [which] become centers-of-consciousness, [and] which organize the narrative” direction of the text as a whole (32). Ultimately, in Woloch's reading of the nineteenth-century novel, he suggests that

a dialectical literary form is generated out of the relationship between inequality and democracy. The realist novel is infused with the sense that any character is a potential hero, but simultaneously enchanted with the freestanding individual, defined through his or her interior consciousness. In the paradigmatic character-structure of the realist novel, any character *can* be a protagonist, but only one character is: just as increasing political equality, and a maturing logic of human rights, develop amid acute economic and social stratification. (38)

Put differently, Woloch sees the realist novel's tendency to follow these "centers-of-consciousness" as itself rooted in contemporaneous debates about the role of the individual within the wider social tapestry, especially in the context of the "acute economic and social stratification" that was a direct result of practices like enclosure and the growing pains of the Industrial Revolution. In his reading of Jane Austen, Woloch argues that though "the moral force of *Pride and Prejudice* has been traditionally located within Elizabeth Bennet's 'full development,'" this 'moral force' also "rests equally in the novel's refusal to stay *within* Elizabeth's development, in its insistence on showing how the protagonist's development rests on top of a system of utilization which fragments the fictional universe that surrounds her," an insistence which Woloch reads as a "critique implicit in the structure of characterization that Austen originates" (39-40). Thus, the nineteenth-century novel (the term Woloch employs throughout his 2003 book, *The One Vs. the Many*) as shaped by Jane Austen is always already implicitly aware of the sociocultural dimensions which undergird the kind of social stratification that prizes certain forms of individual subjectivity over others. In enacting these systems, Austen also destabilizes and questions them (Woloch 40).

In my reading of *A Court of Fey & Flowers*, I reflect on the role of enclosure in similarly critiquing a "system of utilization" and class-based stratification present within the fictive universe of this season, and which stands in for an attack on analogous socioeconomic structures

today. Just as, expanding on Woloch's reading, Austen's "structure of characterization" implicitly *encloses* (to tie these concepts together) or curtails the subjective experiences of "minor" characters as part of its critique, so, too does enclosure in *A Court of Fey & Flowers* reflect an analogous (if fantastical) form of "economic" and even subjectivistic stratification. This season of *Dimension 20*'s partial employment of the tabletop roleplaying game, *Good Society: A Jane Austen Roleplaying Game*, reinforces the Austenian "structure of characterization" which Woloch describes above. As we will see, *Good Society* employs the conceit of major (as opposed to minor) characters in ways that clearly draw from and build on Romantic-era ideas and anxieties about just who could access heroic or "center-of-consciousness" roles. In *A Court of Fey & Flowers*, the liberation of fairy magic from an extractive project of enclosure is also coded as a reclamation of individual subjectivity. Thus, *A Court of Fey & Flowers* not only *draws* from Austen's socio-economic critique—it expands it. Produced in a historical period of intense income inequality and rapid technological change, *A Court of Fey & Flowers* signals a renewed interest in Romanticism's revolutionary potential.

As part of this exploration, I also illustrate some of the parallels between how *A Court of Fey & Flowers* navigates scandal, rumor, and celebrity and Romantic-era conceptualizations of these ideas. In so doing, I show that this season of *Dimension 20* draws from a Byronic model for subjectivity in its representation of Lord Squak Airavis and Lady Chirp Featherfowl as Byronic heroes whose appeal is rooted in their capacity to transgress against social norms. As I argue below, these characters work to implicitly expand the (originally white male) boundaries of the Byronic hero beyond their traditional constraints. Lou Wilson indirectly participates in a long history of African American artists who turned to Romanticism and, in particular, to Byron in exploring different expressions of Black masculinity and identity (Sandler 40). And Emily

Axford's performance as the queer Lady Chirp Featherfowl adapts a traditionally male character type, rendering it accessible to others. As Em C. Friedman and Maria K. Alberto argue, "*actual play* enables performer-players (many of whom are queer and a significant number are people of color) to tackle roles that mainstream media would never allow them to perform..." (150).

Furthermore, the Lords of the Wings employ a model of scandalous celebrity in the (eventual) service of ending the magical enclosure of the Bloom, thus allowing for the free access to individual subjectivity which, by comparison, the minor characters of Austen's novels necessarily (and purposefully) did not have access to. Thus, though *A Court of Fey & Flowers* draws from the aesthetics and structuring principles of the Regency era, it does not simply reproduce them. Rather, *A Court of Fey & Flowers* builds on and adapts this framework for its own emancipatory purposes. As I will show, the architecture of scandalous celebrity developed by Clara Tuite to describe aspects of Byronic celebrity culture can be analytically applied to the ways in which this season of *Dimension 20* simulates and builds on Regency structures and norms, even as it deploys this framework in original ways.

The ludic simulation of a controlled, carefully segmented social hierarchy in *A Court of Fey & Flowers* lives alongside the intense (super)natural and magical vibrancy of the lands of Fairie as they are imagined existing in this game. The infamous marriage plot remains central for certain characters in *A Court of Fey & Flower*, even as others simultaneously subvert this convention. But the different player-characters' navigation of romance all occurs against a backdrop of the vying of different Courts for control of the magic of the "Bloom." Here, the Bloom's function is twofold. Firstly, it mirrors the social "season" in Regency-era life of balls, countryside excursions, and all the other public, social networks within which Austen's characters navigate the expectations of society that are often in tension with sentimental love.

During the Regency, the “season” served dual purposes—by drawing aristocrats away from their country estates and into London for a time, political business could be settled or discussed. But the season also marked the opening of the “marriage mart,” where the goal for many young women—or, as we see in some of Austen’s works, their mothers’—was to secure a proposal. But in *A Court of Fey & Flowers*, the Bloom also has a different connotation; it is a concentration of magical power, an important moment of cyclical change for which the most powerful Fey and Archfey come together.

Though the Bloom is initially presented as a natural upwelling of magic to be shared equally between the different Fey Courts, we quickly learn that the Bloom is instead a celebration of control, of privation, and, ultimately, of layers of enclosure. The major Fairy Courts—the Seelie, the Unseelie, and the Court of Wonder—collaborate to maintain the energy of the Bloom within their Courts, rather than allowing it to move from the world of Fairy to the mortal realm and vice versa, perverting the (super)natural order. In this way, the Courts at the heart of this conspiracy are representative of yet another thread from the Romantic and pre-Romantic periods—the role of enclosure in the concentration of wealth and private property in the hands of the landed gentry. As I have alluded to above, however, “enclosure” has other connotations in *A Court of Fey & Flowers*, implications tied to questions of power, individual subjectivity, and the potential for the alienation of that subjectivity as a result of material, economic conditions.

Alongside this narrative of enclosure exist the fairies. In *A Court of Fey & Flowers*, fairies both perpetuate (in the form of the antagonists as played by gamemaster Aabria Iyengar) the systemic inequality born from the Bloom’s enclosure *and* ultimately resist and undo this enclosure (through the actions and decisions of the main player-characters). As we will see

below, this kind of symbolic instability is what allows fairies to come to mean so many different things for a wide range of time periods and cultures, and each iteration has its unique sociocultural dimension(s). For the purposes of this chapter, I am especially interested in the role that fairies played during the Romantic period, during which fairies become much more closely tied to imagination, nature, and, by extension, both Romantic beauty and the sublime. At the same time, fairies come to symbolize for writers like Percy Bysshe Shelley revolution and resistance to industry's perceived encroachment into and exploitation of the natural world. It is through these connotative and symbolic lenses that I will approach the role of fairies and the Feywild more broadly in *A Court of Fey & Flowers*, juxtaposing Romanticist models and aesthetics with what I see as their adaptations in this season of *Dimension 20*. In *A Court of Fey & Flowers*, enclosure becomes synonymous with the alienation from one's own individual subjectivity, and the main cast's efforts center around the reclamation of a more widely redistributed potential for subjective experience through the revolutionary power of the sublime.

In this chapter, I will explore some of the ways in which *A Court of Fey & Flowers* simultaneously engages with different aspects of Regency-era writing and thought that are rooted in and adapted from Romanticism. As I will show, the characters, the game's setting, and the overall conflicts that the story presents to the players can all be read and approached through the lens of enclosure and the Romantic sublime, particularly given this season's representation of fairies. As a season that is fundamentally about transgressing and rebelling against systems that developed in the Romantic period, *A Court of Fey & Flowers* cannot be fully understood before first exploring the ways in which it adapts, recontextualizes, and ultimately builds on the Romantic. By deploying the language of Romanticism, I hope to establish not only the historical indebtedness of this *actual play* series to the turn of the nineteenth century, but also to

demonstrate the ways in which it adapts and builds on these influences for its own “emancipatory” purposes.

But there are other reasons why *A Court of Fey & Flowers* invites this analytical lens, and which might also help to explain the renewed interest in Regency aesthetics today which has led to the popularity of such adaptations of the period like *Bridgerton* (2020—present), its spin-off mini-series, *Queen Charlotte* (2023), and, of course, *A Court of Fey & Flowers* itself. I am speaking here, unsurprisingly, of extreme income inequality. Today, U.S. household income before taxes and public assistance reflects an acute divide between the richest 0.1 percent and the bottom 20 percent (see Figure 2), a divide exacerbated by soaring inflation (“Income Inequality in the United States”). This concentration (or, if you like, *enclosure* of wealth) contributes to a self-reinforcing feedback loop, wherein wealthy billionaires leverage their immense capital to shape elections, a process that has been made only easier for the wealthy through the 2015 Supreme Court ruling on *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*.⁶² We have also lived through a series of financial crises, first with the 2008 Great Recession, and more recently through the economic disruptions of COVID-19, setting the stage for *A Court of Fey & Flower’s* engagement with class and social inequity.

Similarly, “during Jane Austen’s own lifetime, the British economy experienced a series of economic crises. An oversized national debt, four waves of recession, two banking crises, the debasement of coins, a major economic crash, and a depression [which] led, in combination, to a doubling of consumer prices, i.e., extreme inflation” (Toran par. 8). Although Austen herself was part of the “pseudo-gentry,” a group which “socially [held] kinship to the landed gentry while

⁶² For more on the effects of this Supreme Court ruling on the health of American democracy, see Rachel Funk Fordham’s essay, “Citizens United and the Decline of Democracy: Assessing the Decision’s Impact 15 Years Later” (2025), published through The Roosevelt Institute.

[being dependent] on earned income from a male breadwinner,” that proximity to the landed classes allowed her work to in part commodify the experiences of the wealthy elite, even as her *oeuvre* implicitly critiques this socioeconomic system (Toran par. 7). In the same way, *A Court of Fey & Flowers* draws on and plays with Regency class aesthetics in its own efforts at articulating its own unique critique of capital accumulation and enclosed subjectivities.

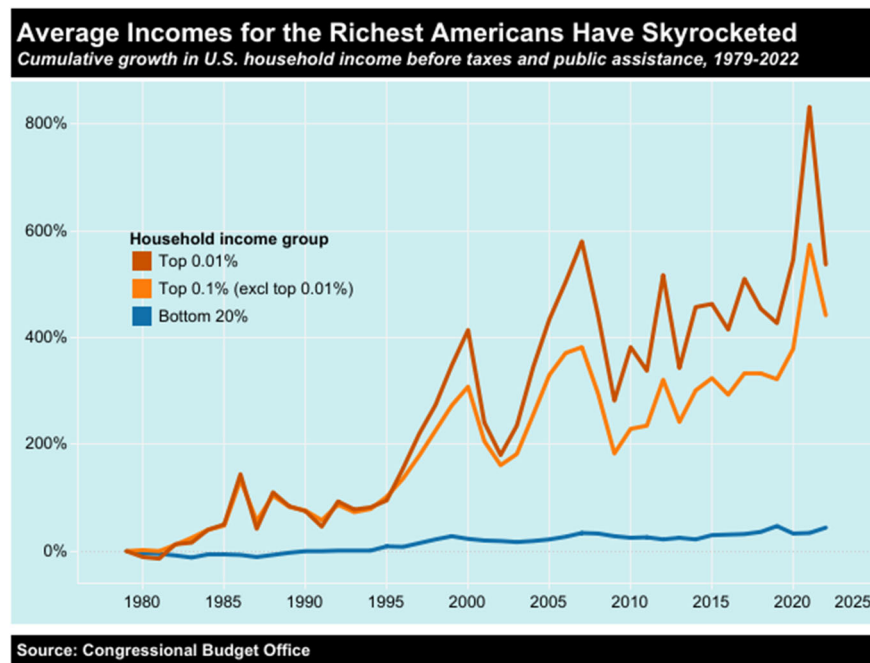


Figure 3 (Congressional Budget Office Graph)

I. Gamifying the Austen Novel: A close reading of *Good Society: A Jane Austen RPG*

Good Society: A Jane Austen RPG is, as one might imagine, based on the novels of Jane Austen. Indeed, the very first page of the game guide directly states that “in pursuit of [the end of creating an Austen story], we have created *Good Society*, a collaborative roleplaying game that captures the heart, and the countenance, of Jane Austen’s work” (Gordon 3). As the game’s description continues, the guide goes on to say that *Good Society* is, first and foremost, “a game about social ambition, family obligation, and breathtaking, heart-stopping longing” (3). At its outset, then, *Good Society* identifies a key tension between sentiment and responsibility that readers of Austen’s novels are, of course, familiar with. But how do we explore this longing? What drives our story? Well, just as Austen’s novels are driven by their vivid characters, so, too, does *Good Society* rely on character roles (what Woloch would describe as “character-systems”) that players can take on and adapt. In what follows, I will examine how *Good Society* thinks about in-game personae and their roles within the ludic mechanics of the game, emphasizing the ways in which these formulations are rooted in ideas about the self that emerged during the Romantic period.⁶³ In light of Woloch’s argument on Austenian systems of characterization, the ludic framework offered by *Good Society* helps to reinforce the kind of functionalized stratification of competing subjectivities that Austen’s work often emphasizes and explores.

