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“THE WONDER OF THE VISIBLE:” FANTASY, REALITY, AND THE PRISM OF STORY

IN THE WORK OF PATRICIA A. MCKILLIP

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

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BY

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ABSTRACT

“THE WONDER OF THE VISIBLE:” FANTASY, REALITY, AND THE PRISM OF STORY

IN THE WORK OF PATRICIA A. MCKILLIP

BY SOPHIA TORRES POMARES

Patricia McKillip’s works *The Book of Atrix Wolfe*, *In the Forests of Serre*, and “The Fellowship of the Dragon” - the first two of which are novels, the last being a short story - all demonstrate one of fantasy’s inherent tensions: the negotiation of certainty and uncertainty, of real and make-believe. McKillip shows us that fantasy can make important interventions in how we think of reality, and not simply by reflecting our world in metaphor or allegory. Not only does she make us question the parameters defining fantasy literature, she complicates our understanding of the definition of fantasy entirely. In the way she constructs layers of reality within her fantasy worlds, McKillip raises questions about our own reality. By de-hierarchizing what we would think of as real and fake worlds, McKillip’s work ponders what it means to be “real” and also what it means to be “possible.” McKillip’s works show how formula can be combined with subtle experimentation to pull on the power of convention while also introducing ambiguity, revealing what can be done within the confines of (or rather, the freedoms afforded by) the generic form in which she works. She demonstrates that story is the most important rule of fantasy, but in the end, it is less a rule and more of an outlook on reality.

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Introduction

Picture a work of fantasy literature. Does a leather-bound and well-loved copy of *The Lord of the Rings* come immediately to mind? Or is the specific work less distinct – a blocky, generic paperback, with yellowing pages and a fading wizard casting shadowy magic upon its cover. Or maybe it is a small unassuming title with the sprawling, ephemeral illustrations of Kinuko Craft adorning its binding. If you stumbled upon the latter volume, you likely would not at once recognize it as a novel by fantasist Patricia A. McKillip, but you might be confidently able to decide next to which titles it should be shelved. Or perhaps to you the very phrase “fantasy literature” is practically an oxymoron?

The genre most readers today perceive as fantasy has, since its birth as a mode explicitly separate from realism, been devalued as a genre worthy of serious critical attention, and indeed, consideration as serious fiction. A precise definition of the term varies among critics, variably expanding to include any work dealing with “the construction of the impossible” (James and Mendlesohn 1) or shrinking to define only those texts that can claim Tolkien as a literary ancestor. Although stories with what could, to a modern reader, easily be termed “fantastical” elements have existed since the earliest days of human storytelling, John Clute asserts that not until the beginning of the 18th century did it become necessary to draw a line between works adhering to mimetic representation and those that did so to a (sometimes much) lesser degree (Clute, “Fantastika”). In Clute’s estimation, as Enlightenment values privileging rationality proliferated during this period, there emerged a wider “cultural consensus that informative obedience to ascertainable reality ultimately told us more about our human experience of the world we inhabited than any myth or fairytale or fabulation could possibly do” (21). As such, one might argue that since the very inception of what we think of as the genre, fantasy texts have had

to jostle to be considered literarily on par with their realist neighbors in what has often been a losing battle. Clute terms this mode “fantastika,” under which he groups the more commonly understood categories “Fantasy; Science Fiction; and Horror” (24), yet even within what can be understood as fantastic literature exists a hierarchy privileging that which is “grounded in the scientifically possible” (James and Mendlesohn 1) and closer to history as we know it. As Robertson notes, in a decades-long bias that largely persist in the academy to the present day, “critics continue to reduce fantasy as anti-historical-and-therefore politically-bad, while they celebrate science fiction as historical-and-therefore politically-good” (Robertson 68).

And so, alongside an ongoing struggle to have the fantastic recognized as a legitimate area of study exists a push to identify what within its ranks qualifies as intellectually and aesthetically worthy, and what might be considered the lowbrow chaff of the genre. Within fantasy (as opposed to science fiction), critics often appraise this gulf as especially wide. Brian Attebery attempts to bridge it by proposing the idea of fantasy as “genre,” a middle ground between the formulaic fiction of “swords and sorcery” novels and the incredibly broad class of fiction that departs in some way from mere mimesis. He concedes that, “Fantasy is, indeed, both formula and mode: in one incarnation a mass-produced supplier of wish fulfillment, and in another a praise- and prize-worthy means of investigating the way we use fictions to construct reality itself” (*Strategies* 1). He proposes the idea of this genre as a “fuzzy set,” “defined not by boundaries but by a center” (12). For Attebery (and indeed, the majority of critics and general readers alike) this set centers around Tolkien, a giant who towers over the elf- and dragon-filled landscape of modern fantasy and whose shadow is impossible to disregard. It is this definition that I find most useful and which I will be working off of whenever I subsequently refer to the genre of fantasy in this paper.

Fantasy's core composition arguably relies on formula, and as with any kind of "genre fiction," its readers often approach these narratives with a knowledge (whether conscious or otherwise) of the rules underlying the tale they are about to read and expectations for the characters, settings, and themes they are to encounter therein. There is a level of certitude intrinsic to such an organization that does not seem to readily lend itself to revelation or invention; part of the pleasure that comes from reading fantasy stems from the comfort of knowing, as a reader, what one is getting into. The view that fantasy consists primarily of "generic" texts (a term which, in this case, conjures images of those ubiquitous mass-produced paperbacks "restricted in scope, recent in origin, and specialized in audience and appeal," whose commercial success "depends on consistency and predictability" (Attebery, *Strategies* 2)) is one which detractors have used to justify fantasy's depiction as imitative and intellectually barren. Although Baker ultimately argues for the progressive potential (though not quite fully realized at the time of his writing) of the genre, he acknowledges that fantasy "does not skew in that direction traditionally" (438). He cites common critiques ranging from the escapist impulse of literature not directly dealing with the reality of the here and now (an impulse which often results in "affirming dominant ideology," to the fact that, beginning with the markedly pre-modern setting of Tolkien's Middle Earth (438), fantasy settings themselves tend to give way to nostalgia for an imagined golden-age of the past in a tendency that Baker cautions can be "dangerously naïve" (439). In his study of China Miéville's *The Scar*, Benjamin Robertson outlines several key distinctions which he "infer[s] from critical and theoretical studies of fantasy and science fiction," the most important of which is that the latter is characterized by "possibility" and the former by "impossibility" (68). The key conceptual framework undergirding this split is the idea that, because science fiction is so often set in the future, the worlds it describes have a greater

connection to our reality and stand some chance of one day becoming that reality. Fantasy, on the other hand, deals with settings that readers know have never existed and could never exist, divorced as they are from the conventionally real world in which we live in.

Any theory of genre must, of course, concern itself with definitions and timelines of development. However, the further back one looks, boundaries muddy, and the harder it becomes to draw a line staking out where fantasy begins. In his most recent critical work, *Stories About Stories*, Attebery traces the genesis of what would become modern fantasy to a time long before debate could rage about the difference between fantasy and science fiction or their respective merits vis-à-vis realistic fiction. He maps less of a dividing line and more of a vast connecting thread linking the modern genre to myths and folktales – in other words, some of the earliest and most universal forms of literature. Myths we know today “had once been spoken or sung by performers who meant something by them, something not entirely contained within the words of the story but dependent on the occasion, the ritual frame, the audience, and the obligations that such stories carry,” and were not confined to a single definitive retelling (19). Attebery argues that while people may have believed that the gods and magic of the myths were real, the stories themselves were always negotiable. Those stories lost some of that malleability when first mythology and then fantasy, its progeny (and the modern genre that Attebery argues maintains their essence the most), was committed to paper and immutable text. Building off this historical definition of myth as inherently pliable, Attebery argues that fantasy’s “way of playing with symbols encourages the reader to see meaning as something unstable and elusive, rather than single and self-evident” (2). McKillip’s work reaffirms and reintroduces modern fantasy readers to that game-like property of the genre, not as something entirely frivolous or for children, but something by its very nature flexible, unresolved, and open to endless replaying.

