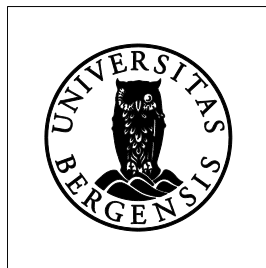# The Familiar and the Fantastic

A Study of Contemporary High Fantasy

in George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*

and Steven Erikson's *Malazan Book of the Fallen.*

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Master's Thesis
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May 2009

Contents

Abstract

En studie av moderne fantasilitteratur

Denne oppgaven tar for seg undersjangeren "høyfantasi" og moderne sjangerteori om fantasilitteratur generelt, og ser på hvordan bokseriene *A Song of Ice and Fire* av George R. R. Martin og *The Malazan Book of the Fallen* av Steven Erikson eksemplifiserer denne. Den tar for seg teoriene til hovedsakelig Brian Attebery, Richard Mathews og Brian Stableford, og undersøker hvordan de ser på konseptet "sjanger" i forhold til fantasilitteraturen og deres forsøk på å etablere et rammeverk for kritiske studier av sjangeren. Atteberys teorier om "formularisk" fantasi har sitt opphav i J. R. R. Tolkiens suksess med *Ringenes Herre,* og den kommersielle masseproduksjonen av litteratur som etterliknet dette verket. Oppgaven ser på hvordan konseptet om formularisk fantasi kan være problematisk i relasjon til sjangerbegrepet, og også hvordan de senere års fantasilitteratur ser ut til å bevege seg bort fra etablerte stereotypier og tradisjonelle fortellerteknikker. Videre undersøker oppgaven forskjellige aspekter av de fiktive verdenene som er skapt av Martin og Erikson, og om de kan si noe om vår egen virkelighet. Den tar også for seg hvilke litterære virkemidler og fortellergrep som blir brukt i disse fortellingene, hvorvidt de har likhetstrekk med eller forskjeller fra det sjangerteoretiske rammeverket, og hvilken betydning disse eventuelle likhetene eller forskjellene får.

Preface

The concept of "fantasy" as a genre was certainly not present in my mind when I at the age of twelve first picked up a Norwegian translation of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings.* At that time, this was, and arguably still is, the first and foremost example of the fantasy literature that emerged in its wake, and close to everyone had some idea of this work was about, regardless of whether one had read it or not. I still remember how completely enchanted I was by this strange and totally engrossing fantasy world Tolkien had created, and it was not long before I picked up an English copy of it. *The Lord of the Rings* is still the only book I read once a year. When I first started reading fantasy literature, I did not give the concept of "the fantasy genre" much thought, but when I did, it was admittedly with a certain degree of skepticism and prejudice. I dismissed the commercial exploitation of Tolkien's masterpiece, until George R. R. Martin's cycle *A Song of Ice and Fire* was recommended to me a few years back. After completing this (as of now) sprawling four-volume cycle, questions regarding the nature of the genre occurred to me: how could something so different from Tolkien's saga be placed under the same genre designation? I was compelled to find out more, which ultimately led me to the writing of this thesis.

Introduction

> As Daenerys Targaryen rose to her feet, her black [dragon] *hissed,* pale smoke
>
> venting from its mouth and nostrils. The other two pulled away from her breasts
>
> and added their voice to the call, translucent wings unfolding and stirring the air,
>
> and for the first time in hundreds of years, the night came alive with the music of
>
> dragons.
>
> (George R. R. Martin, *A Game of Thrones* 806-07)

These closing words taken from Martin's *A Game of Thrones* describe a scene that is perhaps close to the typical image conjured up in one's mind when confronted with the term "fantasy fiction": strange lands, magical beings, mythic heroes, dark lords, elves, dwarves and, of course, dragons. These are all features that could easily be mentioned if one were asked to provide a list of elements or things that would normally belong in the realm of fantasy fiction.

The focus of this thesis is contemporary high fantasy literature, as exemplified through the American writer George R. R. Martin's cycle *A Song of Ice and Fire,* and the Canadian writer Steven Erikson's cycle *The Malazan Book of the Fallen.* Martin (b. 1948) is a science fiction and fantasy writer who is probably best known for the *Ice and Fire* cycle, which has won several community awards. Martin has a master's degree in journalism, and worked for a time as an editor/producer for television, until he became a full-time writer. The first volume of the *Ice and Fire* cycle, titled *A Game of Thrones,* was published in 1996, and the fourth and latest, *A Feast for Crows,* in 2005 ("Life and Times").

Erikson (b. 1959) is an archaeologist and anthropologist who has likewise received popular acclaim for his cycle *The Malazan Book of the Fallen,* of which the first volume, *Gardens of the Moon,* published in 1999, was his debut novel. His cycle is significantly larger than Martin's, and while the eighth volume, *Toll the Hounds* (2008), is as of now the latest, the cycle is not yet completed ("Steven Erikson Biography"). Although these cycles have won several awards and been commercially very successful, little scholarly interest has been paid to these works as of now. I therefore propose to examine these texts as examples of recent developments within the fantasy genre in this thesis.

In order to study these texts in a contemporary generic context, and to illustrate the points where these texts either break from or stick to generic conventions, chapter one will be concerned with discussing recent theorizing of fantasy fiction, and with establishing a set of terms that will be used in the discussion of the texts. The fantasy theorist Brian Attebery touches on one central issue: what constitutes fantasy and the fantastic? This question will be discussed in detail later on in this thesis, but generally speaking, one gets the impression that definitions tend to become either too vast or too narrow. Because of the considerable commercial success of the genre, large numbers of fantasy novels are published every year, some of which contribute to challenging the existing parameters of genre theorizing. This claim will be considered when discussing the texts of Martin and Erikson. Attebery's ideas, set forth in *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992), of genre as "a middle ground between mode and formula" (10), have provided a foundation for recent fantasy genre theory, and his views on mode, genre and formula are essential to his attempt to define and delimit the boundaries of the field. Richard Mathews and Brian Stableford are other theorists who will be discussed in this thesis, and they both build on Attebery's ideas. Based on the arguments of theorists like

Attebery, Mathews and Stableford, I will discuss how their understanding of fantasy and the fantastic and the generic and modal aspects of fantasy can be used to illuminate the works of writers like Steven Erikson and George R. R. Martin. Furthermore, it is inevitably hard to escape the influence of J. R. R. Tolkien when discussing the genre, both in terms of his fictional creation that was defining in a number of ways, but also in terms of his contribution to the evolution of genre theory. His essay "On Fairy-Stories" is central to Attebery's development of a generic definition of high fantasy.

The second chapter will deal with the narrative strategies of the two cycles, and how various narrative devices are employed within the texts. This chapter will examine the narrator's position, narrative point of view and focalization, as well as characterization. I will explore in what way the fantastic elements in these texts influence such aspects as plot structure. I will also address the strategies used to create suspense, and how the formats of the cycles influence plot structure, and to what degree the individual novels of the cycles are self-sufficient.

Chapter three will focus on the fictional worlds of the texts as they are described and presented by the writers. This chapter will address aspects of these fictional worlds such as social and political structures, religious features and natural laws, and how these features are treated and how they stand in relationship to the genre theory presented in chapter one. Some of the questions that will be addressed are: Do these texts break the confines of existing fantasy theory in any way, or do they raise questions that the theory for fantasy fiction will need to address in the future? Are these texts subversive in any way, and if so, what can these secondary and essentially "impossible" worlds tell us of our first-world mundane reality? I will round off the thesis with some brief comments on how the analysis of the texts may serve to settle the question of how Martin's and

Erikson's cycles might be categorized with reference to the definitions that Attebery provides for fantasy as a genre as opposed to formula fantasy.

The increasing body of literary theory concerning the genre of fantasy is a clear indication of the growing acceptance of the genre and its inherent potential. Although its tremendous commercial success is by no means a guarantee of aesthetic value, it is certainly an indicator of its popularity. Although modal aspects of the fantastic, as Attebery suggests, have been a part of literature since its very origins, the effort to establish fantasy as genre and discriminate the genre from so-called formula fiction is relatively recent, and it is only in the last four or five decades that the concept of fantasy as a genre has been used as a basis for analysis and discussion. As should be evident from the discussion that follows, I consider the study of fantasy as both highly relevant and interesting.

1. Locating the Genre: Theories of Fantasy

> Fantasy is the faculty by which simulacra of sensible objects can be reproduced
> in the mind: the process of imagination. […] The difference between mental
> images of objects and the objects themselves is dramatically emphasized by the
> fact that mental images can be formulated for which no actual equivalent exist; it
> is these images that first spring to mind in association with the idea of fantasy,
> because they represent fantasy at its purest. (Stableford xxxv)

This is the opening statement in Brian Stableford's introduction to the *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature* (2005), and it outlines the essence of fantasy in psychological terms. Fantasies are the clear products of, and often used as synonymous with, the imagination. For the past four or five decades, the term "fantasy" has also been a label used to designate a distinct literary genre. Stableford continues his introduction with the following claim:

> There is no thought without fantasy, and the faculty of fantasizing may well be
> the evolutionary raison-d'être of consciousness – and yet, the notion of "fantasy"
> comes ready-tainted with implications of unworthiness, of a failure of some
> alleged duty of the human mind to concentrate on the realities of existence. It is
> partly for this reason that the notion of "fantasy" is so recent. (xxxv)

Although fantasies can be traced back to the origins of storytelling, fantasy as a literary genre has an ambiguous relationship with the canon. Certain theorists have therefore

been concerned with establishing the possible boundaries of fantasy as a literary genre. Recent theorists of fantasy literature include Brian Attebery and Richard Mathews, in addition to Brian Stableford who is quoted above. This chapter will focus on these theorists and their attempts to define and delimit the boundaries of what has come to be known as the genre of fantasy. I will give a brief outline of the history and evolution of the genre and then go on to discuss the aforementioned theorists and their views on fantasy as formula, mode and genre.

The Development of Fantasy as a Literary Genre

> Until the scientific method began to tame and frame the world, the human imagination had had free rein to explain mundane reality by referring to supernatural forces. […] The great resources of human reason gradually reduced the number of acceptable explanations, however, leaving less room for unrestrained belief and imagination. (Mathews 2)

This passage from Richard Mathews' *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination* (2002) underlines the fact that science and reason are, in modern society, the preferred ways of interacting with and relating to the world as we see it. It is partly due to this fact that the terms "fantasy" and "the fantastic" carry with them their connotations; they refer to things that are, wholly or partially, impossible or unreal. Although the fantasy genre, like any other literary genre, is never constant but always in development, it arguably has a strong connection to the literature of the past. As Stableford says: "Although it is the most recent genre of literature to acquire a marketing label, it is also the most ancient genre that is readily identifiable. Storytelling is much older than literature […]"

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(xxxvi). He argues that preliterate cultures are all alike in the sense that the stories that are told before a literary culture is established "are almost all fantastic" (xxxvi). This point is connected to what Mathews argues in the above statement, that these cultures were free to explain what happened around them with reference to the presence of the supernatural. Moreover, in order to explain aspects of mundane reality, revisiting the past, or at least a version of the past, served as a way to establish the importance of these kinds of stories: "Their authority and value is often intricately bound up with their seeming antiquity; that is, the apparent guarantee of their independence and power" (xxxvi). Furthermore, they are "a construction of myth and legend: a past that was different in kind and quality from the present" (xxxvii). As is the case with genres such as myth and, to some extent, fairy tale, fantasy, as the literary genre we know today, is almost always concerned with some version of the past. Indeed, this is one of the distinctive features that separate fantasy from similar genres such as science fiction, which is often preoccupied with establishing one form or another of a possible future. To fantasy, "possible" is as much a keyword as "impossible," for in a re-imagining of the past, what is essentially impossible to us from our conception of the world, suddenly becomes possible or "ha[s] such possibilities as a context" (xxxvii).