⁶³ I acknowledge that categorizing Austen’s work as responding to and in fact a part of Romanticism is in and of itself a historical claim. But as works by Eric C. Walker (*Marriage, Writing, and Romanticism*, 2009), Clara Tuite (*Romantic Austen: Sexual Politics and the Literary Canon*, 2008), and other scholars have argued, Austen’s writing is not only historically and culturally connected to Romanticism in time (she was born during the first year of the American Revolution and grew up in Britain during the French Revolution, and most of her novels were published in or just after the first decade of the 19th century), it also often engages with similar subjects and concerns as her contemporaries among the major figures of the Romantic period.

Good Society foregrounds this class element:

Like Austen, *Good Society* is focused on the genteel class, and the rising class of professionals, merchants, and industrialists that emerged alongside it. The game is not concerned with the upper echelons of nobility, such as dukes, princes, and kings. Nor is it concerned with the fate of middle- or working-class characters. (Gordon 6)

Here, the game insists on class distinction as a central requisite for becoming what it calls a “major character,” bringing to mind once more Woloch’s discussion of “character-systems.” This constraint is in some ways more limiting than the options available to players of *Dungeons & Dragons* (the ludic “core” of *A Court of Fey & Flowers* around which *Good Society* is adaptively arranged), who can come from a variety of backgrounds and walks of life. Such an insistence makes sense, of course. It is the *aesthetics of class* of the Austen novel that the game most wishes to simulate, and that simulation requires that characters be allowed to participate in the balls, dinners, and country walks that only the leisure class could reasonably be a part of.

Here, then, we see the game affirming Bourdieu’s assertion that taste is predisposed to “fonctionner comme des marqueurs privilégiés de la « classe. » ...La noblesse culturelle a aussi ses titres, que décerne l’école, et ses quartiers, que mesure l’ancienneté de l’accès à la noblesse”⁶⁴ (Bourdieu *La distinction* 2-3). In entering this way into the aesthetic dimensions of class, the game pushes players to occupy this state that Bourdieu refers to as “la noblesse culturelle,” even if players are asked to refrain from building characters that occupy the highest echelons of the landed class. In this way, the game also reproduces and enacts the kind of socioeconomic stratification central to understanding the Austenian distinction between major and minor characters. The leisure activities of a Bloom or a season rest on the invisibilization of

⁶⁴ [...function as markers of “class” privilege... Cultural nobility also has its titles, which decide the school, the neighborhood, and which measure how long one has had access to nobility.]

the systems of capital accumulation and class inequality which make them possible.

Bourdieu's thinking continues to be helpful in keeping track of how class dimensions are explored in *Good Society*. In his book, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), Bourdieu gives us the language with which to describe *Good Society*'s simulationist bent in its attempted reproduction of both the aesthetics of class *and* the improvisational framework and limitations that social constraints of the Regency era would have offered:

So it is because they are the product of dispositions which, being the internalization of the same objective structures, are objectively concerned that the practices of the members of the same group or, in a differentiated society, the same class are endowed with an objective meaning that is at once unitary and systematic, transcending subjective intentions and conscious projects whether individual or collective. (81)

Here, Bourdieu is expanding on his definition of *habitus*, the “immanent law, *lex insita*, laid down in each agent by his earliest upbringing” (81). Ultimately, part of what *Good Society* is asking its players to do is to engage with an alternative model of socialization, a foreign structure of *habitus* that they must, for however long the game goes, perform and inhabit. In encouraging players to occupy (roughly speaking) the same social class, the game is also inherently discouraging the encounter of different forms of this “immanent law” which, as Bourdieu writes, produces what he terms the “*hysteresis effect* [that is] necessarily implied in the logic of the constitution of *habitus*,” as “practices are always liable to incur negative sanctions when the environment with which they are actually confronted is too distant from that to which they are objectively fitted” (78). At the same time, this *hysteresis effect* exists in *Good Society* as a game system which is also invested in exploring stories of scandal and transgression.

In *A Court of Fey & Flowers*, we see throughout the season a playing out of this *hysteresis effect* most strongly in the encounter between Binx Choppely and the rest of the main cast of characters, broadly rejecting *Good Society*'s insistence that the game be exclusively

focused on “the genteel class” of Regency Britain. While Binx is the *de facto* head of her fairy Court, it is only because she is its only surviving member, and her experiences in the Mortal Plane mean that she navigates the intersubjective experiences with other characters in the Bloom in ways that depart sharply from tradition. We can also expand this focus on departure from tradition, however, to encompass an aspect of the appeal that *Good Society* and many other Regency-era adaptations seem to have for so many—the appeal of transgression through scandal. As we will see below in our discussion of scandalous celebrity, this threat (and thrill) of transgression drives how some of the different player characters of *A Court of Fey & Flowers* interact with and relate to one another, and it is a central part of the appeal that such strict, unspoken social codes continue to have for viewers, players, and writers that continually revisit the Regency era. Furthermore, the constraints (and subversion) of *habitus* also serve to illustrate what Woloch calls the “social dimension of form,” wherein form (and, in particular, character and characterization) is at least partially determined by class and class difference, an awareness which *A Court of Fey & Flowers* preserves.

As I alluded to above, *Good Society* preserves the major/minor character divide common to Austen’s novels. The game establishes clear differences between minor characters (played most often by the game’s Facilitator) and the aforementioned “major characters” played by the performer-players themselves:

Each player will take on the role of a MAJOR CHARACTER—the Regency gentry at the centre of your story. Players in *Good Society* also wield broad narrative power—and will have more fun if they use it!You’re not just a character, but an author, working with your group to create your very own Austen novel. (Gordon 9)

Social class, then, has a ludic connotation—the “broad narrative power” alluded to above is mostly “wielded” by these major characters who are explicitly positioned in the game as taking

on the simultaneous roles of character and author. In this way, *Good Society* could be said to draw from earlier, pre-Romantic novelistic models that we see in, say Defoe's *Roxana*, the *Fortunate Mistress* (1724) or, on the epistolary side, in Rousseau's *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), where the conceit is that it is the character's own writing that relates their story and subjective experience to us as readers. This occasional conflation of character and author continues well into the nineteenth century, perhaps most famously through Lord Byron's use of the Byronic hero as a character presumed to communicate his true, innermost self to careful readers.⁶⁵ As we shall see, the patterns of similarity between the figure of the poet-as-character (and, in the Byronic sense, poet-as-hero) and *Good Society's* ludic conflation of character and author will only work to emphasize the language and aesthetics of Romanticism that pervade *A Court of Fey & Flowers*. Thus, though *A Court of Fey & Flowers* does clearly draw from Austenian structures of characterization, it is also in conversation with the Byronic mode of aristocratic self-presentation, at times hybridizing these modes in.

This conflation of "author" and "character" is present even in the role of the Facilitator. Unlike the game masters (GMs) of *Dungeons & Dragons*, the Facilitator role in *Good Society* is not one that single-handedly creates a world and conflict for characters to respond to. Instead, "the Facilitator in *Good Society* does not have unlimited narrative control. They do not plan how the story will go, or determine the actions of all the supporting characters. Instead, the Facilitator shares creative power equally with the players..." (Gordon 10). While the Facilitator is encouraged to "bring home the consequences of character actions" and setting, the conflicts that emerge throughout the game are irrevocably tied to what the game terms a character's "secret desire," not in accordance with the Facilitator's own narrative goals, broadly speaking (12).

⁶⁵ What Tom Mole has termed the "hermeneutic of intimacy" in *Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy* (2007).

Indeed, the game even allows for scenarios in which there is no Facilitator, and instead the “responsibility for these tasks is shared among the players,” and in games with four or less people, the game’s writers “highly recommend” that the Facilitator “choose to play a major character” (11). This emphasis on major characters as the narrative engines of the game facilitates forms of play that are rooted in and about Austenian systems of characterization. And as I will show, the way in which *Good Society* thinks about and imagines these major characters mirrors the Romantic-era engagement with longing and secret desires. At the same time, the more collaborative, intersubjective approach to character in both *Good Society* and *A Court of Fey & Flowers* signals how both the season and the game system adapt the role of the nineteenth-century protagonist, expanding and democratizing this role (*actual play* series have multiple co-protagonists who collaboratively construct the narrative together, as opposed to the singular authorial model of the Romantic period), even as it simultaneously limits such roles to the genteel class.

The term “secret desire” is one which the game explicitly uses, and its description as to the nature of these desires is telling: “In the *deepest heart* of every major character is a *secret desire*—a burning hope or passion they wish to accomplish” (Gordon 13, my emphasis). This characterization of the “secret desire” as living in the “deepest heart of every major character” serves, I would argue, as a gesture toward the Byronic model of secret passion described above, a heroic, character-based model⁶⁶ that frames many of the characters that the main cast plays in *A Court of Fey & Flowers*. This ludic tendency itself parallels what Tilottama Rajan⁶⁷ has described as the Romantic tendency toward “the deferral of achieved meaning,” a turn toward a

⁶⁶ See Thorslev, *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes* (1962).

⁶⁷ See *The Supplement of Reading: Figures of Understanding in Romantic Theory and Practice*. Cornell UP, 1990. For Rajan, this turn is especially important in understanding the role of the implied reader in Romantic poetry.

hermeneutic where the text takes on an “increasingly ‘psychological’ rather than exegetical form” that “is located in a creative consciousness *behind* the text” (2, my emphasis). Desire is also central to the narrative model that the game establishes (see figure 1.) The “novel chapter” identified as the first step in the cycle of play calls players to “pursue [their character’s] secret desire, exploiting reputation, rumours, and connections to secure [their] advantage. This phase will make up the bulk of play” (12).

Vital to the understanding of character represented in *Good Society*, then, is a model which prioritizes the character’s interior driving passions and longings as part of the ludic ground on which the game is played, mirroring the tendency “toward constructing the psychological interiority and reflexivity that became the novel’s distinguishing features” during the Romantic century (Park 17)⁶⁸. At the same time, the game limits these “driving passions” and “secret desires” to the major characters—all of whom are also (roughly) part of the same social echelon. The epistolary phase facilitates this emphasis on interiority, even as it makes it literary, as we see from the language used by the game’s designers to describe this stage: “capture *inner thoughts and feelings*, or put machinations in place. Players can also choose to cultivate rumors or fan the flames of scandal during these interludes. The final epistolary of the game is also the epilogue” (Gordon 12, my emphasis). In *A Court of Fey & Flowers* specifically, this stage also serves to further ground the players’ performances in their bodies, with letters and quills acting as props to emphasize this impression. As we will see below, the game’s focus on characters’ “interiority and reflexivity” lends itself to uniquely Byronic modes for navigating scandal, reputation, and sociality.

⁶⁸ Park, Julie. *The Self and It: Novel Objects in Eighteenth-Century England*. Stanford UP, 2010.

CYCLE OF PLAY	
1	Novel Chapter
2	Reputation
3	Rumour and Scandal
4	Epistolary
5	Novel Chapter
6	Reputation
7	Epistolary
8	Upkeep

Figure 4

It is, of course, this focus on secret or private emotional excess which Romantic novels and poems often commodified. In Austen's case, free indirect discourse emphasizes the novel's focus on interiority. Similarly, the model of the Byronic hero relies on what Tom Mole has described as the "hermeneutic of intimacy," a carefully cultivated impression of hidden depths under which powerful passions might be discovered by the attentive reader. Both models of subjectivity play out character-systems which center "major" characters at the eventual expense of the surrounding "minor" character(s). As Woloch reminds us, "*minor characters are the proletariat of the novel*," as the "context of omniscient, asymmetric character-systems creat[es] a formal structure that can imaginatively comprehend the dynamics of *alienated labor*, and the class structure that underlies this labor" (36, my emphasis). As we will see below, *A Court of Fey & Flowers* reflects an awareness of and an engagement with these dynamics as fairies are deployed with revolutionary and emancipatory intent. Furthermore, *A Court of Fey & Flowers* adapts Austenian modes of characterization whereby Austen implicitly critiques the socio-cultural dimension on which the major/minor character divide is grounded.

In its incorporation of the *Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition* game system, *A Court of Fey*

& Flowers further frames these character-systems as emerging from interactions *between* the main cast of “player-characters” and the non-playable characters (PCs vs. NPCs). In this categorical divide, *Dungeons & Dragons* reinforces the functionalization of major vs. minor characters that we see in both Austen’s work and in the *Good Society* game, with PCs generally being the only ones with access to agency and choice, though such choice is always limited by the constraints of the world as constructed by the gamemaster (GM). By drawing on this model, *A Court of Fey & Flowers* troubles its own critique of enclosure, class difference, and capital accumulation, expanding capital beyond physical or material commodities to encompass a vision of alienation from one’s own subjective consciousness.