Patricia McKillip's works *The Book of Atrix Wolfe*, *In the Forests of Serre*, and "The Fellowship of the Dragon" - the first two of which are novels, the last being a short story - all demonstrate one of fantasy's inherent tensions: the negotiation of certainty and uncertainty, of real and make-believe. As any scholar or lover of fantasy of any kind will tell, magical narratives contain seeds of truth and have the capacity to teach us something valuable about our world, even though they take place in one which is made-up. However, McKillip shows us that fantasy can make important interventions in how we think of reality, and not simply by reflecting our world in metaphor or allegory. Not only does she make us question the parameters defining "fantasy literature," she complicates our understanding of the definition of fantasy entirely. In the way she constructs layers of reality within her fantasy worlds, McKillip raises questions about our own reality. By de-hierarchizing what we would think of as real and fake worlds, McKillip's ponders what it means to be "real" and also what it means to be "possible."

Admittedly, McKillip does not represent any radical departure from fantasy convention; does this mean her works are regressive and do nothing more than "affirm dominant ideology?" My thesis will argue strongly against this view. Instead, I will suggest that rather than being stuck in one interpretation of history or experience, McKillip's works deal much more with possibility than impossibility, and most of all the potential for refashioning and reinterpretation that storytelling makes conceivable. While she may follow the rules of the genre, so to speak, the most important rule McKillip adheres to is that of "story". Stories and storytelling require even broader definitions than fantasy, but they are concepts inextricably wound in one another. Clute argues that "the literatures of the Fantastic positively glory in the fact that they present, and embody, Story-shaped worlds" ("Story"). These literatures recognize that they follow the coherent logics of narrative, which "tells or implies a sequence of events, in any order which can

be followed by hearers or readers, and which generates a sense that its meaning is conveyed through the actual telling.” Story, for Clute, is “a narrative discourse which is told.” This definition of story fits with that of the stories told through the myths Attebery engages. In other words, story has been legible to the human consciousness since the dawn of time, and constitutes a mode where power lies in interpretation and reinterpretation; stories can survive infinite iterations and indeed flourish off this variety.

McKillip’s works show how formula can be combined with subtle experimentation to pull on the power of convention while also introducing ambiguity, revealing what can be done within the confines of (or rather, the freedoms afforded by) the generic form in which she works. She demonstrates that story is the most important rule of fantasy, but in the end, it is less a rule and more of an outlook on reality. If anything, her narratives tell us that stories can change, as an awareness of story does not strip agency from the characters, but rather grants it and opens new possibilities for them. McKillip’s fantasy affirms the power of Story as a framework for thinking about reality, and paired with world-building that destabilizes the boundaries between the real and the fantastic, shows us what becomes possible when we realize reality may be more fantasy-like than we typically imagine.

But first let me introduce McKillip’s stories themselves.

Overview of McKillip Works Under Discussion

The Book of Artix Wolfe tells the story of the powerful sorcerer (“mage” is the term McKillip uses) Atrix Wolfe, and of his book of distorted spells. Upon a snowy battlefield on a moonless night, Atrix Wolfe unleashes a spell that manifests a monstrous in a furious effort to end the standoff between two warring kingdoms. Before vanishing, the Hunter decimates the forces of both armies, leaving the field a gruesome nightmare. Twenty years later, we find Atrix Wolfe living as a hermit in the mountains above the mage’s school where he used to teach, mitigating his guilt over the destruction he caused by giving up his magic entirely. He is pulled out of this solitary existence when he learns a student has found an old spellbook he wrote shortly after that fateful night. Written by a man whose every thought was shadowed by the Hunter (thoughts which seeped into the very words), this book contains instructions for simple spells that never works as intended.

The student turns out to be Prince Talis, heir to the besieged kingdom in which the massacre on Hunter’s field took place and in which the legend of the Hunter still looms large. Summoned back to the castle where his brother now rules, he takes the strange book with him. In trying to unravel its twisted magic, he releases the Hunter into the world again. Atrix (who no one knows is responsible for creating the Hunter) arrives to help destroy him once and for all. In this complicated web of mysteries and half-truths we also meet the kitchen maid Saro, child of a separate fantasy world entirely and another casualty of Atrix’s spell. As a young girl she was torn from the eternal spring of her mother’s kingdom by force of magic and tossed beside a woodpile, mute and alone, until the kitchen staff found her. She slowly starts to remember who she is and recover some of her own power as the story progresses and she comes into contact with the prince. The rest of the narrative follows these characters as they attempt to untangle what really

happened that night on Hunter's Field, and finally set an ending to the tale that has haunted them for two decades.

In the Forests of Serre begins with Prince Ronan, heir to the kingdom of Serre, ill-fatedly trampling one of the prized white chickens of the ancient witch Brume. Ronan refuses an invitation into her eerie cottage made of bones and suspended atop chicken feet, and so she issues him a warning that he "will have a very bad day" (3), after which he will leave home and be unable to return until he has found her again. He does indeed go on to have a bad day, returning to the palace to be greeted by the news that his father the king has betrothed him to Princess Sidonie of Dacia. This is a horrifying proposition for Ronan, who is still grieving the recent death of his wife and newborn child. Through a window he spots the firebird, a mystical creature which entrances him with its beauty and song. Seeking to escape from his life, Ronan runs out of the palace and into the forest, chasing the firebird and the oblivion she offers.

Meanwhile in Dacia, Sidonie and her father reach out to the aged wizard Unciel to help them prepare for the princess's imminent journey to Serre. However, Unciel is in a rather diminished state – after a prolonged battle with an ancient entity (the details of which he is reluctant to share), any use of magic exhausts him greatly. Thus, he contacts the young wizard Gyre, who owes him a favor, and asks that he accompany the wedding party as they navigate the forests of Serre, said to be filled with strange and unpredictable magic.

The group make it over the mountains and through the forests intact, only to arrive at the palace to find that the bridegroom is missing. At this point, Gyre has fallen in love with the land and its wild magic, and has begun to covet rulership of it for himself. Being a wizard capable of changing his shape, Gyre realizes just how easy it would be to take the place of the absent prince. On the pretense of going to retrieve him, Gyre heads back out into the forests, finds Ronan, and

traps him with Brume. To escape both her and the spell of the firebird, Ronan makes a deal to give the witch his heart, and she allows him to leave. Now free from his heartache by new means, Ronan returns to the palace and succeeds in trapping Gyre with the witch this time, with Brume's assistance.

But even after all this, the story is far from over. Sidonie, unwilling to marry a heartless man, sets out on her own to reclaim his heart, whether Ronan wants it or not. In order to get away from Brume, Gyre momentarily takes the form of the monster Unciel fought (having seen a glimpse of it in Unciel's face when last they spoke). Through this act he unwittingly reawakens a vestige of it, seemingly intent on destroying Serre and all its varied inhabitants, Gyre included. All the while back in Dacia, Unciel and his scribe Euan Ash try to sort out what is happening in Serre as best they can from hundreds of miles away. Serre contains as many tales as there are trees in its great forests, and the characters of this fantasy novel quickly find themselves navigating their own versions of fantasy story.