Although it may be argued that the Enlightenment was believed to result in the disappearance of the belief in myth and legend, it also, over time, may have rather resulted in the rediscovery of them. In his essay "On Fairy-Stories" (1947) Tolkien argues for the importance of fantasies and means of escape, and as Stableford puts it, he insists that they "were far too useful in psychological terms to be considered unfit for adults" (xlv). Tolkien went on to create his own mythology, and is today considered to be the greatest contributor to and foundation of modern fantasy literature, mainly because of *The Lord of the Rings,* which was first published in 1954-55. Much of the

commercial success that is attributed to fantasy fiction is therefore closely connected to

Tolkien's success; although his works are the object for much scholarly and critical

examination, his narrative and mythological structures provided a foundation of

commercial reproduction. This commercial reproduction is by Brian Attebery called

"formula fantasy," which I will discuss in detail later on in this chapter. First, I will give

an overview of important terms for this thesis and then move on to the discussion of

recent genre theory.

Fantasy and Subgenres: High and Low Fantasy

This thesis will focus on high fantasy literature as a subgenre. As I have already

introduced a number of terms, before I go on, I would like to clarify my use of these

terms in this context and explain their implications. First of all, it might be relevant to

get an understanding of what the term "fantasy" entails when talking of the genre in a

contemporary context. In *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997), John Clute defines

"Fantasy" in the following way:

> A fantasy text is a self-coherent narrative. When set in this world, it tells a story
>
> which is impossible in the world as we perceive it […]; when set in an
>
> otherworld, that otherworld will be impossible, though stories set there may be
>
> possible in its terms. (311)

As always when dealing with genres, this definition is not absolute, nor does it

encompass the many possibilities of subgenres, but it serves to give a general overview

of what fantasy as a genre implies. In *Strategies of Fantasy* Brian Attebery refers to the

fantasy genre as "a middle ground between mode and formula" (10). I will move on to

this discussion shortly, but since the term "subgenre" is used as well, it warrants explanation: "High" and "low" fantasies are *subgenres* in the sense that they represent the sphere of narrative in which the story takes place, that is, in a primary or secondary world, or what Clute refers to as this world and an otherworld. If fantasy *as a genre* is the overall term to describe Attebery's "middle ground between mode and formula," then high or low fantasy are *subgenres* of this middle ground; they represent a further description of the *type* of fantasy that a given text represents.

If high and low fantasies are considered as subgenres in accordance with Attebery's conception of a generic "middle ground," the "high" and "low" modifiers in these terms have nothing to do with literary quality. Rather, they illustrate in what sphere or plane the course of the narrative takes place. For instance, if a story takes place wholly or partly in our world, it is what one would call low fantasy. J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series would be an example of a work of low fantasy. High fantasy, on the other hand, is the term one would use for the story that takes place completely within a secondary, invented and fictional world, the "otherworld" as previously mentioned. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is a typical example of a work that would be placed under the designation of high fantasy. In *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature* (1980), Attebery refers to the notion of an "Other World," a place deeply rooted in the fairy tale tradition: "This 'Other World' is not accessible by ordinary means: it does not exist on the same plane or in the same time as our own" (12). Although a version of this "Other World" can be integrated into our own, primary world in one way or another, such as is the case in *Harry Potter,* high fantasy as a subgenre employs this concept of an "Other World" in a more prominent way. Creators of these "Other Worlds" have different premises to consider; arguably the most important principle is that without a textually integrated frame of reference (the

primary world, the "real world"), the writer needs to present his secondary world so that the frame of reference lies within the mind of the reader on a more or less subconscious level, and is faced with "the much more difficult task of substituting an entire fantasy world for the simulacra of the real world" (Stableford xlviii).

High Fantasy versus Immersive Fantasy

Both of the subgenres I have discussed are related to what Stableford refers to as three distinct "classifications of fantasy stories," based on Farah Mendlesohn's categorization: intrusive fantasy, portal fantasy, and immersive fantasy (xlviii). Whereas the subgenre of high fantasy would fit under the label "immersive," intrusive and portal fantasies would both be included as versions of the subgenre of low fantasy. In order to clarify my use of the terms "high" and "low" fantasies as subgenres and to illustrate the difficulties of categorization, I will outline the implications of these three classifications.

Stableford argues that intrusive fantasy according to Mendlesohn is a story "in which our world is disturbed by a fantastic intrusion" (xlviii). Depending on the degree of this intrusion, these kinds of fantasies take place in the primary world and would fit under the subgenre of low fantasy. This classification is closely related to what Brian Attebery understands as "the fantastic mode" and will be discussed in further detail shortly.

The second classification is "portal fantasy," which, as hinted at in the designation, is fantasy where "the reader is led away from the mimetic world-within-the-text into a 'secondary' world, either by undertaking a journey into terra incognita or by passing through some kind of portal" (xlviii). This is the equivalent of low fantasy as

defined earlier, because it features both a primary and a secondary world, and some form of interaction between them.

The third and final classification Mendlesohn establishes is what she calls "immersive fantasy." This entails substituting the primary world for what Tolkien called a "sub-creation" and Mathews designates as a "secondary world" (Mathews 58). Stableford argues that immersive fantasies are intended "to allow the reader to move directly into a wholehearted heterocosmic creation, without warning or guidance, and to establish facilities that will enable the reader to feel quite at home there in spite of its strangeness" (xlviii-xlix). In essence, high fantasy and immersive fantasy are the same; they both involve a narrative that takes place wholly within a secondary world. For the purpose thesis, I will stick to the use of "high fantasy" to designate the subgenre.

Theories of Fantasy and the Fantastic

Generic theories of fantasy literature have arguably been a problematic field of study, for many reasons. Tzvetan Todorov, Rosemary Jackson and Christine Brooke-Rose are some of the theorists that have been preoccupied with the discussion of fantasy and the fantastic in literary. However, a clear, comprehensive and inclusive genre theory has for many reasons remained somewhat elusive, and their theories will not be further discussed here other than in the context of other theorists' developments of their ideas. Regardless of problems of theory, fantasy as a genre seems to have acquired a solid and indisputable place in the marketplace of popular fiction in the last few decades, and more recent efforts to analyze, examine and discuss fantasy's role as well as its features are relevant when examining the more recent works of fantasy. As previously mentioned, Attebery, Mathews and Stableford are all representatives of the more recent (and by recent I mean during the last three decades) discussion of fantasy as both genre

and mode; this chapter will be concerned mainly with their arguments and understandings of these features, and how they are relevant when examining contemporary fantasy texts. This chapter will therefore focus on Attebery's *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature* (1980) and *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992), and his perspectives of fantasy as genre and the fantastic as mode. Along with Attebery's ideas of genre and mode, I will discuss Mathews' introduction to genre in *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination* (2002), as well as Stableford's introduction to *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literatureı* (2005).

Also, I will discuss how these theorists' understanding of generic and modal features can be used to illustrate how the works of fantasy writers like Steven Erikson and George R. R. Martin can be viewed as examples of contemporary high fantasy, and the following two chapters will discuss their texts in further detail. Furthermore, I will not make any claim as to how these texts should be categorized other than in a high fantasy context, but I will discuss their relevance in relation to narrative strategies and their presentation of the fictional worlds, in relation to Attebery's arguments of formula, mode and genre in particular, as his theorizing is arguably the most prominent and detailed discussion when it comes to contemporary theories of fantasy fiction.

It is also important to point out that this thesis is not preoccupied with the inclusion of these works in the canon. Rather it seeks to argue that the style and themes of these texts are part of a particular – and arguably recent – trend within high fantasy, and are worth discussing in this context. The reason why I choose to focus on fantasy as genre in this thesis is to argue that although much has been said regarding the formulaic traits of fantasy such as the constitution of the fantastic hero, the struggle between good and evil and the presence of the supernatural or even the impossible, contemporary texts such as the selected works by Erikson and Martin employ elements that elude much of

the categorical labels previously attached to the genre. Although the texts I have chosen cannot be said to belong to any other genre than fantasy, and may have some recognizable features of formula, they are employed differently.

The arguments of Attebery and Mathews are therefore relevant in a discussion of these works considering the distinctions between formula, mode and genre, both in the sense that they build upon and further develop the ideas of earlier theorists, and also in the sense that they take into consideration other works that may have inspired writers like Martin and Erikson. Additionally, one can easily argue that genre theories of fantasy often remain outside canonical theorizing, mainly because much of the fantasy literature discussed is considered non-canonical. This thesis is not concerned with arguing otherwise, but recognizes that while both Attebery and Mathews mention the question of aesthetic quality, their objective is to understand the genre for what it is and to provide a starting point for its discussion.

As already mentioned, both Attebery and Mathews have developed their arguments from the ideas of earlier theorists such as Todorov. Their arguments are concerned with illuminating the features of what Mathews refers to as modern fantasy, and recent works like those of Erikson and Martin are, for reasons that will be made clear, best examined in light of more recent fantasy theory.

Fantasy: Mode, Genre and Formula

I will in this section give a brief account of Attebery's and Mathews' points on formula, mode and genre. Attebery in particular delivers a strong argument for the need to differentiate between these terms, and his theorizing also constitutes the fundamental elements for Mathews' arguments.

Both Attebery and Mathews are concerned with fantasy *as a genre.* In *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination,* Mathews builds upon Attebery's differentiation between genre and mode in particular:

> Although it is difficult to define literary fantasy precisely, most critics agree it is a type of fiction that evokes wonder, mystery or magic – a sense of possibility beyond the ordinary, material, rationally predictable world in which we live. As a literary genre, modern fantasy is clearly related to the magical stories of myth, legend, fairy tale, and folklore from all over the world. There are also elements of fantasy in even the most realistic literature, just as daydream and imagination hover at the edges of our waking minds. Fantasy as a distinct literary genre, however, may best be thought of as fiction that elicits wonder through elements of the supernatural or impossible. It consciously breaks free from mundane reality. (1-2)

This passage from Mathews illustrates the essence of Attebery's arguments; it describes what this aspect of the definition "fantasy" refers to, and considers the points Attebery has made in *Strategies of Fantasy* in particular. Here, Attebery discusses three major manifestations of fantasy and the fantastic: formula, mode and genre. (By "manifestations," I am referring to the way in which fantasy or the fantastic features in a text.) He describes formula as a fixed group of easily discernible elements that borders on cliché, "essentially a commercial product," and a "mass produced supplier of wish-fulfillment" (1). Basically, fantasy as formula can therefore be described as a recipe for producing a quickly recognizable story, where the use of stereotype and polarizations of characters and of good and evil tend to be relied upon. Formulaic fantasy can be both

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good and bad; it is a question of appliance and the writer's skill in the usage of formulaic elements. Basically, it is a way of quickly producing a commercially desirable narrative. I will come back to the concept of formula later in this thesis, but it is necessary to give an outline of this concept to understand what Attebery says when discussing the aforementioned "middle ground between formula and mode" (10). This leads me to the second manifestation of fantasy, mode, which Attebery describes in the following way:

> A mode is a way of doing something, in this case, of telling stories. But storytelling is complicated business. In order to depict the essentials of character, dialogue, action, and physical setting, a writer must find ways not only to present but also interpret appearance, behavior, thought, and speech. She must base her descriptions on some conception of identity, causality, intentionality, and the benignity, malignity or indifference of the universe. A mode is thus a stance, a position on the world as well as a means of portraying it. (2)

Here he is basically talking about a feature, a part or an aspect of the narrative, albeit a crucial one. It is here we come to the difference between the usage of the terms *fantasy* and *the fantastic*. As Attebery presents it, the latter is used to denote the mode, while the former is used to denote the genre. So when Mathews says that, "There are also elements of fantasy in even the most realistic literature, just as daydream and imagination hover at the edges of our waking minds" (1-2), he is essentially talking about what Attebery means by the fantastic, the literary mode. I will in this thesis

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continue to use this understanding of the generic and the modal to differentiate between fantasy and the fantastic.