II. The Lords of the Wing: Scandalous Celebrity and the Adaptation of the Byronic Mode

One of the narrative threads first introduced toward the beginning of *A Court of Fey & Flowers* revolves around two characters—Lord Squak Airavis, Earl of Peckersburg, played by Lou Wilson, and Lady Chirp Featherfowl, Countess of Cluckingham, played by Emily Axford. Part of the independent House of the Wing, an aristocratic family not directly aligned with any of the Fey Courts that exist in this world, Lord Airavis and Lady Featherfowl are, as their titles suggest, among the most explicitly aristocratic of the main cast of player-characters. But of greater relevance to my framing of this season of *Dimension 20* through a Romanticist lens is their intense notoriety within the Fey aristocracy. For instance, one of the first scenes in which these characters are introduced involves an exchange with the patriarch of their family, “Grandfather,” in which he warns his grandchildren against their tendency to “constantly forget [themselves]

around those unwinged cretins” (“A Bloom to Remember”). He goes on to warn them against untoward (i.e., scandalous) behavior which might reflect poorly on their family on pain of exile from their roost (“A Bloom to Remember”).

Grandfather thus represents the driest and most conservative elements of this fairy society, for whom notoriety and scandal are intrinsically negative. And yet his position on the exploits of his grandchildren is not necessarily representative of the other Courts’ wider perspectives. The Lords of the Wing arrive at the Bloom late, and yet all its participants are gathered together to see their arrival, emphasizing their importance to the proceedings as scandalous celebrities. Shortly after their marvelous descent carried by thousands upon thousands of birds, they make an announcement alluding to their “reputation of being rakes and scamps,” saying that they have “turned a new feather” and will now behave with utmost propriety (“A Bloom to Remember” 1:09:02). As that announcement is made, however, a *minor* character named Capacea, played by game master Aabria Iyengar, approaches as the sibling of two other fairies who have been entangled with Lord Airavis. Capacea makes an appearance and literally “demands satisfaction.” Though a success on a Persuasion check⁶⁹, Lord Airavis turns her outrage into implied sexual interest, momentarily defusing the situation. Afterward, Dellosa de la Rue, played by Oscar Montoya, offers the Lords of the Wing the opportunity to participate in “a little wager,” one which would essentially gamify the promise to reform that they have already made. This emphasis on the Lords of the Wings’ particular journey in regard to their reputations also works to further illustrate the Reputation mechanic of *Good Society*, which will work throughout the season as a “real-time” tracker of the Lords’ progress in their challenge. Interestingly, though Capacea features heavily in this introduction to Wilson and Axford’s

⁶⁹ Though *A Court of Fey & Flowers* draws heavily from the *Good Society* game system in its exploration of reputation, interpersonal conflicts and interactions are most often mediated through *Dungeons & Dragons 5e* (2014).

characters, she fades into the background afterward and never returns—a common pattern with “side” or non-playable characters (NPCs).

Given both the diegetic and mechanical emphasis on scandal and reputation in *A Court of Fey & Flowers*, in what follows I will illustrate some of the parallels between what Clara Tuite has called “scandalous celebrity” and the effect that the Lords of the Wing—and in particular Airavis—have on the wider social scene of the Bloom—what, in Regency terms, we might call the *ton*⁷⁰. As Tuite argues,

we might say that the phenomenon of celebrity starts to reconfigure the value of notoriety, converting it from a negative to a positive value.... Scandalous celebrity renders the distinction between fame and notoriety redundant because the new economy of celebrity, as distinct from fame, is about translating bad fame—or infamy and notoriety—into good fame. This involves the translation of a more archaic economy of fame into one of celebrity, in terms of which, as the familiar adage goes, any publicity is good publicity (“Tainted Love” 78).

For Tuite, this phenomenon has roots in the epistolary culture of the Regency era, and especially the fallout from the relationship between Lady Caroline Lamb and Lord Byron. Lamb (in)famously coined the phrase that Byron was “mad, bad, and dangerous to know,” but her writing and subsequent publication of the *roman à clef*, *Glenarvon* (1816) cemented some of the details of her intense but short-lived affair with Byron. The result was that Byron was able to incorporate this sense of notoriety and scandal (at least partially) into his evolving celebrity persona, which in turn influenced the shifting shape of the Byronic hero. The gendered implications for reputation in Regency England meant that Lamb was not so lucky, and Tuite characterizes Lamb’s actions in the public performance of scandal as tantamount to “social

⁷⁰ From the phrase “*bon ton*,” *ton* was used to describe the social milieu of the Regency’s aristocratic circles.

death,” for “as the libertine plot has different outcomes depending on the gender of the player, so too does the transition from scandalous celebrity to literary posterity” (82).

My goal here is not to identify coincidental similarities between the Lamb-Byron affair and the story of the Lords of the Wing. Rather, my claim is that the ways in which these two characters negotiate and manage their reputations and social personae throughout *A Court of Fey & Flowers* are informed by a performance of Regency culture that is in turn best understood through the lens of scandalous Romantic celebrity. And while others⁷¹ have suggested parallels between the Lords of the Wing and the Crawfords of *Mansfield Park*, I would suggest that these two characters also draw from Byronic models for navigating reputation, infamy, and notoriety. Thus, while the Austen-inspired setting is the most obvious connection between this season of *Dimension 20* and the Romantic period, it is by no means the only one. Still, *A Court of Fey & Flowers* builds on and to some extent modernizes these tropes, rejecting the gendered constraints Tuite alludes to above. And in the end, Airavis and Featherfowl leverage their celebrity and reputation in an effort toward the intersubjective liberation implied by my reading of enclosure.

The Lords of the Wing consistently draw from models for aristocratic celebrity that are grounded in Byron’s cultural shadow. One of the ways in which we see this coding visually is even in Lou Wilson’s choice of outfit for the first episode. He wears a white button-down shirt open at the neck, exposing a throat that Wilson adorns with some kind of golden neckpiece (see Figure 2). Likely inspired by the visuals of filmic adaptations of Austen’s work, this stylistic choice has earlier roots that are closely tied to Byron’s celebrity profile. In his 1814 portrait of Lord Byron (see Figure 3), “Byron appears in half length, seated in a profile facing the left of the

⁷¹ See Em C. Friedman’s Polygon review, “My Favorite New Jane Austen Adaptation is an Elaborate Game of *Dungeons & Dragons*” (2022).

picture, with his chin resting on his hand. X-ray photography reveals that Westall altered the line of the shirt collar, which initially covered more of Byron's throat" (Mole 81). While, as Mole continues, "we cannot know for sure whether it was the poet or the painter who wanted Byron presented in profile, with an open neckline, creating two of his most enduring visual motifs," the effect is the same regardless of its origin—the close and persistent association in the public's mind between these "visual motifs" and Byron (Mole 81). Knowingly or not, then, Wilson's costume choices draw from an established visual tradition grounded in Byronic celebrity.



Figure 5 (Lou Wilson as Squak Airavis)

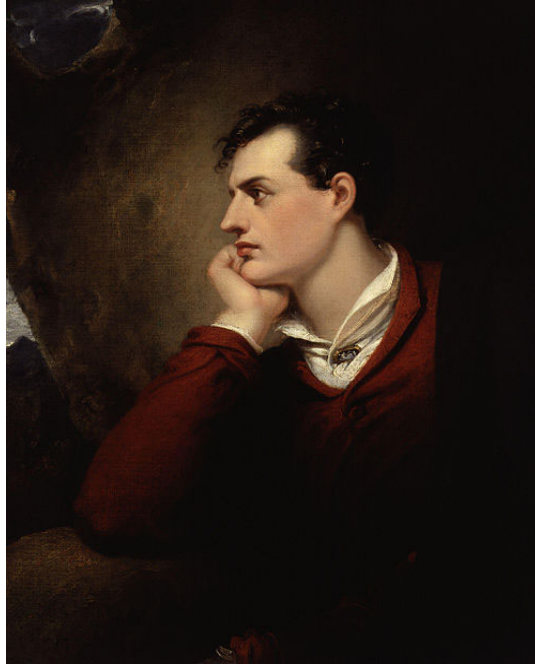


Figure 6 (Portrait of Lord Byron)

These visual elements—in particular the white shirt with an open neckline—help to further cement for the viewer the ways in which Wilson’s character implicitly draws from a longer cultural history, one rooted in emerging modes of celebrity culture during the Romantic period. But there are other ways, scandal and visual motifs aside, in which Squak Airavis and Chirp Featherfowl reflect models of sociality (of being and relating to the other player characters) that are themselves deeply Byronic.

In navigating scandalous celebrity, both Chirp and Squak draw from the kind of aristocratic distinction that Christensen identifies as central to Byron’s own poetic persona:

This was preeminently the case with the literary system of Byronism, which was collaboratively organized in the second decade of the nineteenth century by coding the residual affective charge that still clung to the paraphernalia of aristocracy in order to reproduce it in commodities that could be vended to a reading public avid for glamour.
(xvi)

Though for Christensen this description of the commercialization of aristocratic aesthetics is specific to Byron, it is important to note that it could just as easily be applied to certain “texts” today. Why, for instance, has *Bridgerton* run for three (soon to be four) seasons, captured the imaginations of the thousands of viewers that regularly consume the series and spawning a 2023 mini-series spin-off, *Queen Charlotte*? Scholars have pointed out that shows like *Bridgerton* (and, I would suggest, *A Court of Fey & Flowers*) do not seek to simply *rehearse* or *reproduce* the past, and instead “adapt” elements of, in this case, Regency culture for the telling of stories that are purposefully (and, in the creative sense, productively) multi-temporal in their negotiation between the past and the present (Arjomand 75). In this way, these stories can also act as a form of reclamation of a history denied.

This agenda is perhaps clearest in how *Bridgerton* navigates race by rejecting *both* a “colorblind” approach to casting (the Black and brown actors in *Bridgerton* are *diegetically* people of color) *and* any reproduction that seeks to simply perpetuate the racial prejudices of the historical moments being imitated. Similarly, *A Court of Fey & Flowers* takes on the aesthetic, visual language of the Regency for its own, unique purposes. Like Byron’s system of celebrity, *A Court of Fey & Flowers* relies on the “residual affective charge... [of] the *paraphernalia of aristocracy*,” a parallel perhaps most keenly felt in the framing of the Lords of the Wing (Christensen xvi, my emphasis). In this way, the performances offered to viewers by Lou Wilson and Emily Axford constitute not just a ludic reframing of Bourdieu’s *habitus*, but are themselves deeply reliant on the intersection between Byron and Byronism, Regency-era sociality, and what Tuite sees as an emergent form of “scandalous celebrity.”

Although all the player-characters in *A Court of Fey & Flowers* belong to the Feywild’s version of the aristocracy, they do not all share the same rank, nor the same loyalties. As I have

alluded to above, this season of *Dimension 20* revolves around “the Bloom,” which is both a kind of (supra)natural phenomenon as fairy magic becomes especially concentrated *and* a social event celebrating this phenomenon. This event works similarly to the Regency-era idea of a “season” described above. Most of the player characters belong to specific Courts—Dellosa della Rue is a functionary of the Court of Wonder, while Andhera is the Prince of the Unseelie Court. Similarly, Captain K.P. Hobbes is a military officer in the Goblin Court, while Binx is eventually revealed to be the last surviving member of another Court, the Court of Craft. The exception to the rule is the *Lords* of the Wing, whose family exists outside of (and above) the system of the Courts. Both Featherfowl and Airavis, then, are first and foremost *lords*. They are in a sense part of the Fey aristocracy, but simultaneously exist very much *outside* of it. This framing of Chirp and Squak as lordly outsiders is reminiscent of Byron’s first celebrity persona—that of the Byronic hero, who is similarly simultaneously an insider and outsider of the wider aristocratic world from which he hails. And yet *A Court of Fey & Flowers* does not simply reproduce this model of scandalous celebrity and Byronic subjectivity. As I have alluded to above, this season of *Dimension 20* implicitly expands the traditional delineations of this model. Wilson and Axford play with a version of scandalous celebrity originally only accessible to white men. In this way, Wilson (knowingly or not) participates in an established tradition of African American writers⁷² who frequently drew from Byron’s work in their construction of “the gendered self-presentation of Black subjectivity” (Sandler 42).

In *A Court of Fey & Flowers*, the Lords of the Wing leverage this unique celebrity appeal in their efforts to combat the efforts of those Courts which seek to preserve and expand upon the current system of magical (and thus, subjective) enclosure. In the seventh episode of the season,

⁷² Examples include W.E.B. DuBois, Frederick Douglass, and many others. For more on this, see Matt Sandler’s article “Black Byronism” (2017).

“Masquerade Ball,” the Lords of the Wing return to their scandalous ways, imbibing publicly and disruptively. Near the start of the titular party, Wilson, using the first person, describes as Airavis “Polymorph[s] one of [the lowest ranked attendants] into a fish,” having asked Iyengar first for clarification on “the lowest-ranking person in the room” before choosing his target. Polymorph is a *D&D* spell that allows one to magically transform a creature into a beast of the caster’s choice. In this way, Airavis signals to the broader Bloom a partial return to the scandalous models that served him and Featherfowl in the past. Here, we see a hybridization of scandalous celebrity and the Austenian system of characterization described by Woloch above: Airavis appeals to and glories in scandal here, but he also emphasizes the “minorness” of non-playable characters (NPCs) as one that is grounded in the stratification of power, class, and privilege.