Comparatively, the plot of "The Fellowship of the Dragon" is somewhat more straight forward. Five female companions (Justin, Danica, Fleur, Christabel, and Anne) are summoned by the queen of Carnelaine in order to rescue her court harper, who has mysteriously vanished. The queen suspects that, while heading out to search for a fabled golden harp, he was captured by the dragon Black Tremptor and is now being held prisoner in the mountains outside of Carnelaine. The women are seasoned adventurers, but not quite well-enough prepared to face the dangers of the magical land beyond the kingdom's borders. One by one, they fall prey to various enchantments: Fleur eats from a witch's pot of stew and is transformed into a bird, Christabel is ensorcelled by the song of a fae-like woodland king, Danica follows a trail of gems and is drawn into the subterranean world of the creatures who live within the mountain, and Justin loses a

riddle game to a woman whose name means Sorcery. Finally, only the narrator, Anne, is left to complete their quest and find a way to save each of her friends from the fantastical realities they have respectively fallen into.

Worlds of Fantasy

It would be difficult to mistake the above stories for anything other than fantasy. However, this is not to say that they are entirely typical of the genre. Farah Mendlesohn identifies four primary modes under which fantasy texts may be classified: portal-quest, immersive, intrusive, and liminal. She differentiates each by the means through which elements of the fantastic enter the world of the story, and each carries implications for the structural and rhetorical approach taken by the author as well as the way the reader is positioned vis-à-vis the text. While Mendlesohn does not design her arrangement to exclude the possibility of hybrid modes or works operating outside the patterns she recognizes, she does note that “while many books move internally from one category to another, very few authors produce a single text that exists simultaneously within multiple categories” (xvi). *The Book of Atrix Wolfe*, however, appears to combine elements of portal, immersive, and intrusive fantasy in ways that highlight McKillip’s blurring of the distinctions between reality and fiction within the text itself. To illustrate, let me begin by examining the nature of the various fantastic locals of the narrative.

In *Atrix Wolfe*, McKillip fashions two parallel worlds that are both grounded in the fantastical. The world of the novel’s protagonists can be defined using Clute’s terminology of the “Secondary World”: “an autonomous world or venue which is not bound to mundane reality ..., which is impossible according to common sense and which is self-coherent” (Clute, “Secondary World”). The world that houses Prince Talis, his brother’s kingdom of Pelucir, and the school at which he studies magic in the mountains of Charumenard certainly falls within this description. Talis eventually departs this world and crosses an invisible and intangible border into a world that is undoubtedly fantastical to him: the place that he calls the Queen’s Wood, after the enchanting and immortal monarch who rules over it and whom he meets therein. The fact that it

is accessed through a wood, exists in a state of timelessness, and is associated with dreams in the narrative makes it remarkably similar to common depictions of “Faerie,” a kind of Secondary World routinely deployed in fantasy texts, though often portrayed as an offshoot of our own world (Ashley). As such, it operates in McKillip’s text as a kind of tertiary world, secondary to the Secondary World in which most of the action takes place – a fairyland for fantasy characters. Because Talis at several points slips into this other land, the novel at first seems to fall easily into the category of portal fantasy, wherein a “character leaves her familiar surroundings and passes through a portal into an unknown place” (Mendlesohn 1). Because this kind of fantasy involves the protagonist’s movement from an understood world to one that has to be explained, its rhetorical style hinges on ample description and explanation, as the reader must learn along with them (xix). Moreover, while characters may cross over into a new world or simply be pulled into a stratum of their own which they had previously been unfamiliar with, in both cases the fantastic stays firmly on one side of the portal (2). It is here that *Atrix Wolfe’s* connection to portal fantasy begins to break down, as McKillip begins to dissolve the distinct boundaries between the worlds in her book. The Queen of the Wood’s daughter Saro is transported to Talis’s world, triggering a prolonged hunt in the Wood where her mother searches for a way to reach her across the boundary between worlds. Moreover, by the time Talis himself makes the crossing, readers know more about the hidden world of the Wood than he does (if only slightly), having been introduced to it from the perspective of Saro and her family in the prologue; in other words, they are not left to “learn along with” him, and neither does McKillip’s prose ever provide a great deal of clarifying exposition explaining the history or workings of the Queen’s world to Talis or to readers.

McKillip’s rhetorical strategies more closely align with those of immersive fantasy,

which “depends on an assumption of realism that denies the need for explication (Mendlesohn xx) – readers enter Talis’s world from the perspective of someone already intimately familiar with it, and McKillip describes its magical workings as if they are as intrinsically comprehensible as the everyday reality of the real world. Does the intrusion of the Wood into the Secondary World of the novel then mark *Atrix Wolfe* as most in line with Mendlesohn’s category of intrusive fantasy, where characters must contend with an incursion from someplace beyond their accustomed reality? This framework does not truly accommodate the novel either, for the primary invading force which characters must fight off in the book is a creature composed of elements from both worlds. When the aged and powerful mage Atrix Wolfe descends from his mountain home to confront the army he senses approaching in an implacable march toward Chaumenard, he finds them camped in a field in the neighboring kingdom of Pelucir, engaged in a siege on the ruler’s fortress that has drawn to a stalemate. Overcome with fury after failing to convince the invading king of Kardeth to withdraw his troops, Atrix forms a powerful spell from which he believes both armies will undoubtedly flee. From the field in the human world, “He fashioned his making out of the black, endless winter night, the fire from burning arrows, the last words of the dying, the cries of dreamers, the images in their nightmares” (McKillip 11). Searching for more despair to fuel his spell, he turns to the wood bordering the field and the hungry animals wandering therein, unknowingly reaching across worlds in the process: “Green, or a wish for green, colored the winter trees in their minds, or in his scenting mind. [...] His power snagged a hunter out of a dream, turned his acorn eyes as black as ravens’ eyes, crowned him with an immense tangle of horn” (11). The creature created in this spell is fashioned from elements from both the seen and unseen worlds, from the desolate winter world of the humans and the eternal spring world of the Queen’s Wood. Moreover, the mage is not the only one

responsible for bridging the gap; the Queen's consort and her young daughter, who both share a small amount of human blood, had been gazing discreetly into the human world. Intrigued by what she saw, the girl "with her powerful, focused attention, ... drew the dark world closer to them" (9). While Saro's efforts thus help create a portal of sorts that facilitates an intrusion, the invading force that passes through is a hybrid in both the elements that compose it and the act of its creation. The spell of Atrix Wolfe reaches through the gap widened by Saro, and from the fabric of both worlds he crafts the Hunter, a dark being who destroys the two warring armies and haunts the rest of the narrative.

While the above illustrates that the boundaries between these two worlds of *The Book of Atrix Wolfe* are permeable, McKillip does not characterize them as two actual spaces existing on either side of a clearly delineated threshold; rather, she uses the language of dreams to destabilize the borders between reality and the fantastic within the narrative itself. Twelve years after the Battle of Hunter's Field (as the first appearance of the Hunter has come to be known), Atrix Wolfe first enters the Queen's wood in his dreams – although technically speaking he came into contact with this world at the hour of the Hunter's creation, this moment marks the first time he experiences it for himself in any conscious capacity. In this dream, "He stood surrounded by leaves touching his face, his hair, his eyes, as if he were somehow part of a tree. Then he detached himself from the tree and began to walk through a wood flushed with the first, vivid, light filled green of spring" (McKillip, *Atrix Wolfe* 32). The old mage begins by imagining himself not as an intruder but as a living part of this spring world. Through the latter descriptor, readers might easily draw a connection between this place and the forest of eternal spring introduced in the prologue. McKillip continues, "In the way of dreams, he knew and did not know that he had crossed some boundary between worlds" (32). Atrix himself originally

dismisses this dream (which later recurs) as just that and nothing more, a “message in the language of dreams his mind was sending him” (36). In truth it is an attempt by the woodland Queen to reach out to him so that he may help her recover her daughter who, pulled across the border between worlds on that night years ago, has been trapped on the wrong side all this time. Atrix will not truly comprehend this fact or the true nature of his “dream” until about halfway through the novel. Thus, what he takes to be the fantastic world of a dream later proves to be the very real world of the Queen’s Wood, from which she is desperately trying to communicate. However, even within what he takes to be the world of his subconscious, he seems to recognize that he has “crossed some boundary” and left behind the space of his everyday existence. Yet even this knowledge remains fluid and does not take on the rigid finality of true reality: “in the way of dreams” this fact is something which he simultaneously “knew and did not know.”