As already mentioned, the term *genre* is employed by Attebery to denote what he refers to as "the middle ground between formula and mode" (10). Unsurprisingly, his discussion revolving around this middle ground has its basis in viewing Tolkien, with *The Lord of the Rings*, as the father and foundation of modern fantasy. This is not to say that modern fantasy *began* with Tolkien, but that it is rather heavily influenced by his writings, and at least as a critically "accepted" work, *The Lord of the Rings* precedes other works of fantasy that draw from the same well as Tolkien. It is worth pointing out a few things regarding Tolkien and his work. First and foremost, his writings are today generally received with widespread acceptance because of his exploration of fundamental themes like love, sacrifice and loss, and, according to Stableford, he insisted "that fantasies modeled on fairy stories performed three fundamental and vital psychological functions: recovery, escape and consolation" (xlv). As an academic and scholar, his linguistic interest triggered the creation of a mythology consisting of layers of language, culture and history. His book for children *The Hobbit* (1937) was met with critical acclaim, and in later decades *The Lord of the Rings* had a major influence on how fantasy gained acceptance and was taken more seriously within literary criticism. Tolkien's lecture "On Fairy-Stories," given as early as 1938, was later developed into the essay of the same title from 1947. This essay became an important contribution to genre theory – Stableford calls it "the fundamental document of modern fantasy theory" (xlv) – and it was central in establishing the field of fantasy intended for a mature audience.

Attebery says, "the works we recognize as fantasy tend to resemble *The Lord of the Rings* in three more fundamental ways. One of these has to do with content, another

with structure, and the third with reader response" (14). These three points are important to illustrate the sphere of fantasy as a genre, and I will give a brief description of what is meant by these points here, but I will discuss them in more detail further on in relation to the works of Erikson and Martin.

Fantasy: Content, Structure and Reader Response

The content of fantasy fiction, essentially, has to do with the sphere of the impossible. Mathews describes it as "a type of fiction that evokes wonder, mystery or magic – a sense of possibility beyond the ordinary, material, rationally predictable world in which we live" (1), while Attebery explains that there are slightly different variations as to how the impossible in fantasy is defined, but that "some such violation [of reality] is essential to fantasy" (15). In relation to this point, one can see an evident example of the difference between low and high fantasy, where "fantasy, as it has crystallized around central works like *The Lord of the Rings,* demands a sharper break from reality" (15). It is therefore in high fantasy, then, that these "sharper breaks" arguably become more evident, or at least are more essential, as I have mentioned earlier, for the "Other World" to be accepted by the reader for being just that, whether it is on a conscious or an unconscious level. The break from reality may also have to do with the absence of logic, or a different kind of logic. Mathews argues:

> Unlike realistic fiction, fantasy does not require logic – technological, chemical
> or alien – to explain the startling actions or twists of character and plot recorded
> on its pages; such events may be explained by magic or not explained at all. (3)

In Erikson's *Malazan Book of the Fallen* cycle, the break from reality as a defining trait of the fantasy genre is achieved through the secondary, invented world and the strange and alien races that constitute its population alongside the more familiar human race, among other, subordinate features. Mathews is undoubtedly correct when he argues that fantasy does not *require* logic to explain fantastic aspects of the narrative, but Erikson goes to great lengths in describing in detail what can be called "the physics" of magic, and so what is inherently fantastic and mysterious is explained in great detail. In Erikson's world, magic can be found in the energies of other realms (called "warrens"), easily accessed by anyone with basic training. Dozens, if not hundreds, of these warrens exist, each of which have different and sometimes unique possibilities of power. What Erikson does is to introduce his own form of "fantastic logic"; there are very few events that take place in the story that are not explainable through his "scientific approach" to magic. Even religion is completely logical in this sense; gods and demi-gods are as real as common people who inhabit the world, and few, if any, have any reason to doubt their existence. Even the ascension of gods is explained in detail: famous personalities who gain followers and eventually worshippers ascend to power through these worshippers; the rewards of godhood are eternal life (although not immortality) and vast control of the warrens. This basically means that anyone can become a god, and that there is nothing unexplainable or extraordinary about him or her, though they still are individuals beyond the capabilities of ordinary mortals.

Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* operates in much the same way in the sense that magic is perfectly explainable; but here, magic is not a part of everyday life; it is rather thought to be extinct. Much like in our own world, people do not believe in magic, and belief and faith in the supernatural is only a trait of religious characters that do not have any "real" power of their own. Although magic seems to be some form of latent energy

in Martin's world, there are few people who know of its properties, and those who do are usually tribal shamans or witches. An example of this is the witch Mirri Maz Duur, who performs dark, forgotten rituals in order to avenge the death of her people (*A Game of Thrones* 760). But with the hatching of Daenerys' dragons, magical energies resurface in the world, coming once more to the foreground. One such example is the sudden lighting of "dragonglass" candles in the Citadel of Oldtown, an ancient university (*A Feast for Crows* 682). The impossible, as described by Attebery, is therefore still present in the texts of both Erikson and Martin; the "violation of reality" is clearly present but treated in such a way that one might say that new laws replace the natural laws of our own world, and that these laws are fantastic only in the sense that they cannot be explained through science; they represent magic.

The second point Attebery makes when discussing fantasy as a genre has to do with structure. He explains that the structure of fantasy is characteristically comic in the sense that the narrative is linear, and it begins with a problem and ends with a resolution (15). Although this is generalizing and undoubtedly simplified, he does consider the narrative consequences for what Tolkien calls a "eucatastrophe," "the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn' (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale)" ("On Fairy-Stories" 22). Although different modal elements may appear in the fantasy story, such as horror, comedy and tragedy, it is this "eucatastrophe" that is essential in fantasy, argues Attebery. If this is correct, then what can we make of the works of Erikson and Martin, in which Tolkien's notion of eucatastrophe seems more or less non-existent? It is still fantasy? It seems here that Attebery is moving on the borders of what he previously discussed as a formulaic approach to the concept of fantasy. He says:

If, for instance, the Ring were simply hidden again or fallen, despite the heroes'

best efforts, into the hands of the Enemy, we would not have the structural

completeness of fantasy, but the truncated story-forms of absurdism or horror.

(*Strategies* 15)

This idea of what constitutes fantasy appears somewhat over-simplified and not very

nuanced, but it raises some interesting questions. So should Erikson's *Malazan Book of*

the Fallen cycle or Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* cycle be classified as absurdism or

horror, with reference to modal features of genres other than fantasy? While these

elements are clearly present in both of these cycles, I would still argue that both should

be categorized as high fantasy fiction. It is important to note that since neither Erikson's

nor Martin's cycle is complete as of now, this discussion would be more or less

speculative in nature, so I will be careful not to assume anything beyond what is already

evident in the texts, as it seems Tolkien's notion of the eucatastrophe is dependent on

the ending of the story, namely a turn for the positive. To discuss these issues, I will

have to consider the structural traits of the texts themselves. Attebery emphasizes the

point that the eucatastrophe or sense of structural completeness has to be manifested

through "emotional payoff" (*Strategies* 16), and should provide a sense of completeness

to the story in itself, a sense of totality, and of change; things are not the same as they

were when the narrative began; some shift of balance of power or in the condition of the

world have been achieved, realities have been altered, presumably for the better.

The third point Attebery makes when discussing the features of fantasy as a

genre has to do with reader response. Tolkien's idea of eucatastrophe is directly related

to this third point, for the structural completeness as described above creates an effect in

the reader previously referred to as "wonder," or what Mathews describes as what

"breaks free from mundane reality" (2). But wonder in itself is not enough; fantasy as a genre has to create a sense of or a reference to our own world in one way or another, to avoid complete estrangement from the narrative. Attebery describes it as a complete opposite to what Bertolt Brecht calls "Verfremdung" or "alienation" (see Wolfe 31-32). Arguably, Erikson's main point of reference to our world is established through his scientific approach to depicting the nature of magic (a point I will come back to in further detail), but also through the absence of stereotypical heroes, or *fantastic heroes* such as Tolkien's Aragorn. Both the human and the non-human characters (even "gods" in Erikson's sense) of the *Malazan Book of the Fallen* are flawed, fallible, and utterly realistic in nearly every sense. Martin's characters are much in the same way, maybe even more so; they are mostly driven by greed and self-interest, overtly or covertly, and are flawed to the point of cynicism. This is not to say that Tolkien's characters are not credible; were it otherwise, *The Lord of the Rings* would never have become as popular as it has become. But Tolkien's world is mythical in every sense; it represented the heroic, the majestic and the triumph of good over evil albeit not without loss. This raises some interesting questions about the "other worlds" of Erikson and Martin. They create fantastic universes inhabited by characters that are very much *typically* human in nature, devoid of any heroes or heroics in the mythical and epic sense. In what way does this appeal to the reader? What are the effects on structure? These are questions I will address in the following two chapters. Before I move on, however, I need to say a little more on the subject of fantasy-as-formula, as discussed by Attebery.

Reflections on Formula and Aesthetics

Attebery's attempt to try to establish some boundaries when discussing fantasy as genre is an ambitious one; he is addressing a range of fiction with many interrelated and

overlapping elements and literary tendencies. One can also understand this particular

need to establish some differences between what could be deemed valuable and what

could not, in terms of aesthetic or critical value. This is why he makes use of the term

"middle ground" when designating fantasy as a genre; it represents the area between

"the mode, which is so vast, [and] the formula, which tends towards triviality"

(*Strategies* 2). Now, my trying to distinguish the cycles of Erikson and Martin from the

concept of the formulaic is not motivated by some overwhelming notion of the negative

implications of formula, or the need to defend these works from being labeled as simply

commercial products satisfying the reading public's desire for "wish-fulfillment."

Rather, if they offer any indication of the current trends within contemporary fantasy

fiction, the notion of "formula" as discussed by Attebery needs to be redefined or

abandoned altogether. This is mainly for the reason that stereotypical elements and

common themes of the kind of formula fantasy that succeeded Tolkien seem to be

outdated. The situation calls for a revision of genre theory that is more in line with these

contemporary trends.