This act, however, is ultimately shown to be in the emancipatory service of ending the magical, natural, and, in my reading, subjective enclosure around which the main narrative of the season revolves. It is these “hijinks” that also draw the attention of the Prince Apollo (head of the Seelie Court) and the Princess Suntar (heir-apparent of the Unseelie Court), who eventually propose a political and strategic marriage between themselves and the Lords of the Wing, a conversation I look at more closely below in my discussion of enclosure in *A Court of Fey & Flowers*. While Airavis and Featherfowl seemingly agree to the prospect of a marriage partially facilitated by the enclosure of the Bloom, they actually ally with Binx Choppely and the rest of the PCs in their efforts to liberate the magic of the Bloom from the hands of the few into the hands of the many. Thus, where scandalous celebrity serves primarily commercial purposes in the case of Lord Byron’s work and the commodification of poetic subjectivity, we see in the *A Court of Fey & Flowers* an adaptation of this system as a tool for change and revolutionary potential.

III. Romantic Fairies: Wilderness, Magic, and the Bloom in *A Court of Fey & Flowers*

In the first episode of *A Court of Fey & Flowers*, “A Bloom to Remember,” Aabria Iyengar introduces both viewers and the players to the setting when she says that “this is going to be a story about fashions, passions, and power struggles of Archfey from a variety of courts and noble houses all across the fey realms” who have “come together briefly to celebrate a surge of magical power in their world known as the Bloom” (“A Bloom to Remember”). The language that Iyengar uses to describe the Bloom is telling, and already presents us with the first hints of the Romantic vision of nature which, in this series, is conflated with magic itself:

All of this begins with the Bloom. Since the time before time, the Fey realms have been the wellspring for magic that suffuses not just this realm, but all others. The *flow of magic is natural here, and it waxes and wanes according to its own unknowable clock*. But when the magic surges here, the entire realm reacts in a riotous celebration of life. *Verdancy, fertility, and the giddiness of abundance affect every living thing here, and the eye of the storm of fecundity is known as the Bloom*. (“A Bloom to Remember”, my emphasis)

In this description, magic and nature are conflated—the flow of magic is *natural* and is explicitly what leads to the “verdancy [and] fertility” that Iyengar alludes to. This conflation is also signaled visually to the viewer—the “dome” (the “set” in which they record seasons of *Dimension 20* and which acts simultaneously as table and stage) is decorated with what look to be hanging flowers and trellised plants (see Figure 5 below).

Furthermore, this insistence on the “unknowab[ility]” of the Bloom’s clock suggests a kind of profound and *sublime* force, one that is ancient and tied to the “time before time,” when this fictive world was young. Though the degree to which Iyengar’s idea of magic (which here

functions almost metonymically for nature) has agency is unclear (an ambiguity that will persist throughout the season), I would suggest that it is reminiscent of the spirit of the world that

Wordsworth envisions in “Tintern Abbey”:

...And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a *sense sublime*
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And *rolls through all things*... (95-104, my emphasis)

In this oft-cited poem, Wordsworth offers what for some is the quintessential “High” Romantic understanding of the natural world popularized by the Lake Poets. Nature, for Wordsworth, acts as a kind of spiritual force, one connected to the divine and the transcendental, a “motion and a spirit that impels / all thinking things” and which “rolls through all things.” Iyengar’s earlier description of the Bloom as a flow of magic that “waxes and wanes” according to its own sublime, mysterious rhythms establishes firm parallels between the role that magic plays in *A Court of Fey & Flowers* as the essential energy source for all things and the Romantic characterization of the natural alluded to above. These parallels will become especially important as this season of *Dimension 20* explores the overarching narrative of enclosure. Here, we can see how magic is coded as a kind of extractable resource, as a commodity that will in this season become synonymous with subjectivity as we begin to understand the true consequences of this kind of enclosure.



Figure 7 (A dome in "bloom")

Such representations of nature are, of course, not unique to Wordsworth's vision of Romanticism, though they take on a kind of ideological urgency during the Industrial Revolution. The pre-Romantic writer Charlotte Smith, for example, offers us an understanding of the natural world as possessed of its own innate language and spirit, one that anticipates later Romantic models. For instance, the speaker in "The Swallow" draws on an Orientalist tradition as she laments her inability to fully understand "the wild bird's song":

As fables tell, and Indian Sage,
 The Hindostani woods among,
 Could in his desert hermitage,
 As if 'twere mark'd in written page,
 Translate the wild bird's song.

 I wish I did his power possess,
 That I might learn, fleet bird from thee,
 What our vain systems only guess,
 And know from what wide wilderness
 You came across the sea. (Smith 16-25)

This representation of the natural world as to some extent unintelligible (the birdsong requires a kind of Orientalist mystical translation inaccessible to the poem's speaker) is reminiscent of Iyengar's description of the Bloom's own unknowability, an unknowability that is at least partially rooted in time ("its own unknowable clock"). Smith's speaker here anticipates the laments of later Romantic-era writers for whom nature could also represent a return to an ancient, "deep time" of the wide wildernesses rapidly being consumed by the hunger of the First Industrial Revolution. In *A Court of Fey & Flowers*, Iyengar dramatizes this Romantic-era anxiety by consistently emphasizing the tension between nature as magic and its commodification and enclosure, a practice which, in this fictive universe, has the potential to strip fairies who exist outside the boundaries of enclosure of their access to subjectivity—a true alienation of the self with striking parallels to Woloch's discussion of the sociocultural dimension of Austenian character-systems above.

One of the clearest and most oft-cited examples of this process of denaturalization within the Romantic and pre-Romantic periods is, of course, enclosure in Britain. Starting in the early modern period, enclosure was a phenomenon by which large swathes of the British countryside were privatized and made inaccessible to the public. This process of enclosure intensifies in the lead-up to the Industrial Revolution, bringing it to the forefront of the Romantic mind. For instance, in Jane Austen's novel, *Mansfield Park* (1814), Fanny, one of the book's central protagonists, alludes to enclosure when she cites from William Cowper's *The Task*, a poem published in 1785. While improvement and enclosure are distinct processes, Fanny's reflection on Cowper's lines ties the two closely together in the novel. Like the work of Charlotte Smith above, Cowper's work is often credited with contributing to the transition from the Neoclassical to the Romantic: "Cut down an avenue? What a pity! Does that not make you think of Cowper?"

‘Ye fallen avenues, once more I mourn your fate unmerited’” (57). Fanny’s thoughts are in response to the wealthy Mr. Rushworth’s description of the work that an “improver” has carried out in a nearby estate. The landed Mr. Rushworth’s account of that work introduces his desire for modernization at his own estate, a desire which his interlocutor, Mr. Crawford, identifies clearly:

‘The house was built in Elizabeth’s time and is a large, regular, brick building—heavy but respectable looking, and has many good rooms. It is ill placed. It stands in one of the lowest spots of the park; in that respect, unfavourable for improvement. But the woods are fine, and there is a stream, which I dare say, might be made a good deal of. Mr. Rushworth is quite right, I think, in meaning to give it a modern dress...’ (Austen 58)

The description of Mr. Rushworth’s estate here is telling. Though the house itself is from the Elizabethan era, the focus of the aforementioned “improvements” seems primarily directed toward the ways in which the landscape itself can be further altered and adapted in the pursuit of modernity. Crawford’s characterization of the woods and stream within the property as “fine” is specifically tied to their usefulness in the work of “improvement,” and it is this attitude toward the natural landscape of the space that Fanny objects to. The woods and stream might be beautiful, but they are only *useful* insofar as they “might be made a good deal of.” This kind of enclosure also works to privatize public access to the natural world which many Romantic writers saw as vital to their own process of subject-formation and which is indeed central to Fanny’s own personal happiness throughout the novel.⁷³

⁷³ See, for instance, John Clare’s 1848 poem, “I Am”:
I long for scenes where man has never trod,
For scenes where woman never smiled or wept;
There to abide with my Creator, God,
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept
Full of high thoughts, unborn. So let me lie,
The grass below; above, the vaulted sky.

Here, we see access to an idealized wilderness as conducive to the “high thoughts, unborn” of innocent childhood and, by extension, subject formation. Thus, to render the natural sublime inaccessible has consequences for the individual self.

Similarly, *A Court of Fey & Flowers* simultaneously presents viewers with a description of nature—represented through the magic of the Bloom—that is both tied to a conceptualization of the natural as a kind of unknowable wilderness *and* that is actively being reshaped, manipulated, and enclosed for the purposes of the Fairy Courts, who stand in for the landed gentry of Austen’s novels. It is against this broader background that the events of the Bloom unfold, events which closely follow some of the established patterns of the “marriage plot” as explored in Austen’s work, even as these moments of interpersonal conflict and attraction culminate in a rejection of the forms of Fey “enclosure” that this season explores.

The language of control that Iyengar draws from in her descriptions of both the Bloom and of the relationship that different Archfey have to the Bloom strongly mirrors Romantic-era anxieties around enclosure at a time when notions of “wilderness” and the wild were actively emerging. These parallels also strengthen the connection between *A Court of Fey & Flowers* and the affective models that Austen’s writing reflects through the language of sensibility and sentimentality, as the relationship between these concepts was often mediated through Romantic explorations of human nature: “...sentimental values—self-consciousness, refined aesthetic taste, sympathy for others—are a second-order extrapolation of primary human qualities. Sentimentality is taken as an effort to regain the lost paradise of sensibility. The state of nature is not fallen and needs no redemption” (McGann 34). Once again, then, we see that, for certain Romantic writers at least, access to the quasi-divinity of nature also allows for the construction of a particularized individual subjectivity rooted in the “effort to regain the lost paradise of sensibility” McGann describes above. It is this kind of access which the Courts actively curtail, depriving members of Binx’s Court of Craft of the ability to even *exist* as individuals.

This struggle between the natural and the artificial, between an imagined timeless

wilderness and present modernity pervades the narrative trajectory of *A Court of Fey & Flowers* both at the wider, global level (i.e., the “main storyline” surrounding the nature of the Bloom and the efforts of certain Archfey to control it through acts deeply reminiscent of enclosure) *and* at the granular level of individual characters (i.e., the tension between duty and passion, and between natural impulses and social constraints, and the effects of enclosure on access to subject formation). Furthermore, the entirety of the story takes place in a realm that, within the lore of *Dungeons & Dragons*, is most often called the “Feywild,” a term that foregrounds the relationship between this realm and the imaginative wildernesses described in the work of Romantic writers. Like many of these writers, Iyengar offers a critique of industrial extraction and capital accumulation. As we will see below, however, *A Court of Fey & Flowers* extends this critique into the realm of character, alienation, and subjectivity. In particular, Binx Choppely’s description of those fairies who remained too long in the Material Plane as having transformed into objects lends a different connotation to the role of enclosure in *A Court of Fey & Flowers*—one in which the objectification of the working classes implicit in enclosure is literally dramatized, and which mirrors and extends Romanticist notions on the important role of nature in the development of the self.

Before we leap into an exploration of fairies as envisioned in *Dungeons & Dragons* today, however, we should first establish a sense of how fairies have grown and evolved in folklore and literature, particularly as different ideas about fairies and their role in the world have continued to emerge and reemerge over the last few centuries. As I hope to show, the Romanticist connection in *A Court of Fey & Flowers* extends beyond its social or ludic settings, inspired though they are by Regency-era Britain. Fairies and fairy stories themselves undergo a kind of transformation during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. While Britain’s fairies

would soon be relegated to gaslight productions and Victorian gardens, these creatures of ancient folklore were nonetheless indelibly shaped by Romantic aesthetics. This mark is especially apparent in the union in *A Court of Fey & Flowers* of a fairy's potent natural magic alongside the decidedly revolutionary bent the season takes. As Richard Sugg reminds us, "for the Romantics, the fairies offered not some diaphanous retreat, but new forms of psychic power" (178). This "psychic power" marries a conceptualization of fairies as avatars or expressions of the Romantic natural sublime *and* as vehicles for the revolutionary aims of poets like Shelley or Blake (Sugg 181). But, as we will see below, while Shelley's fairies can only offer a "prophetic" vision of an utopian world yet to come, the fairies of *A Court of Fey & Flowers* enact this revolutionary work. In this way, this season of *Dimension 20* builds on and adapts on Shelley's Romantic fairy.

Fairies, of course, have a much longer history, however. Indeed, the matter of just what we call a fairy is itself subject to debate. For instance, Diane Purkiss' *Troublesome Things* suggests that "child-killing demons and nymphs [of Mediterranean folklore] are the joint ancestors of medieval fairies, who are in turn the ancestors of our own fairies" (12). For Purkiss, who alludes to and dismisses other possible origins like the belief that "fairies are a race-memory of pygmy ancient Britons," the question is less about "where fairies began, but in how they work," and her own focus on fairies is especially rooted in their role as liminal figures often associated with birth, copulation, death, coming-of-age, and other important transitions in human cultural and social life (5, 7, 20). Similarly, Purkiss challenges Katherine Briggs' expansive fairy taxonomies, suggesting instead that there are "only a few really significant types of fairy in popular culture," which Purkiss divides into four broad categories:

1. Brownies, hobs, and familiars; live in one house or serve one person, and overlap with
2. Fairy guides; often dead; conduct a person to fairies and/or teach them fairy lore.