It is not only in Atrix’s dreams that the worlds of reality and fiction begin to mix. When the mage, at the beginning of the novel, attempts to convince the prince of Kardeth to break his siege and put an end to the violence of war, the latter proclaims, “‘I will see spring in Chaumenard.’ The Prince seemed to see it then: the green world lying in memory, in wait, just beyond eyesight. His eyes focused again on Atrix Wolfe, the fierce and desperate dream still in them” (6). For the Prince, spring is a world dreamed. It is the world of his fantasy of conquest, of a future where spring finds him and his army entering Chaumenard, an undefended land waiting to be claimed after vanquishing the armies of Pelucir. It is also the dream of a world full of color and life, imagined in the minds of these people trapped for the time being in a frozen, barren, unforgiving winter landscape. And yet it is also arguably real in multiple ways: the actual springtime the Prince sees in his memory was surely real, as is the world of the Queen’s Wood that the passage alludes to. It is “the green world lying...just beyond eyesight.” All of these

resonances are united in the Prince's dream, in the thought of spring. Indeed, it is almost as if this passage opens up the fabric of the novel itself, creating its own portal of sorts through which the reader may catch their first glimpse of the Wood; a few lines later, McKillip writes: "In the green wood on the hill, within the endless dream of spring, the Queen of the Wood's daughter paused to look across worlds..." (6). Saro and her father, by virtue of their distant human ancestors, are occasionally able to see "living dreams of the world beyond the wood" (7). To them at moments like this it is the human world that is lying in wait, dreamlike, just out of sight.

The Wood and the world that is home to Atrix Wolfe are at once dreams and not dreams, depending on where one is standing, and yet not even the very nature of dreams seems to be settled. As mentioned above, twenty-one years after the creation of the Hunter, Atrix dreams of the Queen's Wood and mistakes it for nothing but a dream; however, prior to the events of Hunter's Field, he also appears to misperceive a dream of the future for the reality of the present. The novel begins with the mage's troubled dreams, where "darkness rode a dark horse into the heart of Pelucir, wielding a sword of fire and bone." Rushing to Pelucir to confront this strange threat, he finds only the encamped human army of Kardeth. Thus, his vision of the dark rider does not at first seem to be real; perhaps he and the reader were meant to see it as a metaphor in the language of dreams for the war and suffering sure to be brought by the invading army. But in the end it is Atrix himself who creates reality out of his dream, however unintentionally: he is the one to unleash the dark rider on the black horse, "an immense tangle of horn" (11) on its head and "sparks of flame between its teeth" (12), an image eerily prefigured by his earlier vision, which may have remained in the realm of the symbolic had he not made it "real."

Mendlesohn's conception of types of fantasy literature is based on strict separations between the fantastic and the regular world of the narrative; the two may interact but very rarely

mix, let alone to the point of becoming indistinguishable. This fact is mirrored in the way we tend to see our own reality – there is the real world, and there is fantasy; there is the world that is possible and the one that is not. Within these distinctions is inevitably a hierarchy that privileges the real, and by extension literary works which most closely reflect it. In place of clear divisions, McKillip's fiction foregrounds hybridity. The worlds she builds flow into each other (often literally), in a way that subtly challenges the notion of binary divisions in reality. Readers of fantasy are usually particularly aware of the difference between the world of the “impossible” on the page and that which they experience in their daily lives. The distinction is difficult to refute; there is no way for a reader to step into those pages, no matter how much they may desire to. But McKillip does not position fantasy as another real world to escape into. Instead, she complicates what it means for a world to be considered “real,” or even a “world” at all.

In some ways, the protagonist Ronan from *In the Forests of Serre* represents the escapist impulse critics of fantasy so often disparage. The firebird appears to offer him a way to leave behind his own reality and the painful memories it contains. If given the chance to step into a world where his grief does not exist, he would gladly take it, and he does: chasing the firebird fills his mind so completely that it is as if nothing else exists. McKillip describes his time under the firebird's spell thus: “Ronan had slipped into a sideways world, where the summer palace did not exist. He could not even see the waterfalls. Nothing - no trail of crumbs, or jewels, or drops of blood - marked his path home. The forest was the world; the firebird held all its truths and secrets” (61). McKillip refers to a “trail of crumbs,” an odd detail that seems to allude to the German fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel, despite Serre presumably having no connection to medieval Germany or any tradition that would independently facilitate the creation of this tale. This is the only reference McKillip makes to it in the novel, but for a moment it seems as if our

world has become the fantasy realm making an incursion into his. Ronan passes into a reality where any number of stories we consider fantastical are happening side by side. He feels that he has “slipped into a sideways world,” but he has not physically crossed into another one like in a portal fantasy, and neither has the fantastic truly intruded as in an intrusive fantasy. For all his efforts at running away, he is quite literally where he started - his home is the forest of Serre, and his reality has actually shrunk such that “the forest was the world.” McKillip positions the landscape where he chases the firebird presumably “across luminous, barren plains, over empty crystal mountains, down ancient river beds” (59) as a kind of interior, psychological world. Is the world in his mind then functioning as another tertiary-level world in the novel? Ronan certainly interacts with it and within it as if it were. Yet we are also given to understand that he never physically left Serre, for other characters like Sidonie and Gyre encounter him in his mad wanderings through the forest. McKillip thus implicitly poses the question, might there be as many individual realities as there are people to experience them? She also ultimately confounds Ronan’s original escapist intent. The harder he tries to slip out of his own world, the deeper he becomes enmeshed in it and the more blended he finds reality to be. When he finally finds Brume, he is willing to do “anything to end the endless confusion of worlds” (65). It is tempting to assume that the dividing line between reality and fantasy is self-evident. McKillip repeatedly troubles this easy certainty, encouraging us to acknowledge one of the first lessons that fairy tales teach us: to be open to wonder, and to imagine otherwise.

McKillip also offers flickering glimpses of what, she implies, is yet another domain where fantasy and lived experience blend one with the other: the shadowy world of memory. Talis visits a section of his brother’s castle to which the warriors of Pelucir had retreated during the battle of Hunter’s Field. There, he sees the shadows move with ghosts of the past: “He

watched, transfixed, as an armed man drew back an arrow, then dropped both arrow and crossbow as a sword falling out of nowhere cut off his hand. The air seemed suddenly heavy to breathe, as if it had filled with smoke and too much heat from the thick, cold hearth” (44). Talis not only watches the scene play out, he is physically impacted by the action in front of him, feeling the heat and smoke of the keep as it was set ablaze in the past, even though the room’s present-day hearth is “thick” and “cold.” Shortly thereafter, “He turned, trembling slightly; the silence within the room seemed strained, as if at any moment the scream of the man who had lost his hand would break through the boundaries of memory and become real” (44). While the final line makes note of a boundary between memory and reality, the earlier description demonstrates that that boundary is permeable and, indeed, has already been crossed. The reader can assume that the man who loses his hand does scream, even if Talis does not hear him. Just like Queen’s Wood, this world affects and is affected in turn by Talis’s present-day one. The shadows later react to Talis himself: “Disturbed, perhaps by his own growing unease, the shadows on the walls grew more profuse, telling him their stories: *Look*, they said. *See. This happened to me*” (45). Unlike mere projections of the past, these shadows seem to have their own kind of agency and the desire to communicate through time. McKillip thus implies that the shadows are living out the reality of their own stories in this moment, no matter how many times those stories may repeat. Like Atrix Wolfe’s earlier dreams, this shadow world is at once real and symbolic, a metaphor for the scar the violence of the past has left on the keep and its people, as well as a tangible location, however diaphanous, where that violence is really taking place. While those actions certainly “happened,” they are at the same time continually happening in the world in which the shadows reside. In this way, it functions like an additional secondary world, where time itself is “not bound to mundane reality” (Clute, “Secondary World”). As in the example

from Serre, McKillip's fantasy presents the opportunity not only to imagine a new world with greater possibilities (as many fantasy texts do), but to imagine flexibility in the notion of a stable "world" at all. After all, memory is a kind of Secondary World we can touch in our own reality, the past its own kind of carefully negotiated fantasy that is nevertheless capable of reaching through and making contact with the present. Through stories that are not outwardly very experimental, McKillip invites us to consider the radical possibility that levels of what we think of as "reality" and "fantasy" are not rigidly stratified, but deeply interconnected.