In the online article "Don't Fence Me In: Reading Beyond Genre" (2003),

Robert Briggs addresses some problems with Attebery's ideas of formulaic fantasy. As

a general comment on the problems of categorization, he says:

> So the practice of classifying texts by genre is one with which most readers of
>
> popular fiction and film are entirely comfortable – even if the term 'genre' is an
>
> unfamiliar one for some of those readers. But if that is the case, this ease is felt
>
> in spite of the fact that most readers feel also, and without contradiction, entirely
>
> *un*comfortable with genre designations. As soon as the notion of genre is

recalled in discussions of popular texts, that is, it is just as likely to be

challenged or recognised as being inadequate to the task. (par. 2)

The notion of what constitutes the formula will always be based on subjective

judgement, and Attebery presents a detailed argument for the distinction between

formulaic fantasy and fantasy as a genre, based on content, structure and reader-

response. As Briggs observes, Attebery's attempt to focus on fantasy as a "genre is also

a matter of pragmatics: a way of focusing on fantasy texts that are worthy of analysis

(according to him) without stretching the scope of fantasy beyond reason." Therefore,

according to Briggs, rather than delimiting formula as a bi-product of the genre,

"Attebery ultimately reaffirms *formula* as the defining characteristic of the *genre* of

fantasy, despite his attempt to distinguish a concept of genre from the concept of

formula" (par. 7). So as to avoid a discussion of *whether* the works of Martin and

Erikson belong under the category of fantasy as a genre, but rather *how* they do, it is

wise to keep in mind the criteria Attebery puts forth when arguing for the boundaries of

fantasy as a genre.

Erikson and Martin: Representatives of High Fantasy

There are some important reasons why I have chosen the works of Erikson and Martin

as my primary texts. First of all, they represent the subgenre I am trying to explore. The

stories take place in an otherworld as previously described, that is, within an invented

secondary world, in which our world or "reality" is not featured whatsoever. The

connection is made only by our recognition of character traits, social and/or political

structures and other features we could in one way or another relate to. Second, although

they would be considered works of popular fiction, I would argue that they do not

belong to the category of the formulaic mass-produced works of "wish-fulfillment" that Attebery describes, mainly for the reason that they do not adhere to the typical model of commercial reproduction that succeeded Tolkien. They offer significant possibilities for analysis within the framework of its genre, with levels of depth and meaning that I consider worth examining in this particular context. Third, they raise questions that recent genre theorists do not account for. They arguably represent a new direction within the genre, a new way of writing fantasy fiction, and a clear break from what is usually described as formulaic fantasy. In the following chapters, I will examine in more detail the fictional worlds in the cycles of Martin and Erikson, and look at the narrative structures employed.

2. Telling the Tale: Narrative Strategies in the Two Cycles

> Fiction, like stage magic, is an act of illusion between performer and audience. The storyteller pulls a clump of sentences out of his hat, waves a magic wand, and tells us that those sentences have turned into people, scenes, and events. And we say, yes, I see it all. Unless the storyteller is extraordinarily incompetent or insistent in letting us in on his secrets, we are more than willing to be fooled. We prefer the pleasures of illusion to the smugness of skepticism. (Attebery, *Strategies* 51)

The fantasy genre, as any other genre, utilizes various textual tools in order to create a fictional illusion. This chapter will focus on these textual tools, and they way the two writers employ them. As examples of high fantasy of an epic scale, both cycles include features intended to create a sense of vastness, to effectively act as a replacement for the primary world. These features include a large number of characters and complex plotlines, spanning over longer periods of time and set across one or more entire continents. In the introduction to *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature*, Brian Stableford refers to Farah Mendlesohn, who prefers the term "immersive fantasy" when it comes to these kinds of "secondary world" fantasies. Mendlesohn, Stableford explains, calls this category of fantasy "immersive fantasies," which "adopt the much more difficult task of substituting an entire fantasy world for the simulacrum of the real world that readers usually expect to discover when they embark upon the task of immersing themselves in a novel" (xlviii). This ambitious scope can present a challenge to both author and readers, and in this chapter I will explore how this and other

challenges are dealt with in Martin and Erikson's cycles. First, I will discuss the narrative strategies employed by the writers and how they fit into a high fantasy tradition. I will also discuss in what way these narrative strategies contribute to the distinction of these texts from formulaic high fantasy and also how they deviate from the foundation laid down by Tolkien for secondary world fantasy. My aim here is to demonstrate how these two cycles, as examples of modern fantasy, have contributed to the genre's development. By not following traditional structures of fairy tale, folklore and romance, but still borrowing elements from them, these two cycles are examples of how the category of fantasy that Mendlesohn calls immersive fantasies has undergone a development. I will try to illuminate how the secondary worlds operate as self-contained spheres of narrative, and this chapter will mainly focus on how the narrative strategies contribute to this.

Levels of Fantasy

The next chapter will deal in more detail with the fictional space in which the stories take place, but in order to discuss the narrative strategies such as characterization, some major points about the fictional space need to be emphasized. The first point has to do with what I will call "the level of fantasy." Since both writers operate within the subgenre known as high fantasy, the question of levels of fantasy is related to what degree to which the writers incorporate elements that may be familiar, or more precisely when dealing with a medieval setting, to what extent they draw on the knowledge of a familiar history. Consider first the world of George R. R. Martin: it is by far more closely connected with actual medieval history than the mythical, complex and almost chaotic world of Steven Erikson. Martin describes a feudal society where lords and noblemen, and, to a certain extent women, rule over lesser lords, clergymen, knights,

craftsmen and, at the bottom of the social hierarchy, peasants, serfs and beggars. Briefly outlined, it is a world in which, to most characters, magic belongs in the realm of legend, with few people aware of its properties, or even its existence. Initially, the only thing that seems fantastic is the fact that dragons (believed to be extinct) are a part of history rather than myth: the skulls in the royal throne room are physical evidence of their existence. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Martin operates with a realistic or, as Stableford prefers to call it, a naturalistic sphere, into which fantastic elements are introduced. Erikson on the other hand, describes a world that is much more loosely structured hierarchically. It is not necessarily feudal, although elements of feudal society are featured. A major difference is the position of women, who in Erikson's world are equal to men in most of the cultures described. A good example is the fact that the Malazan Empire is even ruled by an Empress. In addition, the world is dominated and shaped by the use of magic, which many humans and most non-human races have access to. Gods and demigods are even major characters of the cycle. This is a considerably more magical approach to fantasy than that of Martin, whose world is arguably more inspired by history than myth and magic. In this respect, the level of fantasy I mentioned earlier is much higher in Erikson's world than in Martin's subtler approach. As will be discussed in detail in the last chapter, Erikson operates with a reversal of Martin's structure; in the centre is a fantastic world into which realistic or naturalistic elements of mimesis are introduced.

The different approaches to fantasy allow for different types of characters and motivations. This is directly related to the central spheres of the two narratives, that is, one is predominantly naturalistic while the fantastic elements are more predominant in the other. Martin's characters are mostly human, and as such they are often motivated by recognizable human vices or virtues, whereas the characters and motives of

Erikson's characters of different human and non-human races (some of which are immortal), are often slightly obscure. Characterization is therefore handled in different ways throughout the two cycles. The following sections will deal with the narrative strategies and textual elements, such as characterization, narrative point of view and focalization, plot structure and story, suspense and its relation to focalization, and also format in terms how the separate volumes relate to their respective cycles.

Narrative Point of View and Focalization

The narrator, as generally understood, and as defined in Gerald Prince's *A Dictionary of Narratology* (1987), is "the one who narrates, as inscribed in the text" (65). It is important to point out the differences between narrator, implied author and focalizer. The former two are discussed by Prince in the following passage: "The implied author of a narrative text must also be distinguished from the narrator: the former does not recount situations and events (but is taken to be accountable for their selection, distribution, and combination); furthermore, he or she is inferred from the text rather than inscribed in it as a teller" (42-43). In the cases of the texts I am discussing, the narrators have access to the thoughts and actions of characters. The focalized characters may offer different perspectives on events through rendered thought or speech. In both cycles we can talk about an omniscient narrator; a narrator who utilizes the option of choosing what characters to focalize on and may choose to render what they think and feel.

A fairy-tale structured narrative is more often than not focalized through one or more protagonists, or what Prince defines as a "holder of point of view. […] The central consciousness […] through which situations and events are perceived" (12). In fairy-tale structured narratives, it is often the case that the reader is presented with a

sympathetic character, a protagonist or "hero" (or two or three, at the most) that functions as the central consciousness of the narrative. Readers are invited to sympathize with this character, and there is rarely (if ever) any doubt as to whether or not the central consciousness is on the side of good or evil; he or she is not a tragic hero, but a hero that is intended to help provide the effect of *eucatastrophe.*

Both Erikson and Martin tell their stories through a third-person narrative perspective, though the narrative focus alternates between several characters. Martin's narratives in particular rely on this kind of alternation, as the novels are structured into chapters, each bearing the name of the focalized character. Prince defines focalization as "the perspective in terms of which the narrated situations and events are presented; the perceptual or conceptual position in terms of which they are rendered" (31). Both Erikson and Martin make extensive use of internal focalization, which according to Prince implies that "when such a position is locatable (in one character or another) and entails conceptual or perceptual restrictions (with what is presented being governed by one character's or another's perspective)" (32). A focal or focalized character, then, is "The character in terms of whose Point Of View the narrated situations and events are presented" (31). In the centre, then, is the aforementioned central consciousness, the "holder of point of view" (12). Accordingly, in both Erikson's and Martin's novels, it is largely through the perspective of the different characters that we perceive the world and get to witness various events. In this way, it is as though the narrator picks and chooses what events in the story the characters in focus are to interpret. Since the presentation of these events is based on the focalized character's understanding of the world, the narrative relies on the reader to piece together the greater picture, based on what the narrator chooses to reveal. Similarly, important events in the stories are often conveyed third-hand, and it is through the experiences and thoughts of various focalized

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characters that the reader is able to make up his or her own mind about the actual

events, as in the following example from Martin's *A Game of Thrones:*

> "Sorry, my lord," the messenger said. "Lord Brax was clad in plate-and-
> mail when his raft overturned. He was very gallant."
>
> *He was a fool,* Tyrion thought, swirling his cup and staring down into the
> winy depths. Crossing a river at night on a crude raft, wearing armor, with an
> enemy waiting on the other side – if that was gallantry, he would take cowardice
> any time. He wondered if Lord Brax had felt especially gallant as the weight of
> his steel pulled him under the black water. (765)

This approach to narrative leaves much power to the reader. Events may be

misinterpreted by the focalized character, and so it is often the case that the reader

knows many things the character does not, as the reader has witnessed events from

several perspectives and is able to judge for him- or herself what represents the truer

image.

Erikson's narrative does not actively engage the reader in the way Martin's does,

although his scope and ambitions are somewhat higher. Where Martin operates with

around a dozen different characters through which the story is focalized, Erikson

operates with a far greater number of characters, and the focalization shifts more

frequently. This is mainly due to the fact that Erikson's narrative to a greater extent

focuses on action and important events that take place. Where Martin leaves it to the

reader to piece together the various puzzles themselves, in Erikson's vast scope we

sense the presence of the narrator and an omniscient point of view to a greater extent.

The narrator is in a way more dependent on these shifts in focalization to maintain the

pace. It therefore makes sense to speak of an omniscient narrator in the sense that he has access to – and reports on – what a great number of characters think and feel, filtered through rendered thought and speech. In climactic sequences, the passages of various focalized characters are short, sometimes no longer than a couple of lines, and as the narrative perspective quickly alternates between involved characters, the pace of action quickens. In this sense, Erikson operates more or less exclusively with a series of close-up episodes, and the narrative is to a greater extent focused on the action. This also means that his narrative is more action-driven and more dependent on momentum, while Martin often renders second or third-hand accounts of significant events. The effects achieved are different; one cycle projects the sense of action, the other intrigue and plotting.