3. Fairy societies; seen in fairy world or on ride; include king and queen.
4. Poltergeist/demon fairies, eventually melt down into tricksters; overlap with 1. (8)

Within this framework, Purkiss understands fairies (and especially later medieval fairies) as “the ones who presided over birth, and copulation, and death, and the ones who made all three go wrong. Therefore, they are the ones who enforce the rules, but they are also the ones who articulate the unspoken, silent desires that lie within all three events...” (52). Western European fairies, then, at least in Purkiss’ account, are therefore less like animistic avatars of nature (although their “cultural DNA” includes the nymphs and satyrs who *were* much more closely associated with the natural world) and are instead tied to domestic and human realms in some of their earliest iterations, even as they exist at the margins or outskirts of these spheres. Additionally, fairies may in some cases be helpful, but as the list above suggests, household fairies like “brownies, hobs, and familiars” or “fairy guides” often “melt down into tricksters.” And if not appeased in the right way, they may transfigure into “poltergeist/demon fairies.” Fairies, then, can be dangerously mercurial and unpredictable, even as they are also often associated with luck, wealth, and opportunity.

As Richard Sugg reminds us, however, this apparent domesticity does not preclude a connection to the natural world. Indeed, Sugg argues that fairies are representative of a radically different relationship between humans and “nature,” one in which there are few if any boundaries between what post-Enlightenment and industrialism thinkers often envisioned as two distinct worlds. Fairies, it was said, could often be found under hills or barrows, or hidden away in old forests with towering trees:

This, then, was a natural world with few, if any, blank or meaningless spaces—one where fairies and the stories about them were wriggling in every gap beneath the tree roots, hills, lakes, and shores of the surrounding world.... Perhaps no less basic was the fact

that... the fairy believer [was] in so many ways very *close* to nature all the time. It was not something you escaped to on special occasions.... You were there already, and may well die there.... For some, nature was the thing you *could not* get away from (Sugg 35).

Fairies, then, blend both the human and the inhuman, both the domestic and the strange, and their sometimes-remote locations are further suggestive of their intrinsic liminality. This in-betweenness takes on another dimension with the circulation of Christianity, where the state of a fairy's soul—and the very question of whether such creatures *possessed* a soul—becomes subject to debate. These questions become especially central and, for some, troublesome as Christianity became the dominant religion in Western and Northern Europe. They also help plant the seeds for the fairy's revolutionary potential, seeds which the Romantics will water and tend.

In many post-Christian accounts of fairies, these beings are described as fallen or half-fallen angels, with their presence on Earth a sign of either participation or at best neutrality in the imagined struggle between the Christian God and Lucifer the Devil. Sugg reports on the account of Roderick Macneill, a 92-year-old man from the “Hebridian island of Miunghlaidh, Barra, in October 1871,” in which Macneill recounts that

The Proud Angel fomented a rebellion among the angels of heaven, where he had been a leading light. He declared that he would go and found a kingdom for himself.... Many angels followed him—so many that at least the Son called out, ‘Father! Father! The city is being emptied!’ whereupon the Father ordered that the gates of heaven and the gates of hell should be closed.... And those who were in were in, and those who were out were out; while the hosts who had left heaven and had not reached hell flew into the holes of the earth, like the stormy petrels. These are the Fairy Folk—ever since doomed to live under the ground, and only allowed to emerge where and when the King permits. (17)

Here, we see a latter record of centuries of intermixing between pre-Christian fairy stories and the spiritual cosmology offered by a Christian understanding of the universe. The account is also roughly contemporaneous with the Romantic period, given that the individual telling the story was likely born around 1779, nine years after William Wordsworth's birth and nine years before

Lord Byron's. According to a similar 1894 account from Ellen McKeever, "daughter of a small farmer in Cavan," the belief was that "the guiltiest devils had committed active rebellion, and the intermediate air spirits sinned in word, while the fairies' sin was to have stood 'neutral in the contest'.... Yet despite this, McKeever seemed to think that the fairies could not be saved" (Sugg 21). Here, then, we see the earlier danger and caprice that fairies were already said to indulge in translated into a state of spiritual fallenness from which they can never be redeemed. But one can also note the element of rebellion and resistance to power that become enmeshed with fairy-lore, an implication the Romantics will return to in their own adaptation of fairies.⁷⁴

This potential (if at times fuzzy) association between fairies and the infernal predates the nineteenth-century accounts described above. A notable and commonly circulated story about the land of Fairy (or Fairyland as it was sometimes called) is the belief that fairies owe a tithe to hell, implying both proximity and submission to this realm on the part of the fairies. Perhaps the most famous account of this belief is in the ballad *Tam Lin* (Child No.39).⁷⁵ In this ballad, which tells the story of an encounter between Janet, a mortal woman, and Tam Lin, a knight-turned-fairy, the titular character explains that he was once human, but spent much time in Fairy. When pressed about why Tam Lin left Fairy, he replies by alluding to a "tiend" or tithe. The "tiend" alluded to here is a tithe, one that is paid every seven years. In *Tam Lin*, this tithe is individual—Tam Lin, "sae fair and fu' of flesh," fears *becoming* the tithe, rather than being a *part* of it (24). This account contrasts somewhat with earlier folkloric versions that circulated in the sixteenth century: "An earlier record from Fife, with a yearly payment of the teind, is included in the

⁷⁴ Here, I am reminded of the similar role played by the phenomenon of "Romantic Satanism," which interpreted the solitary defiance of the Miltonic Lucifer as a positive sign of individualist resistance. For more on this subject, see P. Shock's *Romantic Satanism: Myth and the Historical Moment in Blake, Shelley, and Byron* (2003).

⁷⁵ A common and well-circulated version published in Francis James Child's *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882-1898).

indictment of Alesoun Peirsoun for witchcraft in 1588” (Lyle 178). In this version of the tithe, it is a tenth part of *all* fairies that must descend to Hell every seven years. This belief was used in part to explain the seeming obsession fairies had with stealing children and replacing them with sickly changelings—the more children fairies kidnapped, the more those souls could be used as payment in lieu of the fairies themselves (Lyle 177-8). Indeed, in *Tam Lin* it is the Fairy Queen herself who originally kidnapped the titular character, and it is only after several trials tied to shapeshifting that Janet is reunited with her “true love” and the father of her “elfin” child (15). Thus, fairies are, at least in some accounts, vassals of hell, a spiritual danger that becomes revolutionary potential during the Romantic period.

The Fairy Queen as a distinct entity or character is a central figure which continues to recur in both the literature and folklore of the early modern period. Several sixteenth-century “confessions” extracted from supposed witches allude to a Queen of some or all fairies (Purkiss 124-7). Often, this Queen offers some kind of boon, directly or indirectly, in exchange for a service. In Scotland, the Queen might offer supplicants occult abilities that they might leverage to their benefit (Purkiss 124). But “while Scottish witches sought money indirectly..., the English sought it directly,” with both fairies more broadly and the figure of the Fairy Queen reportedly leading “witches” to buried treasure or offering blessings on home and hearth (Purkiss 135). Meanwhile, writers like Edmund Spenser would further cement this figure’s central role in English literature, such as with the titular character of *The Fairie Queene* (1590). Here, she goes by the name of Gloriana, but as Purkiss points out, “Spenser hardly dares to write about or invoke her—Gloriana is by no means a major character in the poem that ostensibly bears her name,” perhaps given the purposeful parallels between this figure and Queen Elizabeth (178). Thus, though the Queen of Elfland as discussed in these earlier accounts of witch trials is often

implied to have infernal associations, Spenser's poem does not take up this position. The symbolic instability of fairies continues, as does their imaginative potential. A rich tradition for *A Court of Fey & Flowers* to draw from indeed.

Shakespeare's work, which Romantic writers like Samuel Taylor Coleridge often turned to in their reflections on character and subjectivity,⁷⁶ is also studded with fairies—either in the form of allusions (such as the reference to “Queen Mab” in *Romeo and Juliet* I will be engaging with more closely below) or through characters that are themselves coded as fairies. Ariel, the spirit enslaved by Prospero, is very likely a fairy, albeit a much more elemental one. Ariel, after all, is responsible for the storm which gives *The Tempest* (1611) its name, and claims to be able to “fly, / To swim, to dive into the fire, to ride / On the curled clouds...” (I.ii 225-8). And even this relatively brief aside into the realm of fairies cannot neglect *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c. 1596), which takes up the figures of Titania and Oberon as monarchs of fairies, involving them in a mischievous subplot wherein Titania is charmed to fall in love with the donkey-headed Bottom. This charm comes from Oberon himself, who is motivated by the desire to take possession of a changeling stolen away by Titania.

Here, we see the danger of fairies as well as their mischief. Though the conflict between Oberon and Titania is humorous, the reason for it has roots in the wilder, darker versions of fairies that took as often as they gave. This unruly danger lives alongside the miniaturization of fairies during this period—Oberon and Titania quarrel among “the cowslips tall” and the play alludes to elves hiding in acorns to avoid their wrath (I.i 10, 30-1). And yet Oberon and Titania are also relatively new to the fairy stage. King Oberon arrives in England through John Bouchier's 1540s translation of *Huon of Bordeaux*, a *chanson de geste* from thirteenth-century

⁷⁶ See Coleridge: *Lectures on Shakespeare (1811-1819)* (2016), edited by Adam Roberts.

France. Queen Titania, meanwhile, seems to be an admixture of the Queen of Fairy present in earlier folklore and elements of “an Ovidian goddess-nymph” (Purkiss 177). Still, though they are not originally folkloric figures, Oberon and Titania became central to how many imagined fairies and the Fairy Court.

Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* continued to inspire variations and adaptations, including a heavily adapted opera by Henry Purcell unhelpfully named *The Fairy Queen* (1692). In Michael Drayton’s *Nymphidia* (1627), we encounter a story that draws some inspiration from Shakespeare’s play, blending it with elements from Arthurian myth.⁷⁷ King Oberon survives in this poem, although Queen Titania is replaced by Queen Mab. Like *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the *Nymphidia* begins by describing conflict between the two monarchs, a conflict born out of jealousy and desire. A knight of the Fairy Court, Pigwiggin, declares his love for Queen Mab who, after accepting his token, “mounts her chariot in a trice, / Nor would she stay, for no advice...” and meets Pigwiggin for an assignation underneath a “cobweb” (41-3). Oberon’s rage and jealousy ensue, and, much as in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Oberon relies on Puck to carry out his orders: in this case, finding Queen Mab and her lover.

The *Nymphidia* continues with a tale of sprites and spells. But whereas in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* we had Oberon victorious in his efforts to take Titania’s changeling, the *Nymphidia* instead concludes with a gendered reversal, a triumph for the Queen. A notable aspect of this ending (and this divergence from Shakespeare’s play) is that Queen Mab does not achieve

⁷⁷ I am here thinking specifically about the relationship between Queen Guinivere and, in *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1136), her relationship with Mordred. The characterization of Queen Guinivere as unfaithful to her husband, Arthur, is also taken up in later medieval French tradition and revolves around Lancelot and Guinivere’s tragic (for the kingdom) affair. See, for instance, *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart* (c. 1177-89) for early evidence of this latter point.

this success alone and must instead involve “Proserpine” (105). This “Proserpine” is, of course, another name for the Persephone of Greek and later Roman myth, and so the *Nymphidia*, like *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, similarly ties its Fairy Queen to the gods of Greco-Roman religious tradition. Thus, the *Nymphidia* does suggest a close relationship between its “modern” fairies and the goddesses, nymphs, and satyrs of antiquity, even as it also introduces a version of Queen Mab that triumphantly (if only momentarily) defies the Fairy King. Once again, fairies remain in a kind of liminal, in-between state, both philosophically and taxonomically. This liminality seemingly makes fairies endlessly energetic and productive in art and literature, though certain patterns do emerge. In particular, fairies often blend a quasi-animistic sense of nature with disruption, whether disruption of theological (such as in the question of the origin of fairies within a Christian worldview), or moral frameworks.

This conceptual blending is taken up in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s 1813 poem, *Queen Mab*. The titular fairy is both a guardian of nature and knowledge, *and* also functions as a prophetic figure who predicts an utopian, revolutionary end to all human strife. This depiction is a purposeful departure from the extant model for Queen Mab, though Shelley does preserve certain elements of this figure’s supernatural accoutrements. In Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, Queen Mab is described as “the fairies’ midwife,” who “comes / in shape no bigger than an agate-stone” (I.iv. 554-55). Mab’s “midwifery” is specialized—she brings forth not children, but dreams: “And in this state she gallops night by night / Through lovers’ brains, and then they dream of love” (I.iv. 570-1). These dreams are often pleasant, as those enjoyed by the “lovers’ brains,” but Queen Mab is, like all fairies, fickle, and “oft the angry Mab with blisters plagues [the lips of ladies] / Because their breaths with sweetmeats tainted are” (I.iv. 575-6). This version of the Fairy Queen has little of her original stature—and not just literally. Queen Mab is

here (and elsewhere) closely associated with the regulation of traditional femininity. Unlike Titania, however, Queen Mab is linked with earlier, more unruly representations of the Fairy Queen, with documented appearances in folklore that predates these literary allusions.⁷⁸ As we shall see, though Shelley takes up certain aspects of the Queen Mab we see in Shakespeare's play and elsewhere, he emphasizes different characteristics and abilities in his description of the monarch.