A proliferation of story worlds is also evident in "The Fellowship of the Dragon," through which McKillip further unsettles the boundary between real and imagined and the relative importance we ascribe to both. For the Fellowship, travelling beyond the mountains constitutes a journey into a land where, once again, the rules of the characters' everyday existences are challenged by magic in various forms. Although not as physically separate from their accustomed reality as the Wood was from Talis's, the land the women travel through can be said to function as a kind of Secondary World within that of the short story. McKillip once again introduces the possibility of additional fantastical worlds branching off from what the characters perceive as the "real" one. Along the way, the narrator, Anne, watches as two of her friends disappear into such worlds. One, Christabel, is pulled into the country of the mysterious wood-knight after taking his hand and riding away with him "down the fading path of light into a world beyond the night" (McKillip, "Fellowship" 133). Another, Danica, is pulled beneath a boulder by a mountain imp, and it is unclear whether she is trapped in a simple tunnel network or "under solid rock" in a separate world within the mountain itself, bound by its own rules of magic (137). Both women disappear without a trace, and their friends cannot follow them, however hard they try to find entry into these other lands. Moreover, there is nothing to suggest that the land of the

wood-king and that of the mountain imps is the same place, and so McKillip creates the possibility of not one Secondary World, but four.

Thus, if one were to accept Clute's numbering system, McKillip hints at the presence of third- and even fourth-degree worlds within the story universe of all three of these works. Yet this terminology lends itself to hierarchy, implying a neat order of nested worlds, the original Secondary World subordinate to the "real" world of the reader and any subsequent ones occupying progressively lower layers. As indicated above, the settings of McKillip's work defy such easy categorization; the worlds she creates bleed into and variously influence one another, their boundaries are unstable, and the facts of the characters' existences are challenged so many times that what is real and what is fantasy (even within these fantastical settings) is repeatedly called into question. Thus, McKillip's worlds function less according to the rules of Clute's numbered, nested model and more like a series of interwoven realities, existing not within one another but side by side, each extending along the fabric of reality, equally vast but only ever glimpsed through a tear in the stitching. This potentially infinite multiplicity is another way in which McKillip de-hierarchizes what we would think of as real and fake worlds. She does this less in a way that implies that everything is "real," but rather in one which ultimately suggests that our reality is closer to the fantastic than we are accustomed to believing.

Story as Fantasy Formula

At the core of various dominant criticisms of fantasy seems to lie the implication that the genre features a turn toward stagnation; unlike science fiction, for example, which oftentimes poses questions to unsettle the reader or invite productive speculation about the future, there are many who see fantasy, despite all of its wildly inventive worlds and magic systems, as unable to truly imagine anything radically new or productive. This perspective is perhaps not surprising if one considers how integral formula is to the internal structure of many fantasy narratives, such that critics like Clute have been able to propose that adherence to the formulaic may actually signal a successful work of fantasy. One would be hard-pressed to argue that McKillip's fiction is entirely committed to subverting genre expectations; on the contrary, the success of her work relies in part on the ability of readers, along with her characters themselves, to recognize the shape of these narratives as fantasy stories. Indeed, perhaps the most important formula she can be said to follow is the simple rule of story itself. McKillip deploys and adapts story formula not to capitalize on a market, parrot the work of preceding authors, or uphold a sense of tradition for its own sake, but rather to reveal the magic hidden at the core of this formula: that an adherence to story and the foregrounding of the act and effects of tale-telling reveals paths to the possible and not just through the impossible.

Although McKillip's work may not fit comfortably within some accepted genre frameworks such as the scheme proposed by Mendlesohn, her fiction cannot truly be said to eschew traditional fantasy conventions. Throughout much of her work, McKillip is very conscious of her position as a writer of fantasy and the tradition in which she is working, never shying away from that label and its connotations of juvenility or irrelevance. These two novels and short story evidence a level of respect and love on the part of the author for the worlds built

out of the common stuff of fantasy, which she uses to craft the settings and narratives taking place in her imagined worlds. McKillip thus displays a high degree of “genre-consciousness,” or an awareness of the genre in which she is active; this awareness usually operates on both a conscious and unconscious level (Duff xviii). She was hardly unconscious of her position within a traditional conception of what fantasy was. To highlight an example, “The Fellowship of the Dragon” was originally published in an anthology titled *After the King*, which collected a series of fantasy tributes to Tolkien. In an interview for *Fantasy Café*, McKillip likens her experience of reading *The Lord of the Rings* to “a grand awakening of ... imagination,” a profoundly inspiring moment which pushed her on course to write her own fantasy novels. Not only was she keenly aware of her own literary lineage as a fantasy writer of a certain generation, but she explicitly sought to capture “that knowledge, that experience, that art that had created *The Lord of the Rings*” in her own work. The action in the novels and short story under discussion takes place in a quasi-medieval world familiar to and often expected by most readers of the genre. They share a great many characteristics with fantasy of the type popularized by Tolkien; the dragons, fairy queens, and shape-shifting wizards peopling McKillip’s writing all constitute “some violation of what the author clearly believes to be natural law,” and mirror the sharp break with reality that makes up the “essential content” of Tolkien’s work (Attebery, *Strategies* 14).

In *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, Clute identifies a four-part model that describes the “narrative course of the fully structured fantasy tale,” which includes “Wrongness, Thinning, Recognition and Healing,” which together to form the underlying framework of fantasy “Story” (Clute, “Healing”). Wrongness involves a realization that there has been “some profound change in the essence of things,” typically in the world around the protagonist, which usually leads to a Thinning of that world through a loss of magic, for example, or another external or internal loss

of something foundational to the essence of world or character (Clute, “Fantasy”). Recognition occurs at the point when the hero recognizes the true nature of their reality and/or their place in it; significantly, this recognition is chiefly a kind of remembrance, or a glimpse at what the world or the hero themselves looked like in their truest form, before the process of Thinning eroded them. Hence, Recognition refers in part to an unclouded vision of the natural order of things, of the wholeness and integrity of a past state. Following this stage, the narrative tends to pivot inevitably toward Healing, or a restoration of such a state, culminating in the story’s redemptive ending.