Characters and Characterization

The classic fairy-tale structure is rarely particularly ambitious or ground-breaking when it comes to characterization. It is an inherent trait of this structure (and in turn, of formula fantasy) that the reader is presented with little challenge when it comes to the recognition of the difference between good and evil characters. We are supposed to instantly recognize the moral position of the different characters, although this admittedly simplistic presupposition does not take into account character development or character traits of a moral middle-ground. A classic device of the fairy-tale structured narrative is also to associate the moral standing of the characters with physical appearance; a tall, fair-haired individual for instance, is rarely the main antagonist, and the crooked, dark-eyed skulking fellow is commonly recognized as an agent of mischief.

It is safe to say that neither Martin nor Erikson follows the classical structure of the fairy-tale narrative when it comes to characterization. Characterization, as defined by Prince, is "[t]he set of techniques resulting in the constitution of character" (13). This has to do with a character's traits, which, according to Prince, "are reliably stated by the narrator, the character herself or another character" (13). When stated in this manner by a narrator, we have an example of direct characterization, which should be distinguished from indirect characterization. Direct characterization is the establishment of character traits through the focalized character or narrator himself, whereas indirect characterization is "deducible from the character's actions, reactions, thoughts, emotions etc." (13). There are, however, few instances of direct characterization in the cycles of Martin and Erikson, as both writers rely heavily on indirect characterization

The narrators never offer their own judgments; these are solely provided by the focalized characters or by dialogue or can be deduced from a character's actions. In Martin's cycle, the various shifts between focalized characters demand a more indirect characterization. It is through a character's actions, rendered speech, rendered thoughts and the effects they have on other characters that the reader can make out, for instance, where on the moral scale a character stands. In Martin's *A Clash of Kings,* for instance, the reader is introduced to Lord Stannis Baratheon, brother of the late king, a hard and bitter man who holds several grudges. Here he is talking about his younger brother, seemingly a far more popular man, who has laid claim to the throne as well:

> "He is a child still," Stannis declared, his anger ringing loud in the empty hall, "a thieving child who thinks to snatch the crown off my brow. What has Renly ever done to earn a throne?" […] "*Your Grace,*" Stannis repeated bitterly.

"You mock me with a king's style, yet what am I king of? Dragonstone and a

few rocks in the narrow sea, there is my kingdom." (11)

Likewise, Erikson also employs indirect characterization to a large extent. In the

following example from *Midnight Tides*, the warrior Trull Sengar is observing his

brother Rhulad at the training compound. Tull finds that Rhulad, the youngest of four

brothers, is overzealous in his attempts to prove himself to people around him:

Although there was nothing untoward in the scene Trull looked upon, he

nevertheless felt a tremor of unease. Rhulad's eagerness to strut before the

woman who would be his eldest brother's wife had crept to the very edge of

proper conduct. […] Rhulad had clearly bested his childhood companion in the

mock contest, given the flushed pride in his handsome face. (42)

When discussing different types of characterization, the description of outward

appearance needs to be taken into account. The way characters look is closely linked to

the way they are perceived. Physical appearance is often a clear indication of character

traits and personality. Martin in particular relies on descriptions as a means of indirect

characterization. To further enhance the sense of a comprehensive and complex

background history, he devotes a considerable amount of space to the description of

clothing, arms and heraldry. It is worth noticing that the physical appearance of the

focalized characters in Martin's cycle is rarely described in the chapters devoted to

them. The personality and character traits of focalized characters are rather brought out

through their speech, actions and thoughts. Where Tolkien, for instance, as an example

of a writer concerned with fairy-tale structure, devoted a considerable amount of space

to describe characters, locations and objects in great detail, Martin's narrative style is quite different. Although descriptions of characters and locations are provided to some extent, he relies more on the rendering of speech and actions. As Tolkien states himself in the foreword to *The Lord of the Rings,* his interest in language results in painstakingly detailed descriptions of Elven language and history (xv-xviii), and it can be argued that Martin's seeming interest in medieval history is likewise evident in the detailed descriptions of historical elements like armor, clothing and heraldry, but these serve to enhance the setting rather than characterization.

In a cast that consists of a considerable number of characters, there is the inevitable need to distinguish between them, especially if several characters share important character traits. In the case of minor characters, Martin uses description of physical appearance to a much greater extent. The character known as "the Hound," for instance, is identified first and foremost by his outward appearance, his horrible facial burn scars and his rasping voice. These intimidating features also give hints about his mental disposition; he is arguably first and foremost a murderer and a ruthless enforcer. The same is true with his colossal brother Ser Gregor, who goes by the name of "The Mountain That Rides"; he is capable of great atrocities and uses his immense physique as a means for abusive and murderous behavior. In other words, the character traits of these minor characters are brought out through their physical traits and appearances. The many noble families of the story are also commonly distinguished first and foremost by physical traits, which in turn say something about their character and disposition. The wealthy and powerful Lannisters are golden-haired and beautiful, and the honorable Starks from the far north are grey-eyed and somber.

A major difference between the two writers when it comes to focalization is the fact that Erikson does not name individual chapters after the focalizers, which means

that several characters may be focalized in one chapter. This may seem as a superficial difference, but the achieved effect is important. By naming the chapter after the character that is focalized, the reader is immediately aware of which character the narrator will be focusing on. Thus, no introduction is needed, as readers become gradually more familiar with the characters they are instantly aware of the perspective that is about to be offered. Due to the fact that Erikson needs to establish the focalizer of different passages, he utilizes direct characterization to a greater extent. The narrator can therefore use this to his advantage in order to achieve various effects. Often, when major characters are focalized, the focalizer's identity is established immediately, for instance in the first sentence of a passage: "In the hut Quick Ben had watched the ambush, dumbfounded" (*Gardens of the Moon* 463). By naming the focalizer and establishing his perspective, little effort is needed to jump right back into the focalized character's current perspectives or state of mind.

The same principle applies to passages starting in the middle of a conversation, where one or more characters are usually named immediately. This is by far the most used method of establishing focalization throughout Erikson's cycle; parts of the narrative have no obvious focalizer, or have, according to Prince, "zero focalization" or "nonlocatable, indeterminate perceptual or conceptual position" (103). Here is the opening passage of the first chapter of *Midnight Tides*:

> *Here, then, is the tale. Between the swish of the tides, when giants knelt down and became mountains. When they fell scattered on the land like the ballast stones of the sky, yet could not hold fast against the rising dawn. Between the swish of the tides, we will speak of one such giant. Because the tale hides with its own.*

37

And because it amuses.

Thus. (35; italics in the original)

This is a clear case of zero focalization. In other cases, passages are devoted to introducing a new or unknown character or entity, where the character in question is *not* named, just referred to as the "man," the "woman," the "creature" or even the "god," and readers are intended to wonder who or what is featured, until the character's identity is revealed either at the end of the passage or through a different character's focalization. This is intended to create and enhance the effect of mystery or anxiety, horror or wonder, and to create suspense.

Narrative Structure and Plot

Brian Attebery has described the beginning-to-end narrative structure of the fairy-tale as a typical trait of formulaic fantasy. This is a structure that is seldom featured in realistic novels, for instance, but rather employed in the epic or in myth. The chronological approach that follows the pattern of introduction, problem, and solution, is more often than not employed in comedy. *The Lord of the Rings* has borrowed the structure of a traditional fairy-tale and thus constitutes a complete story from beginning to end. From Frodo's humble beginnings the story progresses until the point where he becomes the greatest hero of Middle-earth. To Tolkien the eucatastrophe already discussed, which implies a turn for the better and a linear narrative structure, is central to the myth and fairy-tale, and also to his own works of fantasy. It has continued to be central to writers of fantasy fiction. Ursula LeGuin's *Earthsea* cycle is built up in the same way; the narrative describes the development of the young Ged from his origins as an apprentice smith to becoming a powerful wizard. As with Tolkien, the ultimate triumph of good

over evil is central to the narrative structure. We follow the protagonists through trials and errors, joy and sorrow to the ending and the resolution where the forces of good emerge victorious.

Both Tolkien's and LeGuin's stories are third-person narratives, in which we primarily get acquainted with the benevolent protagonists, as the narratives are focalized on them. Evil is in these cases is mainly portrayed as an external, malevolent force, although an important plot element concerns the conquering of evil from within one's own self. Still, one could easily argue that the evil within is somehow a direct or indirect product of an external threat. This external and powerful force is unfamiliar and distant, yet its presence is felt at all times, which renders it even more threatening. The effect of the eucatastrophe is made all the more powerful from the fact that the powers of good defeat forces and superior powers of malice against overwhelming odds.

At the same time as these features have contributed to what is perceived as formula, the "awareness of fictionality" in fantasy allows for a kind of metafictional liberty, a freedom for the writer to turn what may be conceived as constraints to his own advantage. Attebery explores the narrative conventions of fantasy as treated by Tolkien:

> Tolkien has managed to complicate the beginning-to-end chronology of the fairy tale without violating it. Some of the devices Tolkien uses to turn a simple story into temporal counterpoint are available to the writer of realistic fiction. Yet we are uncomfortable when a primarily mimetic story calls too often upon coincidence, foreshadowing, oracular pronouncements, or repetition of patterns. We see the author's hand too plainly at work [...] But when Tolkien [...] set[s] up prophecies or parallel events, [he] do[es] so within the context of a magical

world, in which coincidence and correspondence have the force of natural law.

(*Strategies* 59)

It is important to emphasize the fact that Tolkien's works stand out as the basis for later formulaic fantasy not simply as a result of his successful employment of the fairy-tale structure and interesting creatures or characters set in a fantastic world. Critics who agree on Tolkien's importance in modern fantastic literature do so with reference to artistic and aesthetic value, mastery of language and narrative structure. There is a clear difference between Tolkien's work and formulaic fantasy in the sense that writers of formulaic fantasy are not necessarily interested in underlying themes and the aesthetic qualities of genre, but rather in an adaptation of the same fantastic elements and superficial structures and features.

The narrative structures of the works of Erikson and Martin are less concerned with the formulaic in this sense. Prophecies and foreshadowing have little or no influence on the narrative, for instance. Their stories are significantly more unpredictable, as they are not quest narratives of the kind found in Tolkien's works; their plots are not structured around a vital task that needs to be accomplished in order to restore balance or to achieve the effect of eucatastrophe.

The Lord of the Rings is what we would call a typical quest narrative. The story circulates around Frodo's mission to travel to Mount Doom to throw the Ring in the fires in which it was made. There is a clear, structural build-up. Readers are initially presented with a problem: The One Ring is found and needs to be destroyed. There are complications, the protagonists are met with resistance in their efforts by malevolent forces, but they eventually triumph. The story has a resolution, though not without loss. This typical quest narrative structure has been commonly adapted by writers of

formulaic fantasy. There is a clear plot – in the case of *The Lord of the Rings* there is a clear mission which needs to be carried out – and within the narrative there can be several subplots. In *The Lord of the Rings* the subplots serve the purpose of assisting Frodo in his mission. When Merry and Pippin find themselves among the Ents, for instance, they try to rally them into attacking Saruman, who serves Sauron. When Saruman is defeated, one subplot is resolved and has in turn served to feed the momentum of the main plot, namely easing Frodo's journey to Mount Doom.