Fairies undergo a kind of renaissance during the Romantic period⁷⁹, especially given, nineteenth-century efforts at documenting folklore (Sugg 179). While the Brothers Grimm were, of course, an important part of this folkloric revival, there are also (roughly) contemporaneous efforts in Britain during the first few decades of the nineteenth century. In *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Borders*, first published in 1802 and then expanded until its final 1830 version, Walter Scott collects and edits such ballads as the version of *Thomas the Rhymer* alluded to above. As the title suggests, fairies were for Scott deeply tied to Scottish and, by extension, Celtic cultural heritage. Furthermore, Scott was part of a wider circle of writers and folklorists that believed fairies to either be a cultural adaptation of the *duergar* of Germanic and Old Norse mythology or

...that fairies were derived from Druids. Fleeing their conquerors and hiding in underground dwellings topped by artificial mounds, the Druids have done all that fairies were alleged to do. A declining people, the Druids borrowed food from ordinary peasants and abducted women and children to swell their thinning ranks, often returning them—sworn to secrecy—years later. (Silver 144)

⁷⁸ However, there is still much debate regarding the exact origins of Mab. Katharine Briggs, for instance, suggests that "her name is much more native than Titania's," and in another work she categorizes Mab as a word and figure of Celtic origins (*The Anatomy of Puck* 47 and *A Dictionary of Fairies* 275). Simon Young, by contrast, argues that it is ultimately impossible to pinpoint Mab's exact origins before her appearance in the world of literature and theater ("The Mab of Folklore").

⁷⁹ Fairies (and creatures that might as well be) are referenced by a variety of Romantic writers, including, but not limited to "Blake, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats" (Sugg 179).

Whether or not factually true, the association between fairies and Celtic culture in the latter theory that writers like Purkiss dismiss as historically unlikely nonetheless remained a potent belief during and even well after this period.⁸⁰ This link also reinforced the belief that fairies were deeply tied to and a part of nature and the natural world, a realm the Romantics would imagine as a kind of divine reprieve from industrialized life. Indeed, for writers like Blake, for instance, “Shakespeare's Fairies also are the rulers of the *vegetable* world, and so are Chaucer's; let them be so considered, and *then the poet will be understood*, and not else” (*Descriptive Catalogue* E 535, my emphasis). While Blake continues imagining fairies as diminutive creatures, they are nonetheless powerfully associated with the “vegetable” and therefore natural world.

It is this particular version of fairies that I am most interested in putting in conversation with the types of fey that we see in *A Court of Fey & Flowers*, fairies that are conceived of both as having deep ties to the natural world *and* as disruptive, even revolutionary figures. But before we can embark on this analytical juxtaposition of “texts” separated by two centuries, we must first reflect on one (though by no means the only) of the most notable fairies of the Romantic period that I have already alluded to above—Queen Mab as Shelley’s poem represents her. As we shall see, the titular fairy of Shelley’s poem is associated with both nature and Shelley’s notion of the “World-Spirit,” *and* with resistance, revolution, and disruption. This combination is especially significant in providing a framework through which we can both understand the shift in fairy lore during the Romantic period, and the implications of these changes for how fairies are represented and adapted in *A Court of Fey & Flowers*.

There are, of course, several other Romantic texts that engage with or even simply allude

⁸⁰ This renewed interest in Celtic culture and heritage had different, often nativist connotations specific to the different component nations of what was at the time the British Empire.

to fairies and fairy stories. And we have not touched on the Victorian efforts and domesticating the fairy, nor of the oft-maligned “Disneyfication” of fairy tales in the twentieth century. But for the purposes of this chapter, I will conclude my overview of fairy stories and fairy history here. As we have seen, fairies are, from their very conception, “troublesome,” liminal figures. From early folkloric traditions surrounding birth, death, life, or copulation (what Purkiss identifies as some of the central traditional domains of fairies in folklore) to vehicles for the Romantic sublime and resistance, fairies have occupied a variety of cultural, philosophical, aesthetic, and even theological niches. Below, I will continue to emphasize fairies’ connections to the natural world, the Romantic sublime, and revolutionary intent through a brief reading of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem, *Queen Mab*. I hope to further illustrate the close ties between how fairies “work” in *A Court of Fey & Flowers* and certain aesthetic and imaginative traditions during the Romantic period. As we will see, *A Court of Fey & Flowers* builds on the Shelleyan call for revolution, moving it from the space of a prophetic dream to “actual” resistance—the main cast of Archfey enact the emancipatory promise anticipated by Queen Mab, midwife of dreams.

IV. *Queen Mab* and the Revolutionary Potential of the Romantic Fairy

In *Queen Mab*, a sleeping woman, named Ianthe, is visited by the titular fairy, who, in this version of her story, continues to be associated with sleep and dreams. The poem’s first canto opens on a description of Ianthe’s sleeping form, before the first hints of a fairy visit begin to manifest:

Hark! Whence that rushing sound?
‘Tis like the wondrous strain
That round a lonely ruin swells....

'Tis softer than the west winds' sigh;
'Tis *wilder* than the unmeasured notes
Of that strange lyre whose strings
The genii of the breezes sweep... (I, 4, added emphasis)⁸¹

Here, Queen Mab's coming is associated with beauty, but it is a beauty that is also deeply *wild*, "wilder than the unmeasured notes" of an Aeolian harp. Though Shelley's poem preserves Queen Mab's small stature, she is by no means diminutive, as readers can well see from this momentous description even before the fairy herself has appeared. Later on, after Mab has materialized with a "purpureal halo 'round the scene" (5), she invokes her fairy magic in a significant way:

Stars! your balmiest influence shed!
Elements! your wrath suspend!
Sleep, Ocean, in the rocky bounds
That circle thy domain! (I, 6)

Here, as Mab prepares to cast a spell that will draw out Ianthe's soul so that she might be shown a series of visions which will end on the promise of utopian revolution, she invokes not "cowslips tall," but the "stars'" influence and the "elements'" wrath.

Later, taking Ianthe with her on her traditional chariot, the pair flies into the heavens, past the stars, to Mab's dwelling amidst the celestial spheres. Describing this journey and this space, the speaker declares

Spirit of Nature! here!
In this interminable wilderness
Of worlds, at whose immensity
Even the soaring fancy staggers,
Here is thy fitting temple.

⁸¹ Line numbers missing from this edition, citations reference canto number then page number.

Yet not the lightest leaf
That quivers to the passing breeze
Is less instinct with thee... (I, 10)

Though Mab's dwelling place exists in "this interminable wilderness / of worlds," giving her a god's-eye view of the universe, the speaker is clear in their insistence that "yet not the lightest leaf... is less instinct with [Nature]," closely tying together the poem's titular fairy with nature and the Romantic sublime. Shelley's Queen Mab, then, breaks with miniaturizing conventions, associating this Fairy Queen with what Shelley, even as he advocated for atheism, described as "the hypothesis of a pervading Spirit, coeternal with the universe," a belief which, for Shelley, "remains unshaken" as of the writing of this poem, even as his version of Queen Mab rejects organized religion as oppression (VII, 70). Indeed, this description of what Shelley elsewhere calls the "World Spirit" is part of a note to a declaration on Queen Mab's part: "There is no God! / Nature confirms the faith his death-groan sealed..." (VII, 70). Here, Shelley's conceptualization of a World Spirit "co-eternal" with Nature bears striking similarities to Iyengar's description of the Bloom as a "flow of magic [which] is natural here, and [which] waxes and wanes according to its own unknowable clock." Nature, in Iyengar's description, is a kind of wilderness encompassing the "[v]erdancy, fertility, and the giddiness of [natural] abundance." In this way, I position *A Court of Fey & Flower's* treatment of fairies and the natural sublime firmly within a Romanticist framework. Furthermore, the death of capitalistic accumulation that Queen Mab has come to prophesy anticipates the enactment of that revolutionary potentiality in *A Court of Fey & Flower's* adaptation of the Romantic fairy.

Queen Mab, then, is both a figure with deep ties to nature and the Romantic sublime, *and* a representation of the imagination's capacity for rebellion and resistance in the face of oppressive systems. But God is not Mab's only target: "Nature!—no! / Kings, priests, and

statesmen, blast the human flower / Even in its tender bud” (Shelley IV, 29). The Fairy Queen goes on to say that these figures’ “influence darts / Like subtle poison through the bloodless veins / Of desolate society” (Shelley IV, 29). Ultimately, Mab offers Ianthe—the representative of human innocence—a vision of a world without gods, kings, or masters:

Then, where, through distant ages, long in pride
The palace of the monarch-slave had mocked
Famine’s faint groan, and penury’s silent tear,
A heap of crumbling ruins stood, and through
Year after year their stones upon the field,
Wakening a lonely echo; *and the leaves*
Of the old thorn, that on the top-most tower
Usurped the royal ensign’s grandeur, shook
In the stern storm that swayed the top-most tower
And whispered strange tales in the whirlwind’s ear (IX, 132, emphasis added)

As this passage reflects, Queen Mab—and, by extension, the poem that bears her name—imagines this utopian world as a move away from the false and unnatural to a reclamation of the true and the natural—the ruins above are “crumbling,” but the promise of new life offered by the “leaves / Of the old thorn” is one in which nature *usurps* the grandeur of what is, in this vision, a distant world of falsehood and vice.⁸² The same “wild” powers that Mab is associated with in this poem are those that, in the vision she offers Ianthe, will ultimately triumph. Even at the poem’s conclusion, however, this dream remains just that—a dream that will be enacted by the fairies of *A Court of Fey & Flowers*.

⁸² Falsehood and vice are especially helpful for thinking about the evils that Shelley’s poem critiques, especially given a lengthy note in Canto IV that purports to be a dialogue between two allegorical representations of these two elements of corruption.

V. *A Court of Fey & Flowers*: Enclosure and the Romantic Fairy

But how do we apply this vision of fairies to *A Court of Fey & Flowers*? Well, the Feywild itself as envisioned in both *A Court of Fey & Flowers* and, more generally, in official *D&D* materials, foregrounds its Romanticist parallels in how the realm is conceived. In the “official” or canonical lore of *D&D*, the Feywild is characterized as

a place of *awe-inspiring natural beauty*. The plane was always bathed in twilight of the setting (or perhaps rising) sun, with lanterns and fireflies providing additional, haunting lights. Visitors to the plane *found that all sensations, both sensory and emotional, were heightened*. Smells were stronger, colors were more vivid, and sounds were clearer... (Grubb, Cordell, and Noonan 210, my emphasis)

Often characterized as a mirror the Material Plane (the official canonical stand-in for “reality”), the Feywild specifically embodies those elements of the Material Plane that have to do with riotous life, unbridled nature, and passionate emotion. As we have already begun to see, *A Court of Fey & Flowers* preserves most of these associations. But in representing the Bloom as an expression of the primordial and natural magics that certain Archfey wish to shape and control, the series alludes to some of the anxieties prevalent in certain examples of the genre that *Good Society* is based on—“improvement” as, in a word, indicating enclosure, the limitation of vast swathes of traditionally open country into the hands of a wealthy few. Furthermore, enclosure in *A Court of Fey & Flowers* takes on a subjectivistic dimension as the consequences of the Bloom’s stoppage are revealed.

It is Binx Choppley, played wonderfully by Surena Marie, who has ultimately come to disrupt this system. In some ways, Binx could be said to be a kind of composite of a variety of Austen’s heroines, though she differs in key ways from some of the models offered by Austen.

Here, I agree with Em C. Friedman that Binx can be seen as being partially inspired by the characters of Fanny Price and Catherine Morland, the respective protagonists of *Mansfield Park* and *Northanger Abbey*.⁸³ Binx, after all, is entirely alone by the start of the season, and in fact goes by a different identity at first, that of Gwyndolin Thistle-Hop. This subterfuge is in part motivated by Binx's suspicion that the rest of her Court—the Court of Craft—“died” in the Material Plane where they had been making their residence because the Archfey that remained in the Feywild would not allow the power of the Bloom to flow freely from their realm into the Material Plane, a point I return to below. Though the motivations of Austen's heroines differ from Binx's, Fanny and Catherine, too, often occupy the status of an outsider in their novels.