Structurally, the narratives themselves generally fit well within Clute’s quadripartite model. A certain sense of Wrongness colors the story in both the novels: respectively, the dark Hunter reappears in the world after twenty-one years, his presence disrupting both the world of the Wood and Pelucir once again, and the towering shadow creature released by the wizard Gyre wreaks havoc in the forests of Serre, tearing up the landscape and scattering its inhabitants. Several characters can be said to go through their own processes of thinning. The great mage Atrix Wolfe begins his story as a shell of his former self, living as a hermit in the mountains after having abandoned his powers decades prior. The loss of hearts is a central motif of *In the Forests of Serre*; Prince Ronan gives his up to escape both his grief and Brume’s spell, losing a vital part of himself in the transaction, and the very heart of Serre’s magic (symbolized by the firebird’s egg) is threatened under the onslaught of the monster. Both novels and the short story end with the “final turn toward deliverance” defined by Tolkien himself with the word “eucatastrophe” (Attebery, *Strategies* 15), and which aligns with Clute’s final stage of Healing. At its most basic, this concept refers to the happy ending we typically associate with fairytales. The central conflicts of all three of McKillip’s stories here under discussion are resolved more or less happily

– the protagonists of *The Book of Atrix Wolfe* ultimately defeat the monstrous Hunter and Saro is reunited with her mother; *In the Forests of Serre* ends with the shadowy creature that had besieged Serre vanquished, war averted between Serre and Dacia, and Prince Ronan’s heart safely returned to its place in his chest. Even “The Fellowship of the Dragon,” wherein only one of the four fellows successfully sees their quest to fruition, contains a eucatastrophic turn at the end. With the dragon as an ally, Anne notes that upon leaving the mountain she “began [her] backwards journey” to rescue each of her friends in turn (119). Clute notes that “Fantasy tales can be described, in part, as fables of recovery,” (“Fantasy”) and this is certainly an apt descriptor for McKillip’s short story. Even in a considerably condensed form, she crafts this story to fit the outlines of a readily recognizable fantasy tale. The women initially set off in order to locate the queen’s missing harper (whose absence constitutes Wrongness at least on the scale of the queen’s court), and the group itself experiences a literal kind of Thinning as more of them disappear. Although Anne’s recovery of Justin, Danica, Cristabel, and Fleur is not technically achieved by the end of the tale, she at least leaves the dragon’s lair hopeful that their rescue will be possible. McKillip constantly draws attention to the fact that she is telling a tale that adheres to fantasy story structure, and further foregrounds its importance by having tales themselves play a major role in the narrative.

One might argue that, even internally, McKillip’s narratives do not question any notion of a status quo or concern themselves with upsetting any natural order. In fact, they seem more often to foreground the importance of rules and guiding frameworks, which end up being enabling rather than limiting to the characters. In *The Book of Atrix Wolfe*, the most powerful mages must follow strict guidelines for how they use their magic. When the Prince of Kardeth bemoans the restrictions preventing Atrix from using his powers as a weapon, the mage

responds, “Experience teaches us restrictions” (McKillip 5). Only when Atrix Wolfe breaks these rules by creating the Hunter does he become powerless, ceasing to use magic altogether as part of his self-imposed exile. In “The Fellowship of the Dragon,” after things begin to go wrong for the titular adventuring party, the women are led on by the idea that the harper they are searching for (having presumably passed through the treacherous landscape already) knows how to navigate the rules of the land, and will be able to help them recover their lost friends. Justin reassures the narrator, Anne, of this fact after they lose yet another of their fellows; she tells her, “There are ways. There are always ways. This land riddles constantly, but all the riddles have answers” (166). Even in unfamiliar territory full of dangerous magic, the women find comfort in the fact that the world around them must surely follow a set of rules, where every problem has a solution visible to those who look close enough. Even in the forests of Serre, where the magic is altogether wilder and less structured, there is still a sense of legibility. Trying to parse the witch Brume’s parting words to him, Ronan “He tried to remember childhood tales. Did her predictions come true? Or were they only random curses that she tossed out according to her mood...” (McKillip, *Serre* 5). McKillip here hints at the fact that Brume operates according to her own consistent logics, which Ronan simply has to recall.

However, in these instances it is not just an arbitrary set of rules that allow the characters to negotiate their worlds: the fabric of their worlds is woven from stories themselves. As the above line demonstrates, Brume functions according to the logics of story; to understand the “children’s tales” told about her is to understand Brume herself. Moreover, the prince’s confrontation with the witch is not the only time that characters must draw upon their knowledge of story to navigate their circumstances. Faced with what could be the looming destruction of all of Serre, one of the first suggestions Ronan poses for how to face this threat is to seek the council

of the queen, established previously as a repository for all the legends of the land. He remarks, “Maybe my mother can remember some way in a tale to outwit the monster” (230). In Serre, clearly tales are to be taken seriously. The only rules this land (described throughout the novel as wild and teeming with unpredictable magic) seems to follow are those recorded in the legends about it. Looking through written accounts to prepare for his post as the princess’s guardian on her journey, the wizard Gyre first dismisses this characteristic of Serre. Indeed, he treats Unciel’s records of his time in the forests as fantasy fiction, of a sort: “The magic of Serre seemed patched together out of children's tales, Gyre decided” (39). Gyre finds this to be true as these tales later come to life around him, and he must discover what Ronan and the rest of the inhabitants of Serre have known all along: even in a place where such beings as ogres and witches exist as part of lived reality (and thus would not necessarily qualify as fantastical anymore to the characters), the most useful roadmap is story.

The characters of “The Fellowship of the Dragon” share a similar experience. The Fellowship believes that the missing harper will be able to help them because, supposedly at least, he has knowledge of a great many stories by way of his vast musical repertoire. When asked how he could possibly have survived an encounter with the same witch who transformed Fleur, Justin suggests, “Maybe he had met the witch first in a song” (131). They, like the inhabitants of Serre, are aware that the land they travel through follows the rules of narrative and that the knowledge they must use in order to navigate it can only be found in story. Justin, termed by Anne “the riddler among us” (123), herself acts as a keeper of story knowledge. Her skill at riddles, revealed in the climactic riddle contest against Yrecros, derives in part from her knowledge of diverse tales and legends, which proves to be an incredibly valuable currency. Before failing to answer one of Yrecros’s riddles and thus losing the game, Justin engages the

sorceress long enough for her to reveal clues, phrased as the answers to the riddles Justin poses her, regarding how to rescue their friends. On a broader level, McKillip's repeated emphasis on stories resists on a certain level a strictly realist or deconstructionist impulse to tear down artifice or to only grudgingly acquiesce to conveying ideas through anything resembling a structured plot, and instead exemplifies what is perhaps the foundation of Clute's formula for fantasy: that "the literatures of the Fantastic positively glory in the fact that they present, and embody, Story-shaped worlds" ("Recognition").

In the structure of her own narratives and in the ways that her characters discover meaning and truth in the most formulaic of forms – riddles, songs, fairytales - McKillip allows readers to easily discern the "Story-shape" of her works and thus recognize them as quintessentially fantastic. However, for McKillip tales represent more than mere containers for lessons or knowledge; by having characters recognize that their experiences are making up part of a larger story in which they and their surroundings are continually enmeshed, she further emphasizes the power of story as a lens through which to see the world. The following lines from *The Book of Atrix Wolfe* come soon after the people of Burne Pelucir's supernaturally besieged castle truly realize that the Hunter of their nightmare has reappeared in their midst once again. She writes, "They wanted Atrix to tell them anything but that, anything but legend, terror, mystery, death, anything but that the tales spun out of Hunter's Field had no ending yet" (100). Pelucir's people realize that what is happening to them makes up the material of a tale, but that fact does not fill them with any sense of security or certainty. Instead, they understand the mutability at the core of storytelling. McKillip does not characterize them as afraid of the Hunter's inevitable destruction (or conversely, confident that there's will have the same happy ending that most fantasy stories afford) – it is the fact that the tales "had no ending yet" that

terrifies them. They see through to the core of story as something constructed and not self-evident, not static or set in stone but which is, perhaps eternally, open to a multitude of endings.