Neither Martin nor Erikson operates with a quest narrative in the same sense as Tolkien and later writers of formulaic fantasy who have adopted this structure. There may be quests in the form of missions that need to be carried out and resolved in order for the story to progress, but these are oriented around subplots rather than the overall major plot. In Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire,* for instance, Bran's journey beyond the Wall to find the three-eyed crow and enlist his help in opening "his third eye" is a subplot that is laid out as a typical quest narrative, but the motives are different. There is no apparent reason directly related to the plot why Bran should find the three-eyed crow, other than his lust for adventure and lack of other options. Readers are led to understand that this may have to do the inevitable battle with the creatures of ice, the Others. As the title of the cycle suggests, *A Song of Ice and Fire* is ultimately concerned with the inevitable battle between elemental forces; the malevolent ice-creatures beyond the great Wall known as the Others, versus the Princess of dragon blood on the other side of the Narrow Sea, Daenerys, and her resurrected dragons. As these forces slowly but surely draw nearer to each other, various subplots are played out, such as the War of the Five Kings.

There is no apparent quest that needs to be completed at the beginning of Erikson's cycle either; rather, we are presented with a series of subplots that in turn are

woven together into a larger conflict. It soon becomes evident, however, that the struggles of mortal and immortal alike lead to a final confrontation with the scheming and malevolent Crippled God, who seeks to inflict his own suffering on every living being.

Cycles and Plot Structure

The main plot centered around a central conflict in the cycles by Martin and Erikson are not presented early on like is the case with *The Lord of the Rings* but rather fed in small trickles throughout the various subplots and conflicts that take place in the narratives. Tolkien's story was never meant to be divided into three separate volumes. Thus, the major plot of his narrative is meant to be the main focus of all three volumes. It is essentially one narrative, and the fact that it is divided into a trilogy has little or no effect on the structure or plot. The cycles of Erikson and Martin feature several volumes, and this has a clear effect on structure.

Martin's cycle consists of four volumes so far, and as already mentioned, it is the struggle between elemental forces that eventually becomes the main focus. Structurally, each volume offers no clear resolution to its subplots, and thus the author carefully manipulates the narrative so that readers are left wanting to read on and to find out what happens in the next volume. Martin's story also features the clearest chronological structure. The prologue in the first volume, *A Game of Thrones,* introduces the Others, the creatures of ice, and readers are gradually provided with clues of the impending struggle between these forces and the inhabitants of Westeros. Subplots are not necessarily resolved in the same volume that they were introduced, but are expanded and developed in consecutive volumes. Thus, we see a clearer resemblance to Tolkien's conception of the story in the sense that it is not the format

that dictates progression, but rather the story itself. This is not to say that the fact that it is a cycle is not considered carefully, but rather that the author chooses not to resolve every minor conflict within the space of a single volume. Structurally, the first volume, *A Game of Thrones,* features mostly presentation; of characters, relationships and emergence or escalation of conflicts, culminating in the breakout of the War of the Five Kings. The second and third volumes, *A Clash of Kings* and *A Storm of Swords,* deal with the war itself, as well as the escalation of the threat of the invasion from the Others beyond the Wall. These volumes are even less structured around an independent plot; they are more dependent on one another. The fourth volume, *A Feast for Crows,* deals with the aftermath of the war and the chaotic political situation that arises in its wake, and establishes a clearer connection between what is happening on the two different continents where the narrative takes place.

Erikson's *Malazan Book of The Fallen,* as the cycle is called, is more concerned with each volume being structurally and narratologically self-sufficient. It would be easier to read any of the volumes of Erikson's cycle as an independent story, though it would probably be less rewarding in terms of understanding the fictional world. Each volume of the cycle is essentially a structural "miniature" of the major plot. Each of the volumes features one or more subplots that are presented, complicated and resolved, all within the space of a single volume. Still, each volume serves to develop the overarching major conflict, the struggle against the Crippled God. For instance, *Gardens of the Moon* features a struggle for control over the wealthy city of Darujhistan, a struggle which draws the attention of both god and man. The conflict is resolved with an uneasy alliance between invading and defending forces. The next volume, *Deadhouse Gates,* then shifts the focus on to a different continent, where an uprising threatens the Malazan Empire. The conflict is introduced, escalated and then

resolved in the same volume. This gives the reader the sense of completeness, although it is gradually revealed that each conflict is part of the greater conflict and overarching plot.

The Creation of Suspense

Many of the narrative strategies I have already discussed are closely connected to suspense. Especially when talking about cycles consisting of several volumes, suspense needs to be created and maintained to encourage readers to continue reading. Although this is also true of most writers of every conceivable genre, how suspense is achieved varies significantly. In the case of the texts of Erikson and Martin, if we consider suspense and its relation to focalization we can see a clear example of how the narrator chooses to reveal just enough information for the story to progress in a satisfying manner in relation to plot. Both Erikson and Martin make use of an omniscient narrator who gets to choose what information to relay. Although readers are given enough information to piece together most of the picture, enough is withheld, which means that the reader is always encouraged to read more, or more carefully. Martin, in particular, has a tendency to end each chapter with a version of a "cliffhanger," so that further reading is encouraged in order to find out exactly what happens to the characters. Erikson employs this strategy in much the same way, but suspense is also created to a large extent through his faster pace and focus on shorter and more action-driven episodes.

A point worth discussing in relation to suspense is related to characterization. As I have discussed, both writers rely more on indirect characterization than direct, which means that the judgment of the characters is left more or less entirely up to the readers. As a consequence of this, it is not hard to imagine that different readers will

sympathize with different characters, as virtually no character stands out as completely good or completely evil, or as protagonist versus antagonist in the traditional fairy-tale sense. Martin's character Lord Eddard Stark, for instance, is a character that is presented as honorable and compassionate, and he is clearly a person driven by a desire to contribute to the greater good rather than self-interest. These positive traits are balanced off by his stubbornness and near hopeless inability to sufficiently adapt to his surroundings and the people around him. When Stark leaves for the king's court, where intrigue and personal ambition abound, his refusal to indulge in such dishonorable endeavors contribute to his eventual downfall. The same is true with many of Erikson's characters; different readers will undoubtedly feel more sympathetic towards different characters. However, a narrative without certain characters that readers can identify with would bear more resemblance to a historical account than literary fiction. Therefore, it is inevitable that readers are led to identify with a certain group of characters in order to take any interest in what happens next. In Martin's case, we have the Stark children and their effort to restore their house, and in the case of Erikson, we have the group of individuals eventually uniting and setting themselves up against the Crippled God.

The Archaeological Structure

Brian Stableford outlines the challenges the writer has to face when "substituting an entire fantasy world for the simulacrum of the real world […] without warning or guidance, […] to establish facilities that will enable the reader to feel quite at home there in spite of its strangeness" (Introduction xlviii-xlix). The two writers prepare the reader for the immersion into their fictive worlds in quite different ways. Martin follows a more traditional build-up of the plot and subplots; he allows for gradual

familiarization of characters so that motives and motivations are always at least partially evident. Erikson offers a different structure and build-up; he can jump right into an episode or a conversation where certain things may not make much sense. Later on, events may unfold that shed light on previous incidents that were unclear, and are illuminated in an entire new way.

According to the presentation of the author in *Toll the Hounds* (2008), Erikson himself is both an anthropologist and an archaeologist, and the build-up and story structure are arguably archaeological in nature. The more one "digs" into the world, the more history and information about the world is revealed for characters and, by extension, readers to understand. A good example of this archaeological structure can be found in the fifth book of the cycle, *Midnight Tides* (2004). The prologue deals with an incident that occurred thousands of years ago, where the god Scabandari Bloodeye conquers a land and betrays his own brother. After the death of his brother, focalization shifts to other characters through whom hints of the coming fate of Scabandari are revealed. The narrative then jumps thousands of years ahead in time, where entire cultures have been founded on a mistaken interpretation of the deeds of Scabandari. As the story progresses, more and more about the truth of Scabandari is revealed to the reader through the discoveries and experiences of various characters. In the end, we are given the whole picture; Scabandari was murdered by other gods as punishment for his deeds, and his soul magically imprisoned for eternity.

This archaeological build-up of plotlines and gradual revelation is a structure found not only in subplots like in *Midnight Tides,* but in many cases span over the course of several novels and gradually illuminates various aspects of the fictional world. I would argue that the first novel of the cycle, *Gardens of the Moon,* suffers somewhat by this ambition. The volume functions as a self-contained novel, if we focus on the

action, the character development and the fascination for the strangeness of Erikson's world. The archaeological effect is only revealed as the cycle progresses, from the second novel and onwards, because the first novel can then be seen in relation to the larger whole.

Tolkien as Basis for Formula

> [Tolkien] emphasizes that fantasy is not avoidance of the actual but a means of a more complete understanding. […] Tolkien suggests that fantasy helps us regain the fresh, clear vision of childhood, the ability "to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity – from possessiveness." […] Escape follows as a liberation from the prisons of habits and conventions of the contemporary real world. (Mathews 57)

As we can see from the above quote from Mathews, Tolkien had a clear conception of what fantasy entailed. As Mathews explains, fantasy, for Tolkien, was an extension of the dreams and visions of childhood. But it was not merely escapism, a childish endeavor meant to temporarily liberate us from the familiar, but an enriching experience and a "means of a more complete understanding" (57). Tolkien's mastery of style was a major factor of the success of *The Lord of the Rings*. The narrative is situational; the focalized characters influence how the situations are perceived. During Bilbo Baggins' birthday party in the Shire, the style is light, merry and simple; the hobbits' love of "simple things" shines through in the text. The pastoral, nonsensical style represents a contrast to the dangers that eventually emerge.

Brian Attebery's ideas of formula, mode and genre and their role in genre theorizing were discussed in the first chapter. Elements that have been frequently used by various writers of the genre must have originated from somewhere; it is the implication of the term "formula fantasy" that the elements in question have their source in one or more defining standards of fantasy fiction. In the case of high fantasy, the major influence is arguably Tolkien's works. This is not only the case of fantastic ideas of supernatural beings or cultural and sociological conceptions commonly employed within the genre, but also of the textual and narrative structure. Since this chapter deals with narrative structures in the works of Erikson and Martin, I find it relevant to expand on the notions of formulaic fantasy and how Tolkien ultimately formed a platform for recent writers of fantasy fiction to stand upon. Because an aim of this thesis is to illustrate how these writers break from this particular trend or tradition within high fantasy fiction, it is important to have some understanding of the background of this tradition.

As discussed in the first chapter, formula can be understood as different from mode, with genre as the "middle ground" between the two. The fantastic as mode has a long tradition in literature, if we examine it in general terms. As Attebery says, the concept of the fantastic mode "is broad, so that any findings will have extensive potential application" (*Strategies* 4). If we consider the modal approach to the fantastic, it will cover far more literary ground than the more recent concept of fantasy formula; *A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Tempest, Huckleberry Finn, Gulliver's Travels* and Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* are some examples of literature that features elements of the fantastic. Because the fantastic as mode (in Attebery's sense) will more or less automatically be subordinate to genre, critics will have no problem recognizing its field of use. But fantasy as genre, and particularly fantasy as formula, has a narrower

appliance. These conceptions of fantasy and the fantastic are more recent constructs; it is arguably because of Tolkien that critics speak about fantasy as a separate genre. Without Tolkien, "elves" and "dwarves" would not have been constant features of recent formulaic fantasy; indeed it can even be argued that without *The Lord of the Rings* the notion of formulaic fantasy would have been non-existent or uninteresting. There are a couple of points I need to address regarding this. First, it is important to keep in mind that works of formulaic fantasy are not inherently bad; there are writers that have managed to stick to a formula and still are inventive and refreshing. Second, Tolkien's subcreation is so vast and complex, both in terms of inventiveness and textual and narrative qualities that every work of formulaic fantasy tends to be measured against *The Lord of the Rings.* The purpose of discussing these points is twofold: first, to explain why it is difficult to avoid Tolkien in any discussion of fantasy fiction, and second, it is arguably because of Tolkien that theorists like Attebery and Mathews discuss formulaic fantasy and fantasy as genre in the first place, as Tolkien's success caused a range of imitations, suppliers of "wish-fulfillment."