Like Binx, Fanny arrives to Mansfield Park without being entirely conversant in the modes of discourse and behavior adopted and perpetuated by the different Courts assembled. Indeed, Fanny's aunts and uncle, who offer to raise her in their home to offset some of the expense of Fanny's own overwhelmed mother, think of her *as* an outsider, an alienation rooted in class difference. As Sir Thomas, Lady Bertram, and Mrs. Norris discuss the arrangements for Fanny's arrival at Mansfield, Sir Thomas reflects that

There will be some difficulty in our way, Mrs. Norris... as to the distinction proper to be made between the girls as they grow up; how to preserve in the minds of my *daughters* the consciousness of what they are, without making them think too lowly of their cousin; and how, without depressing her spirits to far, make [Fanny] remember that she is not a *Miss Bertram*.... they cannot be equals. Their rank, fortune, rights, and expectations, will always be different. (Austen Kindle Loc. 355-65, Chapter I)

The careful attention Sir Thomas pays here to preserving these distinctions in class will frame Fanny's upbringing throughout the novel, and it is not until the end of the book, upon her

⁸³ See *Polygon* essay, “My Favorite New Jane Austen Adaptation is an Elaborate Game of *Dungeons & Dragons*” (2022).

marriage to her cousin Edmund, that Fanny is fully welcomed as an equal into the family. Here, we also see the Austenian character-system described above—though Fanny is clearly a “major” character as a protagonist, she is frequently relegated to a marginal, almost “minor” role from the perspective of the Bertrams due to her socioeconomic status. But between being given the attic as her room to sleep in and being asked to behave as a kind of personal servant to her aunt, Lady Bertram, Fanny is aware of these differences and of her status as someone who almost always sits outside of the family. Similarly, Binx consistently stumbles in her interactions with others, and quickly becomes one of the characters with the least reputation points in *A Court of Fey & Flowers*. Unlike Fanny, however, who ultimately wishes to assimilate into the family, thereby reforming the gentry, Binx acts as a disruptive, destabilizing force to the *status quo* who actively refuses reformation through assimilation.

Binx first infiltrates the Bloom disguised as an Archfey of a different Court from hers, Gwyndolin Thistle-hop of the Court of Wonder. Though *Northanger Abbey*’s Catherine Morland does not herself engage in deception, the core misunderstanding at the heart of the novel—that Catherine stands to inherit a fortune and is furthermore well-connected—nonetheless produces interesting parallels to the figure of Binx Choppley. Like Binx, Catherine remains for much of the novel as a partial outsider, one who does not fully understand the machinations of “good society” which lead to the General’s misapprehension of Catherine as what he would term a desirable connection for his son, Henry Tilney. Unlike these protagonists, however, Binx uses her outsider status to push back on these wider patterns of emotional and literal enclosure. Whereas Fanny grows accustomed to the wealth, status, and social practices of her adoptive family, Binx refuses to internalize these attitudes. Indeed, Binx, unlike Fanny, who, at the end of *Mansfield Park* marries her cousin and is therefore returned to the household she lamented leaving, opts

instead to break the cycle of magical (and, we can imagine, *capital*) accumulation perpetuated by the system of the Courts when, at the end of the season, she participates in the undoing of the Archfey's tightly held control of the Bloom's magical flow.

In a sense, then, a central concern in *A Court of Fey & Flowers* is a reexamination (and, in some ways, a rejection) of the "civilizing" (read *bourgeois*) impulses that have ruled fairy society for so long. Many of the Archfey that make up the main cast of characters are apparently ancient, as we see during a moment of reflection on the part of Squak Airavis. In this scene, Lady Chirp, Squak's cousin, has revealed to him the existence of a mortal child produced through a union forbidden to them both by their grandfather. As Squak takes hold of a token produced by Chirp's infant child, Aabria Iyengar describes the moment using language reminiscent of her earlier descriptions of the Bloom's primeval origins:

You pick it up and as you're holding it you feel a strong resonance of magic. It feels, *if we go back millennia*, to when you were and felt young, and moving through the House of the Lords of the Wing at their full power, that energy that is so connected to air and flight and life and soaring, that feeling you don't feel at home anymore, you feel a little surge of it inside of this woven piece, but it does feel different. It comes with that sort of stomach flutter of flying, but knowing that maybe you'll fall, something impermanent, something to her mortality that has changed the magic. But you recognize it very much [as] your magic. ("The Masquerade Ball", my emphasis)

There is much of Shelley's Queen Mab here. This allusion to Squak's youth mirrors the Bloom's own origins as a primal, natural force. Like Squak, the Courts gathering to celebrate and control the Bloom have become separated from their "wilder" origins. The Bloom's social and affective constraints have effectively domesticated the fairies, a domesticity that takes on the form of Regency-era configurations surrounding class, sensibility, and nature which have a deterministic effect on subject formation. Ultimately, it is this domestication that the fairy protagonists of this

season do battle against—a kind of “rewilding” of fairies, if you like.

Indeed, if we think of the Bloom’s magic as analogous to a Romantically sublime “wilderness,” then the machinations of the fairy Courts to control and distribute that magic take on a hue reminiscent of enclosure and early iterations of extractive, industrial capitalism in Britain. After all,

attention devoted to the contraction of space received its most visible expression in the latter part of the eighteenth century in debates over the enclosure of common fields and wastes.... From 1760 to 1780 and from 1790 until 1815 the two great waves of parliamentary enclosure fenced off the last of the open fields and, during the latter period especially, brought into cultivation vast stretches of *what was thought of as wasteland or wilderness*. (Crawford 11, my emphasis)

This “wilderness” had to be mapped out, codified, and, crucially, made *productive*. This historical period also, of course, is a moment when “England enlarge[d]... its national borders” through expansive colonial practices. “Expansion,” Crawford reminds us, “was underscored by an intensifying national belief in a uniquely British form of liberty conducive to productivity in all areas: increased revenues and raw goods from colonial acquisitions, increased exports of woolen, cotton, and linen goods...” (3). Colonial extraction provides the capital for greater and greater expansion, even as it relies on the exploitation of objectified, distant Others. Indeed, the Sir Thomas of *Mansfield Park* disappears for much of the novel due to a visit to colonial holdings in the Caribbean, suggesting a bloody root to the family’s wealth. Similarly, the bounty of *A Court of Fey & Flowers* is grounded in a kind of extractive privation of both wealth, and, as we shall see, individuality itself.

A Court of Fey & Flowers is therefore in part a story about capitalistic accumulation, though its treatment of enclosure builds on rather than simply repeats these ideas. In the seventh

episode of the season, “Masquerade Ball,” the plans of two of the most dominant Courts in the Bloom (the Unseelie and the Court of Wonder) are revealed. Prince Apollo, one of the leaders of the Court of Wonder, and Princess Suntar, heir-apparent of the Unseelie Court, propose an alliance with the Lords of the Wing, framing it thus:

Iyengar (as Apollo): Honestly, well, if we're going to be getting into bed together, the truth of the matter is it's been a matter of rumor, but also a matter of fact that the Unseelie Court has been looking to curtail access to the Mortal Planes. And when I originally reached out to Suntar, more so to ask why than anything else, it occurred to me that the Court of Wonder and the Unseelie Court had something interesting in common.

Wilson (as Squak): Hmm.

Iyengar (as Apollo): The stockpiling of magic, 'cause it flows into the Mortal Realm via those portals. But if we had a means to stopper it, to bottle it, we could keep that for ourselves. So an Alliance was born and, man, I don't wanna be crass, but since we're speaking so liberally—

Axford (as Chirp): Yeah.

Iyengar (as Apollo): We have a bit of a sense that the Lords of the Wing, storied though your house may be, is in a bit of disrepair, and we figured your good name deserves good magic behind it again, and that bringing you in would, of course, cut you in to our little venture. (“The Masquerade Ball”)

The “stockpiling” of magic and the control of its flow is the explicit goal of these two powerful individuals—magic that, as we have already seen, is in many ways synonymous with life force and nature more broadly. The description of this enclosure as a kind of *venture* emphasizes the parallels with speculative finance and extraction, but also has consequences for the process of subject formation.

This kind of magical enclosure has, like the true enclosure it parallels, many victims. But where regular British citizens were in some occasions stripped of their livelihoods, the enclosure that we see in *A Court of Fey & Flowers* has *taken* at least some portion of life from those fairies who are unable to access the Bloom’s power. Binx eventually reveals to her compatriots that the

reason she is the last member of the Court of Craft is because the other members of her Court became partially inanimate: “If you get trapped in the mortal plane, like, if you can’t find your way back, you turn into stuff.... ...the last weaver of the Court of Wonder [t]urned into a tree.... [And m]y sister is now a haunted house” (“The Rule of Sneakery”). Here, then, the consequences of enclosure extend to limiting the access of some fairies not only to life, but, indeed, to the *experience of an individualized subjectivity*. Much as enclosure contributed to the functionalization of stratified social classes in the Romantic period, leading to an alienation of workers from their labor, so, too does the enclosure of *A Court of Fey & Flowers* ultimately dramatize the objectification of laborers and workers produced by industrial capitalism. While there is still an innate “sacredness” to the objects these beings become, Binx’s description suggests fear of this fate, and Surena Marie’s performance here reinforces that impression. She hesitates, stumbling over her words at times as she reveals to Chirp Featherfowl, played by Emily Axford, the fate of fairies who remain trapped in the Material Plane.



Figure 8 (Binx's Revelation)

Her expression (Figure 6) is grave and even haunted as Surena Marie vocally and visually emphasizes the sense of loss and alienation attendant to the literal objectification of the fellow

members of the Court of Craft. Thus, the allegory of enclosure here functions at two levels at once—on the surface, *A Court of Fey & Flowers* seems to (and indeed authorizes) a reading of enclosure grounded in the aesthetics of the Romantic sublime and its unique framing of nature. But on another level, its use of enclosure builds on and extends an Austenian character-system which implicitly asks—who gets to be the protagonist? Who can become a “major” character, a “center-of-consciousness” around which the world moves? In *A Court of Fey & Flowers*, individual subjectivity is limited to those fairies who remain in power. Much like the Romantics saw the quasi-divine nature of the natural world as to some extent necessary in the development of their own inner selves, so, too is the “magic” of the Bloom not only a commodity to be bandied about and extracted, but also a means toward achieving and maintaining an individualized, subjective identity.

Ultimately, at the season’s conclusion, the main troupe of fairies decides against perpetuating this system of magical enclosure, and Iyengar describes their victory thus:

...the problem is solved. The portal is preserved. ...everything begins to stabilize as a new order and a new understanding about the world and what it could be when people aren’t separated, when they’re brought together and held together, and everything calms and stills (“You Will Never Know A Lonely Day Again”).

Here, balance is seemingly restored through the preservation of a magical portal that is open and flows freely, a symbol for equity in the midst of natural and magical abundance. It is notable here that Iyengar’s description of this “new order” relies on a kind of profound intersubjectivity as people are “brought together and held together,” suggesting an almost transcendental union with the magic of the Bloom and, through it, all others. But, as Friedman reminds us, Austen’s stories often “seem tidy until you look up close. In the same way, Iyengar does not tie off loose ends, but instead ties these characters together” (“*A Court of Fey & Flowers* Has a Lot to Say about

Love, Class, and Equality”). The Courts, after all, remain, as does the distinction between Archfey and “lesser” fairies—or between “major” and “minor” characters, to return to Woloch’s engagement with Austen. Thus, while the “Pack of Pixies” (as the main cast comes to call itself for this season) partially enact the revolution that the Romantic fairy only anticipates, the systems of class and power that enabled this enclosure in the first place still remain, even if they are somewhat weakened.

Conclusion

The Regency continues to fascinate. *Bridgerton* (2020—present), the Netflix adaptation of Julia Quinn’s novels by the same name, released the show’s fourth season earlier this year, and it is currently seventh on Netflix’s “Top 10 Most Popular Shows” list with 113 million total views. *A Court of Fey & Flowers*, released in 2022, clearly responds to and shares this fascination. But the Regency unfolds, as we know, during the Romantic era, and thus any adaptation of this period is potentially loaded with other continuities ranging from the political to the aesthetic. As I have endeavored to illustrate above, *A Court of Fey & Flowers* is uniquely suited to a Romanticist interpretation in three key ways: its engagement with Regency-era notions of the self, sociality, and character-systems through its adaptation of *Good Society*’s game mechanics; its exploration and adaptation of scandalous celebrity and the Byronic mode represented by the Lords of the Wing; and in its framing of fairies and fairy magics as revolutionary figures grounded in and a part of a version of nature very similar to the Romantic sublime, and which enables and facilitates subject formation.

Furthermore, I have endeavored to demonstrate the ways in which *A Court of Fey & Flowers* is not only indebted to these Romantic-era ideas and forms, but in fact builds on them.

In my interpretation of *A Court of Fey & Flowers*, I see their adaptation of enclosure as expanding beyond the self-evident eco-critical connotations to encompass questions of subjectivity and protagonism. Through this reading of enclosure, we can deepen our understanding of *A Court of Fey & Flower*'s overarching critique of late-stage capitalism, which, it suggests, results not only in the privation of economic resources, but also of subjective individuality as workers are reduced to functionalized roles. This kind of alienating privation is ultimately what the series (in some ways unsuccessfully) attempts to combat. As we have seen, the Lords of the Wing contribute to that effort through an adaptation of scandalous celebrity and Byronic heroism, which they leverage as a means of achieving the party's broader goals. Finally, *A Court of Fey & Flowers* expands on the revolutionary potential of the Romantic fairy, moving it from the realm of dreams to the realm of action, if only within the context of a fictive world.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated the degree to which *A Court of Fey & Flowers* draws from, adapts, and remediates some of the concerns, ideas, and aesthetics of the Romantic period. In doing so, I hope to show the relevance of a Romanticist conceptual framework for thinking about the *actual play* series that this dissertation engages with. This framework foregrounds the dynamics of power and subject-formation that frequently undergird *actual play* performances. But it also attests to the relevance of Romanticism today as, sometimes knowingly, sometimes not, these *actual play* series consistently draw from traditions, ideas, and discourse indelibly marked by the Romantic period. Much like the Romantics themselves, we are in the midst of a period of acute income inequality which shows no signs of abating. And new horizons are rising which suggest that this kind of functionalized stratification might only be exacerbated in the years to come. Here, I am thinking of the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), a profound

technological revolution with the potential to automate wide swaths of the current labor market.⁸⁴ Indeed, “as an instrument of capitalist quantification and calculation, AI is purposefully designed in such a way that it will intensify alienation, exploitation, extractivism, racialized and gender exclusion, and climate degradation” (Mansouri & Bailey 1).