In Serre, an awareness of story offers Ronan quite literally an expansive view of his existence. At one point he must climb the forest's tallest tree in order to reach the nest of the firebird. From this vantage point:

He saw the whole of the forest laid out like a tapestry beneath him: a background of green on which strange bright figures moved busily through their tales. Witches and hermits, ogres, foxes and languorous water sprites went their mysterious ways, stirring cauldrons, speaking to animals, cudgeling one another. Magic spiraled in scarlet and blue threads from their fingers; song unwound in gold from the throats of birds. Ronan, so high above it that the figures seemed no bigger than stitches in the tapestry, clung like an insect to the great tree, his mouth dry, his blood pounding against the wood. He scarcely knew what he saw, or where he was now, except above it all. He closed his eyes against the terrifying, overwhelming vision of Serre and heard the firebird again. (155)

McKillip describes this scene through imagery that is decidedly difficult to visualize. Ronan essentially sees the “whole of the forest” laid out like a tale unfolding, a woven tapestry.

McKillip associates tapestries with storytelling throughout the novel. For example, Gyre describes the queen of Serre's bedroom thus: “The chamber was so full of tapestries, stories covering every stone, in fire and bone and gold, that the wizard felt he had stepped into one of the queen's tales” (120). Additionally, McKillip paints Ronan's vision in this passage almost akin to an illustration in a children's storybook: the flat green background, the individual figures that he can see even between the trees of the dense forest, the whimsical beings like ogres and witches and talking animals, the colorful spiraling magic. Is Ronan at this moment literally

seeing Serre as a tapestry depicting all the tales of its inhabitants, or is this simply a metaphor for the sprawling perspective offered by his high vantage point? McKillip does not offer a clear answer. Because *In the Forests of Serre* is a fantasy novel, either or both might be true, as the genre allows an author to turn the symbolic into reality. As with the shadow world depicted in *Atrix Wolfe*, the line between literary device and what the characters perceive as “real” in the story world blurs until the distinction hardly seems to matter. Have the stories become real, or has the real taken on the pattern of one of his mother’s storytelling tapestries? Ronan does not seem to know either, for he “scarcely knew what he saw.” Perhaps the difference between the two is more arbitrary than he had previously realized. What he does know is that the sight is “terrifying” – it represents an openness that is “overwhelming” in its scale.

Ronan does not remain outside this all-encompassing image of his world for long. Near the end of the novel, he regains his heart from Brume, complete with all its joys and pains. In the moments after, “He closed his eyes, and saw his life, like one of his mother's tapestries, patterned with the busy, colorful magic of Serre, the witch in her bones, the firebird in her tree, wearing one another's faces...” (286). This scene resembles a moment of Recognition, when, in Clute’s model, “protagonists begin to understand what has been happening to them.” They may become conscious of what kind of story they are in and what steps they must take to further that story, or “they may discover what Archetype serves as an Underlier figure and defines their fate,” for example (“Recognition”). Here it seems that Ronan does begin to understand what has been happening to him; however, this understanding is born more from the sense that his whole world is story-shaped, and not that he has a specific part to play in it. This recognition of story allows him to see outside himself, which is, in a way, how he finally escapes himself and the pervasive grief he had been running from – it is at this moment that he sees his life as nothing more than

one thread in the tapestry of Serre, one strand of its “busy, colorful magic.” In addition, he seems to gain no sense of fate or destiny, nor any idea that he fits easily into an archetypal pattern; on the contrary, this perspective grants him new, more fluid ways of thinking about identity in general. Brume, in her cramped cabin of bones and chickens, and the ethereal firebird who surveys the world from above begin to blur together into a single entity. They are so enmeshed, they wear “one another’s faces.” At the same moment, Ronan recognizes that these two very different beings can be one and the same, and also that the fabric of his being is woven with the same threads. Instead of accepting a specified role or locking himself into a certain track like one of Clute’s protagonists might, McKillip positions Recognition as the moment when Ronan is truly free – he has reclaimed a vital part of himself, been liberated from Brume’s prophecy, Gyre’s attempt to steal his identity, and from his doomed sense that there could be nothing more to his life after the death of his beloved first wife.

Just like the proliferation of worlds described earlier, McKillip’s work hosts a proliferation of stories – the story in front of the reader, the stories the characters tell each other about their world(s), and the stories they find themselves living. This multiplicity serves a similar function with regards to story as well, in that it breaks down notions of hierarchy and demonstrates that neat distinctions between reality and fiction are not always very useful. To return to Clute’s definition of Recognition: “[characters] understand, in other words, that they are in a Story; that, properly recognized (which is to say properly told), their lives have the coherence and significance of Story; that, in short, the Story has been telling them.” For Clute, this stage stops with the act of realization, but for McKillip’s characters the epiphany does not end there. She shows us there is individual power in being “told,” not because some higher force is dictating one’s fate, but because it means one’s life has the potential to unfold in the baffling,

wondrous, and endlessly variable way of a myth or a fantasy tale. Even envisioning their lives in ways as supposedly formulaic as a fantasy story grants them more agency than accepting a stable notion of reality as entirely separate from fiction.

Storytelling plays a large role in the way another character conceives of this reality, through which McKillip once again demonstrates how an outlook that recognizes the shape of story can open the world to a wealth of possibility. For the entirety of *Serre*, the scribe Euan Ash remains far away from much of the action, caring for the frail wizard Unciel and helping him transcribe the many notes from his travels. After Unciel eventually senses the something is amiss in *Serre*, Euan begins to feel rather ineffectual, powerless as he is to do much more than keep the wizard's health up and hope that he can figure out a magical solution to the whole mess. At one point Euan imagines himself taking up the role of a fantasy hero and saving the day himself: "He would have adventures. After climbing the highest mountains, crossing the interminable forests, scaling the steepest cliff, battling witches and ogres, he would appear to the princess as marvelous and unexpected as any magic in *Serre*" (170). Euan has spent much of the story up until this point reading about Unciel's exploits, which are essentially fantasy stories to the scribe. Now, he realizes that he can live out adventures of his own. Euan does not wish to disappear into a fantasy, but to see the shape of fantasy in his own world. Unlike Ronan, Euan does associate himself with a particular archetype, which enables him to step out of himself and imagine a different route for his life to take. However, just like the prince, Euan's recognition of story does not trap him in a constricting mentality. He realizes that for his life to be shaped like a story means that it also must be open to all the possibilities that story provides. Imagining other ways his story might unfold, "He watched the scribe fight his way across *Serre* to rescue a princess, only to find that the princess did not want rescuing at all, and could not imagine what he was

doing there. Too many tales, he thought. Too many possibilities” (172). Seeing his life as a fantasy tale creates the potential for many possible outcomes. Fantasy offers the means to imagine different outcomes – through her work, McKillip shows us the power of pulling fantasy closer and recognizing the shape of story in our own world, stories which are capable of housing “many possibilities.”

As mentioned above, Robertson argues that critics have a tendency to label fantasy as ahistorical. McKillip’s emphasis on story as the basis of fantasy is one way in which she reveals how the genre is undoubtedly historical, with an evolution more closely tied to the genesis of human storytelling than potentially any other. Through his study of myth as the progenitor of modern fantasy, Attebery reminds us that storytelling has always been a part of how we experience our world. However, myths have always been deployed culturally in numerous ways, and not always to encourage a liberated view of the world. Indeed, an emphasis on fate is considered by many to be an integral part of the genre that developed out of the mythic tradition, so much so that *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* states “prediction and prophecy are always of special significance in fantasy - if a foretelling is mentioned at all, it is almost certain to be accurate” (Nicholls and Langford). Certainly fantasies, both after Tolkien and in work that predates him, contain no shortage of prophecies, chosen ones, or oracles. But what McKillip teases out in her works is something latent and perhaps more ancient: the idea that to resemble a story is to reflect the oral tradition of myth, where no story is ever told exactly the same way twice. She emphasizes her connection to this tradition, not as rigid set of rules or constricting genre conventions, but as something malleable that is in constant flux, that opens up potential by imagining there might be multiple endings. Her fantasy resists certainty or predestination –

although we might guess at the ending, as long as the tale continues (and McKillip suggests it always will) things remain nebulous.