The most prominent features of the cycles of Martin and Erikson that contribute to setting them apart from Attebery's concept of formula is the fact that they do not employ "stock characters and devices," that is, stereotypical characters and quest narratives based on Tolkien's writings. One reason for this can be found in the fairly complex strategies of characterization described above, and in the ways in which the narrator selects the amount of information the reader has access to. On the other hand, similarities can be found in the evolution of plot structures, as the emerging of unmistakably evil forces to some degree serves to gradually polarize two sides of the conflicts. The difference lies in the fact that neither Martin nor Erikson operates with characters that are *by definition* good, they populate a "grey area" somewhere between

Tolkien's concepts of good and evil, between cosmic darkness and mythic heroes. This approach is more similar to what Mathews labels as "sword and sorcery," where the notion of eucatastrophe is *not* stressed (118).

3. The Fictional Worlds of *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *The Malazan Book of the Fallen*

> It is intrinsic to the nature of preliterate storytelling, therefore, that stories should
> be set in a world that is not the everyday world of the present day but in a world
> of myth and magic: the world of "once upon a time." (Stableford, Introduction
> xxxvii)

One of the distinctive features of high fantasy as a subgenre is the fact that the story
takes place in what Attebery describes as an "Other World" (*Fantasy* 12). As I have
previously discussed, this fictional space has no link to or historical connection with our
own world, the "primary" world. The settings for the cycles of Martin and Erikson have
no relationship with this primary world. The space and time for these narratives are
completely fictive, although resemblances can be found in, for instance, the length of a
calendar year. Because high fantasy narratives are usually located in a world with
distinctive features borrowed from medieval history, one usually assumes a position
from which one looks through a window into the past; the events depicted are presented
as though they belonged to a time long gone. In these cases, time is an important factor
within the framework of the narrative, but as it is liberated from a connection to the
primary world, we are not required to locate time in any relational sense.

This chapter will focus on the fictional space as it is presented in the texts, and
give an outline of the worlds within which these stories take place. Here I will address
such aspects as social and political structures, religion and religious factors in society,
as well as natural laws and ontological systems. I will also discuss how the fantastic
elements are integrated, and how these elements contribute to a break from literary

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realism (what M. H. Abrams describes as modal realism). Elements of realism, romance, myth and folklore are featured in these works; and by borrowing from these modal and generic conventions, something new is created. I will examine how these elements are integrated and employed. Richard Mathews claims that "the literary genre of modern fantasy is characterized by a narrative frame that unites timeless mythic patterns with contemporary individual experiences" (*Fantasy* 1). Fantasy fiction has the potential for creative subversion, and I will try to locate and discuss these elements of subversion if they are located in these texts.

Elements of Realism in High Fantasy

In the online article "Realism in American Literature, 1860-1890," Donna M. Campbell makes the following claim: "Broadly defined as 'the faithful representation of reality' or 'verisimilitude,' realism is a literary technique practiced by many schools of writing" (par. 1). In what way can high fantasy provide a "faithful representation of reality," when the fictional world is completely separated from the primary world? Initially at least, one can exclude any direct geographical representation, although climate, topography and terrain in various manifestations will be representations of what we can recognize from the primary world. The "faithful representation of reality," as Campbell defines it, is more related to what M.H. Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* describes as a way "to designate a recurrent mode, in various eras and literary forms, of representing human life and experience in literature" (260). Although the selected excerpt from Abrams describes realism as a mode in a somewhat general sense, it serves to give an outline of what it may entail when seen in the context of high fantasy. In the case of the texts of Erikson and Martin, borrowing from the modal aspects of realism may be found in the social, political and psychological elements, first and

foremost presented through the experiences of various focalized characters. In the cases of both these writers, there are "gray areas" in which realism (in the sense of "representing human life and experience") and elements of the fantastic are interconnected; and in some cases these aspects of modal features enhance each other. For, as Kathryn Hume points out in *Fantasy and Mimesis* (1984), fantasy is essentially *"departure from consensus reality"* (21), and is not realism. But fantasy may borrow elements of realism to enhance believability in the secondary world. C. W. Sullivan III illustrates this point in *Folklore and Fantastic Literature* (2001): "All literature is, then, part mimetic and part fantastic, with realistic fiction toward one end of the spectrum and fantastic fiction toward the other" (280).

George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*

George R. R. Martin's cycle *A Song of Ice and Fire* takes place primarily on the continent called Westeros, or Seven Kingdoms, but also on a massive, unnamed continent "across the narrow sea," a continent mostly referred to as the Free Cities. Geographically, Westeros is a continent of the size of South America, with a variety of climate regions; the far south is dominated by deserts, while the far north is forever covered in snow. The continent of the Free Cities resembles Asia in size, but as most of the story takes place in Westeros, this continent remains mostly unmapped. A distinctive feature of this world is that seasons last for several years, so when the Starks say "Winter is coming," it bears some ominous significance. That the seasonal cycles differ radically from our own world is a fantastic feature that contributes to separate this world from a historical past, but it is also a device the writer employs to enhance the severity of shifting seasons. One can easily imagine the labor needed in preparation for a winter that lasts decades rather than just a few months. This device is also one of

many that are reflected in the cycle's title, *A Song of Ice and Fire.* As the major plot line is gradually revealed through the course of the story, it becomes clear that the major struggle is between elemental forces, namely those of ice and those of fire. Winter serves throughout the narrative as a symbol for darkness, regression and depravation, and along with the approaching winter come the malevolent ice creatures known as "the Others," thought only to exist in myth and children's stories. In opposition to the actual and symbolically approaching winter, the title's reference to "fire" is represented primarily by the exiled princess Daenerys Targaryen and her dragons. Her exile from Westeros also has a symbolical significance: as winter approaches her homelands, summer is also symbolically "exiled." As an increasing number of people in Westeros come to resent the ongoing wars and power struggles of the ruling houses and yearn for the return of the Targaryen dynasty, the exiled princess gains power, both in terms of wisdom and followers.

There is a dual layer to Martin's fictional world in terms of narrative style. On the one hand, much of the focus is on a realistic portrayal of events that resembles actual medieval history, particularly in terms of social and political structures. In this sense, it resembles aspects of modal realism rather than the myth or fairy tale. However, on the other hand, the complication of events gradually moves into the realm of the fairy tale, exemplified in the Others and their "undead" servants, as well as Dany's growing dragons and her subsequent increase of power. This break from realism is also evident when magic gradually resurfaces, which is eventually revealed as a result of the rebirth of dragons, who have long been thought to be extinct.

The Social Structures of *A Song of Ice and Fire*

As Martin's world is heavily inspired by actual medieval history, particularly of a Western European kind, the social and political structures very much resemble those of feudal England and France. A source of Martin's inspiration is the period of civil war in England that is usually referred to as the War of the Roses. This power struggle was the outcome of a political and military conflict between the English noble houses of Lancaster and York, where both factions essentially took turns in reigning. This historical element is clearly evident as the source of inspiration for the noble houses Lannister and Stark, both of which play key roles in the conflicts of Westeros. Structurally, the world operates in ways very much similarly to what we find in Western European medieval history. Fantastic elements are not evident in this context; rather the cycle features a more or less direct adaptation of the hierarchical structures of the middle ages. Westeros, or "Seven Kingdoms," is ruled by a king, who governs his realm through the heads of a number of wealthy and powerful noble houses, two of which are the aforementioned Houses Lannister and Stark. The lords of these houses in turn rule a number of lesser lords and knights, and the social ladder is structured hierarchically all the way down to the peasants and beggars at the bottom rung of society. In addition to the feudal hierarchical structure, the inspiration from medieval history is also reflected in the role of women and the patriarchal system.

Women, as in the middle ages, are seen as inferior to men. They are not allowed to inherit (with a few exceptions) and are generally viewed as status symbols and a means to secure the family line. They are generally not allowed to choose their own husbands; they are rather considered as useful tools of diplomacy and as means of securing favorable alliances. The family patriarch has the prerogative of choosing a woman's husband, and accordingly, the women are often used to further a noble

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house's cause or to increase wealth and power through their potential husbands. Although the social status of women in Martin's cycles is very much like that of medieval Europe, quite inferior to that of men, this applies only to the description of social structures, not to how they are depicted or used for narrative purposes.

Several of Martin's main characters are women, and they are portrayed as realistic characters to whom the social challenges they are faced with are major concerns in one way or another. For instance, Catelyn Stark undertakes a journey to find out who attempted the murder of her son; uncomely Brienne of Tarth, in search of honor, defies the scorn and mockery she encounters as a would-be female knight; and ten-year-old Arya's boyish nature becomes a valuable ally when she is cut off from her family and lives the life of an outlaw. In each of these instances, the women must compensate for their being the "gentler sex," as they are repeatedly referred to, in order to progress in their endeavors: Catelyn makes use of her status as nobility, Brienne's great strength and skill at arms sees her through, and Arya's fierce resourcefulness ensures her survival on several occasions. Through these, and several other female characters, many of the social challenges that women face are illustrated. Some, like Catelyn, try hard to live up to the expectations of their families and to "do their duty," while others, like Cersei Lannister, resent the fact that they are seen as inferior, and overcompensate by continuously trying to outwit and thereby dominate others. For Cersei, every man, including her father, is a threat to her power, and every women is a rival. This eventually leads to increasing paranoia and fear of competition, and as she puts it: "when you play the game of thrones, you win or you die. There is no middle ground" (*A Game* 488).

Since many of the social structures and codes of conduct are imported from the medieval period, it follows that it is not just women who are hampered by social

disadvantages. Illegitimate children are essentially without legal rights, they are not allowed to inherit, nor do they have any possibility of removing their labels as "bastards." Because of his birth as a bastard, Jon Snow, the illegitimate child of Lord Eddard Stark, eventually joins the Night's Watch, a brotherhood order dedicated to the protection of the Wall, erected for the purpose of keeping out the savages of the far north. Initially an order with a noble purpose, it is now reduced in strength and numbers, and the Night's Watch essentially functions as exile, to which robbers, rapers and thieves are sent to a lifetime of servitude. Disgraced noblemen or younger children of houses with too many heirs may join the order on occasion, and like anywhere else, their noble birth ensures their advantages. Like the following passage indicates, the Night's Watch is essentially a last resort for people who have reached the end of their possibilities. Here, Jon Snow addresses his uncle, who holds a high-ranking position in the Night's Watch:

> "I want to serve in the Night's Watch, Uncle."
>
> He had thought on it long and hard, lying abed at night while his brothers slept around him. Robb would someday inherit Winterfell, would command great armies as the Warden of the North. Bran and Rickon would be Robb's bannermen and rule holdfasts in his name. His sisters Arya and Sansa would marry heirs of other great houses and go south as mistress of castles of their own. But what place could a bastard hope to earn?
>
> "You don't know what you're asking, Jon. The Night's Watch is a sworn brotherhood. We have no families. None of us will ever father sons. Our wife is duty. Our mistress is honor."

"A bastard can have honor too," Jon said. "I am ready to swear your oath." (*A Game* 54).