To be clear, my position here is not that AI itself is an inherently negative technology. Rather, I am reflecting on the potential (and, frankly, likely) socioeconomic impact on extant income inequality, given that powerful AI companies are leveraging their wealth to influence and curtail the regulation of this new, at times unpredictable form of technology.⁸⁵ Furthermore, this technology also threatens profound environmental impacts, as it is “driving an unprecedented boom in data centers—massive facilities that consume large amounts of electricity and water while releasing waste heat into surrounding neighborhoods” (Hubertz par. 1). These data centers are often constructed “in the same low-income communities and communities of color that are already struggling with abandoned properties and dangerous heat waves,” further cementing the potentially deleterious impact of unregulated AI development not only on the labor market, but on the environment itself (*Ibid.*). Romanticism, then, can provide a rich aesthetic and philosophical foundation on which to build in the face of these technological, and socioeconomic changes, and I suspect that we will continue to see further adoption of or engagement

⁸⁴ According to a report by the International Economic Development Council, AI “has emerged as a transformative force in the labor market, reshaping the nature of work, job roles, and employment dynamics across a variety of industries. As AI technologies continue to advance, the impact of AI on the labor market is multifaceted and complex” (3).

⁸⁵ Here, I am referring to Donald J. Trump’s executive order, “Ensuring a National Policy Framework for Artificial Intelligence,” which, among other things, establishes as the “policy of the United States” the goal of “sustain[ing] and enhanc[ing] global AI dominance through a *minimally burdensome national policy framework for AI*” (my emphasis). In plain language, the executive order aims to severely curtail the ability of states to regulate this emergent technology.

with some of the ideas, debates, and even anxieties of the period, even as new artists, thinkers, and performers adapt these concepts for their own unique, emergent purposes.

Conclusion: Adaptation's Revitalizing Potential

And thus, we come to the end. This project is the result of years of attempting, sometimes successfully, sometimes less so, to juxtapose two fields of study that, on the surface, would seem very different. As I have continued to emphasize throughout this project, many of the contributions to the field of *actual play* studies tend to focus on the “emergent” or unprecedented aspects of this genre. Recently, critics like Gerard Natchwey, one of my primary interlocutors in my project, have begun to pay more attention to the historical, cultural, and aesthetic foundations on which *Dungeons & Dragons* and, more broadly, *actual play* shows are built. It is this newfound focus that this dissertation is rooted in, and I have thus far demonstrated the complex historical, ideological, performative, and aesthetic networks which tie the *actual play* series that I have taken as my case studies here to the Romantic period.

In the first chapter, we looked at the role of Romantic poets Lord Byron and William Wordsworth in modifying both the epic genre, and the models of heroism that epics had traditionally prized. For Wordsworth's “autobiographical epic,” the supreme focus on interiority and self-development reinforces the Romantic-era conflation between the categories of hero and poet, categories which, until this point, had remained largely separate. While Lord Byron initially participated in this kind of heroic tradition in poems like *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage I & II*, his final contribution to the epic genre through *Don Juan* sought to ironize and destabilize the High Romantic model of heroism. I argued that both epic “styles” provide us with two poles or ends on a continuum of Romantic epic-heroism which I framed as a taxonomical model for thinking about how different *actual play* series explore the concepts of heroism, epic, and the development of the self (*bildung*). This chapter also demonstrated the degree to which my two *actual play* case studies, *Worlds Beyond Number* and *Fantasy High: Junior Year*, leveraged some

of these Romantic conceptualizations. In the case of *Worlds Beyond Number*, Lou Wilson's performance as Eursulon, a figure in many ways analogous to the Romantic hero, extends access to this kind of subjectivity beyond its traditional (white male) boundaries. Similarly, *Fantasy High: Junior Year* plays with the kind of polyphonic instability present in Byron's take on the epic in service of its own unique critique of heroes and heroism.

The second chapter brought together ideas and discourse surrounding orality, print culture, and improvisation. I traced the history of Italian improvisation from its original roots in the early modern period to the incorporation of the language of this practice during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. At a time when writers like Wordsworth conceptualized poetic composition as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," improvisation served to infuse some of the writing of this period with the Romantic values of originality, spontaneity, and genius. Taking Lord Byron's *Don Juan* as an example, I illustrated the ways in which Byron assimilates the *impression* of improvisation through elements like *ottava rima* and the Byronic digressions which so characterize the text. In my reading of improvisation in *Don Juan*, I argued that its use in the mock epic in a sense "authorizes" the gendered reversal Byron makes to the story of the Don Juan character, rendering it an unstable "stock figure." I juxtaposed this use of improvisation with its employment in *Dimension 20: Neverafter*, in which anxieties about the tension between orality and print similarly invite the player-performers to transform their stock characters—based as they are on fairy tale figures—through acts of improvisation and performance, a process that I called *voicings*. Ultimately, Romantic improvisation in *Neverafter* serves its own unique purpose, as the season concludes with a radical redistribution of the means of literary production which challenges Romantic notions of authorship, even as it sidesteps and does not entirely resolve the tension of

remediation.

Finally, the third chapter of this dissertation began with a discussion of Romanticism's representation of nature and the Sublime, a survey that I tied to the history of the fairy in folklore and literature. I demonstrated the symbolic instability of fairies throughout history, while also noting the decidedly eco-revolutionary charge they take on during the Romantic period. I grounded this understanding of the Romantic fairy in a brief reading of Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem, *Queen Mab*, emphasizing the deep ontological ties between the titular fairy and the natural sublime as imagined by Shelley. Establishing this context was a necessary first step in approaching *A Court of Fey & Flowers* through this particular Romanticist framework, given the centrality of fairies and their relationship to nature in this season of *Dimension 20*.

The next step required a review of Jane Austen's structures of characterization, structures which both reify and implicitly critique the socioeconomic stratification which make these forms of characterization possible, and which tie into narratives of individuality and subjectivity that were developing during the turn of the nineteenth century. The third thread I pulled in this chapter further emphasized the Romanticist foundations of aristocratic heroism and scandalous celebrity represented by the Lords of the Wing, while also demonstrating how this season of *Dimension 20* sees player-performers leverage these contexts in unique ways. In that chapter, I offered a "reading" of the season's overarching narrative arc surrounding the Bloom as one which followed Romantic patterns of enclosure. As I argued, however, *A Court of Fey & Flowers* deepens its critique of enclosure to encompass not just the enclosure of land and nature, but the enclosure, too, of subjectivities. Thus, while *A Court of Fey & Flowers* implicitly and explicitly draws on the language of the Regency and the Romantic period, it adapts that framework to its own particularized critique of income inequality.

Placed alongside one another, these different chapters act to clarify and illustrate part of the complex web of influence and adaptation which ties *actual play* series today to the Romantic period of two centuries past. As we have seen, *Dungeons & Dragons*, the game system that most of my case studies utilize for play, invites its players to play at epic heroism. But any understanding of the role of epic in both *Dungeons & Dragons* and the *actual play* series which utilize this system must, as I have argued, include an awareness and understanding of how that genre changed and evolved during the Romantic period. In *Dimension 20: Neverafter*, the language and tools of Romantic improvisation foregrounds and enables the series to adapt and in a sense remediate the stock characters which it employs, even as it simultaneously critiques the Wordsworthian model of authorship as described by Jacques Rancière above. Finally, while the Regency aesthetics of *A Court of Fey & Flowers* are the most obvious link to Austen's novels, its deployment of character and characterization is deeply reminiscent of Austen's own approach, an impression that *Good Society: A Jane Austen RPG* further reinforces. *A Court of Fey & Flowers* hybridizes these systems of characterization with more Byronic modes of scandalous celebrity, and merges this focus on heroes and characters with its allegory of enclosure as a literally objectifying force.

What I have attempted to demonstrate in this project is the degree to which these interconnecting webs not only exist between *actual play* and the Romantic period, but also just how we can deploy that awareness and those tools in order to better understand these series today. In so doing, I am not only bringing a literary and historical awareness to *actual play* that many other critics have thus far neglected, but I am also attempting to demonstrate the wider applicability of Romanticism to other areas of study. In its 2022 call for papers for their "New

Romanticisms” conference, the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism reflected on some key, central questions that haunted the field for the last decade. Notably, they asked,

What does it mean to study Romanticism today? How can Romantic Studies appropriately and effectively respond to current debates about the relevance and future of Higher Education, social justice, climate change, and contemporary culture more generally? (NASSR)

I first read these words before this project’s initial conception, and I remember being struck by them even then. After all, to my mind, we live in a period in history that bears certain strong parallels to the Romantic period, even as these parallels today unfold in their own unique, historically determined ways. This belief framed the way I continued to relate to the media around me, media that I often found myself mentally putting in conversation with some of the Romantic ideas, structures, and aesthetics I worked with professionally throughout my time in graduate school.

It was this newfound awareness of the degree to which Romanticism continues to be remediated today which I brought to my own “home game,” a long-running *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign that, as of May 2026, has been running for six years. What began as a tool for socialization during the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic has evolved into a rich tapestry of characters and stories. Like many who were first introduced to the game during this period, I was largely influenced by the models for performance and roleplay common in *actual play* series like *Critical Role* and *Dimension 20*. These models offered principles for structuring roleplay that, even then, I began to recognize as hazily familiar. This sense was deepened by the “class” that I have been playing with for the last six years: the Druid. In *Dungeons & Dragons*, Druids are partially inspired by some of the same discourse which shaped fairies and fairy stories during the

turn of the nineteenth century. They are representatives of a vast wilderness which is in constant negotiation (and, in many cases, in direct conflict with) human civilization and industry, and Druids are tasked with bridging this tense divide. In the case of my character, my Druid was more tightly bound to the Romantic period through what is known as his “subclass.” Subclasses are, in a sense, specializations that one’s character adopts as they progress through the first few levels. Subclasses determine the abilities and features available to one’s character beyond the basic traits that come as part of the class itself. My character’s subclass is known as the “Circle of Dreams,” a Druidic specialization that attributes the source of many of my character’s abilities to the realm of Fairie described in the third chapter of this dissertation.

In roleplaying as this character—a “Dreamer” known as Micah—I began to, at first unconsciously, draw from some of the Romantic models for nature and the sublime that I have explored more critically as part of this dissertation. In thinking, for instance, about the *act* of casting magic from my character’s perspective, I reflected on the potential applicability of Keats’ negative capability to conceptualizing my character’s relationship to his own magical power, a power I began to imagine as a kind of naturalistic inspiration. The game’s mechanics rewarded this approach, as Druids are what are known as Wisdom-based casters. Thus, their abilities—especially as collaboratively determined between myself and my GM—are often coded as intuitive and instinctual. Indeed, I remember vividly a scene where my character discovers the remnants of an ancient, proto-Druid settlement. At its center, a “pool” of quartz shimmered in invitation, enclosed by four pillars with arcane inscriptions. These inscriptions, which the GM first imagined on his own, were poems, haikus which invoked the natural world *and* acted as anchors to a powerful spell. This conflation of natural magical power with poetic inspiration should, at this point in the thesis, be familiar to us, and my imagined experienced as this

character reinforced for me the sense that even those players or GMs who know little about the Romantic period (my GM is an engineer who tends toward more modern readings, especially novels) are actively drawing from a not-so-distant aesthetic and conceptual well.

I mention these experiences at the closing of this project to further demonstrate the degree to which Romanticism continues to remain relevant today, especially in “texts” like *actual play* series which are so deeply rooted in traditions of adaptation and remediation. But as I hope this brief exploration has illustrated, such relevance goes beyond the realm of the academic and into the experiential, into the structuring concepts that frame and anchor the imaginative experiences of the game’s players and their characters. At the anecdotal level, Romanticism enriched and deepened my own roleplay as a character tasked with the stewardship of a vision of nature that I found incredibly familiar. And as I have shown above, centering this indebtedness offers us a richer sense not only of the aesthetic history of *actual play*, but also of the generative potential of remediation and adaptation to how these series approach new problems, such as in the case of *A Court of Fey & Flower*’s expansion of enclosure; and how they revisit, reframe, and explode older ideas, as we see in the reclamation of Romantic heroism by performers like Lou Wilson in *The Wizard, the Witch, and the Wild One*. Indeed, three of the four “pillars” through which the NASSR 2022 call for papers invited submitters to think about Romanticism today (“[the] relevance and future of Higher Education, *social justice*, *climate change*, and *contemporary culture more generally*”) are the heart of this project, and of the *actual play* series that it engages with. Adaptation and remediation will continue to be of central importance to the field of Romanticism, and this is but one brief, first step in that direction.

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