In “The Fellowship of the Dragon,” Justin is the character who most understands that she and her friends are living according to the rules of fantasy. When she and Anne encounter Yrecros, Justin immediately understands that in order to get any information from the sorceress, they will need to match wits in a riddle contest: “‘It’s a game,’ Justin breathed. ‘Question for answer. She’ll tell us all we need to know.’ ‘Why must it be a game?’ I protested” (143). Anne, already exasperated and on the edge of panic, questions why this enchanted world has to work the way Justin expects simply because the stories she knows say it must be so. Why must Anne and Justin follow the rules of this land, and why should there be rules at all? At first, Anne’s frustration seems justified, especially after Justin manages to pull from Yrecros the way to rescue each of their friends, but ultimately loses the game and is forced to become the sorceress’s apprentice for seven years. Justin promised Anne she would not disappear like their other companions, and yet in the end Anne who must face Black Tremptor alone.

When Anne finally finds the harper chained with a cuff of gold to the wall of the dragon’s vast cave, it becomes evident that he is not nearly as knowledgeable as the Fellowship thought he would be. Anne finds that he passed through the same landscape oblivious to the magic around him, interacting with people like the witch and the sorceress as if they were nothing more than strangers he met on the road. It was in this way that he ultimately avoided their traps. He didn’t follow their rules, and perhaps was never even aware there were any to begin with, unlike Justin. However, Anne does not feel vindicated or relieved by this revelation. On the contrary, it upsets her: “‘Maybe you never stopped to listen,’ I said, in growing despair over the blind way he blundered through the land” (147). Anne then meets Black Tremptor, who trapped the harper

after he tried to steal the dragon's fabled golden harp. In a final twist, Anne decides to leave the harper to find his own way out and back home (if he can), opting instead to take the dragon up on his offer to help her find her friends if she will help him solve a riddle (for it turns out Justin is not the only one who has been riddling with Yrecros; the dragon lost his true name to the sorceress in a similar game years prior). After all she has experienced at the hands of magic and fable, Anne rejects the harper's perspective. In essence, she chooses to accept her position as a character in a fantasy story. She elects to exist in a world where there are ways to save her companions, not the one in which the harper seems to live: one that is not structured like a story, and where the people one meets have no connection to each other and everything is related by coincidence or not at all. In other words, a world that resembles what we have come to expect the "real world" to look like. At the end of the tale Anne seems to realize that you can choose to face everything as reality, but then you will miss something essential. McKillip leaves readers at the end of "The Fellowship of the Dragon" with the sense that to tell oneself a story is to imagine hope. Yes, if Justin did not have to engage in a riddle game she would not have lost and been whisked away by Yrecros, but Anne also may not have ever discovered the means to free the others. To disregard story is to find oneself locked into a certain ending, not the other way around; it is to end up like the harper, trapped in a dark cave unable to see any path forward. In an age of increasing cynicism and despair, faced as we are with seemingly impenetrable systems of oppression operating across the axes of gender, race, ability, etc., I believe that this mode of thinking offered by McKillip's fantasy characters' relationship to story can be radical and not regressive. Fantasy models a way to think through our reality, and McKillip leaves us with the notion that sometimes we must first believe that all the riddles have answers in order that we may find them.

Conclusion

At the beginning of *In the Forests of Serre*, McKillip describes how Gyre, an insatiably curious child, came to learn magic. “One day he followed a stranger out of the city, beyond the sea, to a place where others like him gathered to be taught the astonishing magic in the color orange, in the shape of an orange, who peeled away the rind to discover the mysteries hidden within the wonder of the visible” (34). In its own way, the magic of McKillip’s fiction lies in its ability to peel back the layers of reality, ultimately reintroducing us to the wonder that resides in the visible world of our own experience.

In a genre conventionally populated by images of aged wizards pouring over treatises of magic (or whatever other texts might qualify as nonfiction in their world), McKillip’s work emphasizes that real knowledge is contained in the fictional and the fantastic, in the tales, the games, and the songs. Attebery writes, “Fantasy is fundamentally playful - which does not mean that it is not serious. Its way of playing with symbols encourages the reader to see meaning as something unstable and elusive, rather than single and self-evident” (*Stories* 2). For McKillip, story is what underlies the fantasy formula she follows, and I argue it is the thing that gives the formula so much potential in a genre detractors would rather see as closed down and geared toward the impossible. Story represents one way in which fantasy can be playful and serious, just like Justin’s riddles, which are both games and matters of life and death.

Attebery and Clute argue that story is a fundamental component of the fantasy genre. For realistic literature, privileged as it is in both critical and cultural contexts, the recognition that the needs of story ultimately drive the text “proves to be an embarrassment, a scandalous admission that fiction is an artifice” (“Recognition”). After all, our world is certainly no fairy tale. But what an unshakeable emphasis on realism lacks is the fact that reality is inevitably full of artifice as

well. From our histories, to the ideologies presented to us as incontrovertible fact, to the political systems that shape our lives, our world is a construction at its core. It might be tempting (at least for some) to believe that this world is self-apparent, just like it would be pleasant to imagine that places as magical as Serre or the Queen's Wood exist somewhere we can physically visit. A good writer of fantasy may make their worlds feel real, but readers are typically aware of their constructed nature from the outset. This fact is more difficult to discern when it comes to more obviously mimetic fiction, but it arguably still holds true. A realist narrative presents a constructed version of a reality that is itself constructed. McKillip's worldbuilding, which defies an easy separation between reality and fantasy, reminds us that from certain angles at least, our real world can look a good deal like a fantastic one. In other words, engaging fantasy is to take a step closer to what it means to be real. But to acknowledge the fantasies around us is not necessarily limiting. Modern fantasy like McKillip's builds on a far earlier oral mythic tradition that in turn was built on the fluidity of retelling. To obscure story is to deny the possibility of a new, better ending. Stories are magical, unruly, and irrefutably alive – like fantasy, which as a genre is so deeply linked to and built upon the idea of story. It is not dead or dull, but rife with astonishing power for those who know how to see it. This power lies in what Patricia McKillip reveals to be one of the genre's foremost capabilities: the ability to teach us how to peer beneath the layers of the real and see how it is as deeply intertwined with the realm of the imagined as the threads of a tapestry, and just as open to unravelling and reforming in new patterns.

In *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Mendlesohn cautions against the mixing of different modes within the genre, especially when it comes to the logics of worldbuilding. For instance, if an author combines the rhetorical style typically associated with immersive fantasy with a plot that more closely resembles intrusive fantasy, the result will fall flat. She argues that “Like a

perspective puzzle, if the reader stands in ‘the wrong place,’ the image/experience will not resolve” (xviii). In McKillip’s work, this kind of kaleidoscopic irresolution is partially the point. Whether she is playing with how to define a world or adhering to the underlying story structures of traditional fantasy, she works toward the same end: an emphasis on ambiguity, uncertainty, and possibility that in many ways represents what any truly complete fantasy is capable of. McKillip reminds us that to tell a story is simply to open the door to potential. She shows us that story is the most important rule, but in the end, it is less a rule and more of an outlook on reality. For the concept of story can be kaleidoscopic too: it can change, now one thing, now another. It represents a frame of mind capable of fracturing the “real” world into prismatic, ever-changing fractals. After all, does not the ability to imagine a happy ending make up the very core of hope? McKillip brings us to acknowledge the power that can come from thinking about reality in more fluid terms. Instead of lauding fiction that most closely resembles what we think of as the real world, it would do to impose a bit of fantasy on our perception of that world. It has always been there to begin with, hiding underneath the rind of an immutable, irrefutable conception of reality that obscures the true wonder of the visible.

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