Jon comes to prove the latter statement when he is elected by his companions to become the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, at the age of sixteen. He again preserves his moral integrity by refusing the offer of King Stannis to forsake his oath as a brother of the Night's Watch and take up the seat in Winterfell as Lord Jon Stark when all his brothers are believed dead.

Jon's journey, both physical and moral, exemplifies an important social theme in the cycle: there is hope for social advancement despite what seems as an initially predetermined life with few alternative outcomes. Much like Jon Snow, the dwarf Tyrion Lannister, despite his high birth, is treated as a bastard because of his physical deformity. But where Jon Snow uses his sense of honor as a means of social advancement, Tyrion uses his extraordinary capacity for wit and self-irony to his advantage:

"Let me give you some counsel, bastard," Lannister said. "Never forget what you are, for surely the world will not. Make it your strength. Then it can never be your weakness. Armor yourself in it, and it can never be used to hurt you."

Jon was in no mood for anyone's counsel. "What do you know about being a bastard?"

"All dwarfs are bastards in their father's eyes."

"You are your mother's trueborn son of Lannister".

"Am I?" the dwarf replied, sardonic. "Do tell my lord father. My mother died birthing me, and he's never been sure." […]

"Remember this, boy. All dwarfs may be bastards, yet not all bastards need be dwarfs." (*A Game* 57)

What Tyrion Lannister and Jon Snow have in common is their struggle for social acceptance. Although Jon initially takes a very defensive position among his brothers of the Night's Watch, alienating several of them in the process, he eventually comes to heed Tyrion's advice and "loosens up"; he does not allow jealousness and mockery to wound him. In the Watch he gains friendship and respect, and finds he has much in common with the outcasts, many of whom were forced into the brotherhood. Tyrion undergoes a similar journey as Jon as he follows his own advice and armors himself in his weakness, so that it "can never be used to hurt" (57). This gains him a temporary increase in social status, and on one occasion he even acts as regent in the name of his lord father. But whereas Jon eventually finds acceptance despite his birth as an illegitimate child, Tyrion eventually succumbs to his gradually surfacing anger, his resentment towards what has been life-long mockery, and being considered a lesser being. He ends up murdering his own father and fleeing into exile.

Religious Diversity and Forces of Magic

A common feature of the fairy-tale and of fantasy structured as fairy-tales is the presence of supernatural powers or the direct or indirect involvement of deities or god-like entities. In *The Lord of the Rings,* Gandalf, with mandate from the gods, manipulates divine forces to protect and inspire. In Tolkien's *Silmarillion,* where the mythology of Middle-Earth is presented, the gods are active players and major

characters. But *Silmarillion* bears more resemblance to myth than *The Lord of the Rings,* in which the divine sphere plays a subtler role and religious elements are rather heavily featured thematically. But Tolkien's works also bear resemblance to the fairy-tale in the way religion is treated; the existence of gods is never questioned, they are rather accepted as living beings present on the mortal plane. In LeGuin's *Earthsea* cycle, religion takes the form of a natural balance; an existence in harmony with nature, resembling spiritualism that may be found in, for instance, pre-Christian Native American cultures.

In *A Song of Ice and Fire,* religion assumes a more passive role, seemingly motivated by cultural and hierarchical reasons. As previously stated, Martin's intention is seemingly to create an alternative medieval Europe as backdrop for his narrative, and as a result, the "church," in this case manifested in the alternative "Faith," assumes a similar role to that of the Christian Church of medieval Europe, a major power of state. The narrative does not provide any confirmation of the actual existence of gods or deities; religion is merely an aspect of culture, an institution in an otherwise secular society. This world order is radically different from that of Erikson's cycle, in which gods and divine beings are major characters. In this way, Martin's representation of religion's place in the structures of society resembles the major organized religions of the primary world, and its relation to secular society is always an issue for characters to deal with. For instance, members of the nobility, in theory representing "model citizens," serving as examples to the common people, have certain expectations tied to them when it comes to religious practices, as their actions and customs are observed and closely monitored by the public. Being in essence medieval celebrities, they must observe and obey the religious customs in order to gain popular favor in order to stay on the citizens' good side. Although the nobility have a far superior position, the general

population must still be appeased, at least superficially, so as to keep order, and be manipulated if need be. Cersei Lannister, for instance, having repeatedly neglected her religious duties, faces an inquisition by a fervent and zealous movement within the Faith when enough rumors of her numerous adulteries reach the masses. She is summarily arrested and imprisoned "to be tried before a holy court of seven, for murder, treason and fornication" (*A Feast for Crows* 655).

The structure and function of religion in *Ice and Fire* are very much similar to the hierarchy of Christianity and the organization of the church in medieval Europe, and Catholic England in particular. In nearly every settlement in Westeros there can be found a "sept," the equivalent of a church, to which people go to worship the "Seven Faces of God." The Faith is led by a "High Septon," the religion's equivalent to the archbishop, who is based in the capital's Great Sept similar to a cathedral. The Faith's functions are also in many ways similar to that of medieval Christianity: the monarch can not rule without the blessing of the High Septon, and many delicate matters of state in which the Faith's blessing is needed, are resolved with negotiation and diplomacy, political leverage or downright bribery.

Although the Faith is the ruling religious body of Westeros, it does exert a policy of tolerance towards several other religious movements on the continent. The most prominent of these other religions is the faith of the "old gods," practiced by the northerners, and the religion of "the Drowned God," practiced by the seafaring reavers of the Iron Islands. The people of the North worship the nameless gods of old, and this faith is structurally far looser than the organized Faith. The northerners have no organized sermons and no fixed prayers or rituals. The only physical presence of the old gods is a "heart tree," usually found in a wood and in the vicinity of a castle or settlement: a somber face that is carved into a white tree, to which personal prayers are

directed. The religion of the Old Gods is a private matter, and as such, proper etiquette and practice is not enforced to any significant extent. The religion of the Old Gods has much more in common with tribal mysticism, similar to, for instance, pre-Christian Celtic beliefs. Here an element of the fantastic is introduced when Bran, in his dreams, begins to make contact with these spiritual forces, represented by the three-eyed crow who guides him on a journey beyond the Wall. This is one of the few cases in Martin's narrative where spiritual forces of an organized religion take an active role. Neither the Faith nor the religion of the Drowned God gives us any indication that their deities play active roles, or if they even exist. They remain objects of beliefs.

The people of the Iron Islands, being isolated both geographically and culturally from the rest of Westeros, are identified primarily through their religion. The way of the "Drowned God" is a harsher and more totalitarian faith, in which strict customs are observed and enforced. With the outbreak of the War of Five Kings, this religion undergoes a renaissance in which the Iron Islanders are united. This faith practices a principle of a dispassionate conduct and glory in battle, apparently somewhat inspired by Norse religion. Every Islander must undergo a ritual of drowning, which many do not survive, where they are "drowned" and then revived, to be reborn in the name of the Drowned God:

"Rise," he told the sputtering boy as he slapped him on his naked back. "You have drowned and been returned to us. What is dead can never die."

"But rises." The boy coughed violently, bringing up more water. "Rises again." Every word was bought with pain, but that was the way of the world; a man must fight to live. "Rises again." Emmond staggered to his feet. "Harder. And stronger."

"You belong to the god now," Aeron told him. (*A Feast* 18)

This ritual of cleansing and rebirth is a common aspect of several religions; it is for instance similar to the baptism rituals of Christianity.

Both the religion of the Drowned God and the major, organized Faith are merely aspects of culture and social organization in Martin's narrative. They both function as features of verisimilitude in the way that they are not related to fantastic elements in any sense, they are rather presented as institutions through which human society enforces and upholds a certain set of cultural rules and norms. They represent aspects of realism in the way they are handled and culturally integrated, and subsequently their validity is never proved or disproved. The break from realism and the introduction of the fantastic is encountered in the religion of the Old Gods, which grants visions and mystical prophecies through dreams, but then only through a couple of selected characters. These forces are evoked in response to the invasion of the Others, and it is therefore clear that supernatural forces must be resisted with the aid of opposing supernatural powers.

There are two diverging tendencies in Martin's fictional world. On the one hand, one tendency strives towards creating verisimilitude, the "faithful representation of reality," in the mode of realist fiction, in the way that he re-imagines medieval society, exemplified in the feudal structures and the organized religion which is in almost every aspect similar to major religions of our world. The other tendency incorporates elements of the fantastic, which are located in forces of nature, or pre-medieval elements which exist completely independent of and removed from human society. The overarching plotline draws these elements together, and the fantastic comes to dominate in the scenes where these aspects interact.

In the very centre of Martin's subcreation, then, is a medieval society, which, although completely fictional, very much bears a resemblance to our own historical knowledge of how medieval Europe was structured. Central to this society are the feudal hierarchy and the influence of organized religions, where the Faith, a re-imagining of the medieval Catholic Church, is the most influential. It is within this sphere of his subcreation that Martin draws heavily on history and adapts strategies to create verisimilitude. The experiences of characters that have to do with this sphere – political intrigue, medieval warfare and religious practices – feature elements of realism in the sense that they represent the full range of human reactions and reasoning. The writer has abandoned Tolkien's idea of the mythic hero central to the fairy-tale and fantasy structured as fairy-tale. But parallel to this central sphere of Martin's subcreation are the realms of the supernatural, the realms of the fantastic. In the fantastic sphere, there are fewer nuances; there is rather a polarization of forces that are elemental and diametrically opposed: ice and fire, the Others and the dragons. When the fantastic shines through, purposes and affiliations become much clearer, things are more ordered and elements of myth and fairy-tale are revealed. Bran's dreams and visions of the three-eyed crow lead him on a quest to gain magic powers, to "open his third eye." This exemplifies a range of subplots that function as quest-narratives within an overarching plot. Other such fantastic subplots are Dany's strengthening relationship with her dragons and her quest to take back the land that was usurped from her family, and Jon Snow's growing spiritual link with his wolf. In many ways, these two spheres of Martin's subcreation enhance each other: within a framework of realistic elements, elements of the fantastic are contrasted and brought more sharply to the front, and the effect is more powerful.

Steven Erikson's *The Malazan Book of the Fallen*

The world of Steven Erikson is a darker, vaster and more chaotic world than the one Martin presents in his works. Where Martin focuses on a certain period of the history of the world of his creation, Erikson's narrative is neither structured chronologically, nor limited to the time span of a few years, and it frequently jumps back and forth between different scenes and events. If we consider the way his narrative works, his background as an archaeologist is very much evident in the way he builds up both the story and the events within his world. Isolated events may not make much sense, until it is finally revealed in a later passage that it is closely connected to what happened thousands of years ago. Where Martin's characters are exclusively human except for the Others, this is not the case for Erikson, who operates with countless different fantastic races and beings, many of whom may live for thousands of years or who may even be immortal. Some of his characters are even gods or demigods, and accordingly their motivations and memories span over millennia, which means that the passage of time is of little importance.

The events of Erikson's cycle takes place on several continents of an unnamed world, but also within the realms of magic, in places that exist as parallel dimensions to the "physical" world. The world is mostly ruled by the Malazan Empire, governed by the Empress Laseen, who is currently engaged in war on several fronts in an effort to quell resistance. The main characters are people from several of the warring factions, intended to provide the reader with a range of different perspectives on the unfolding events. Erikson's world is often a violent and hostile place, and the elements of tragedy surface throughout the narrative. War and conflict are central to the plot and represent a constant threat. If we compare Erikson's narrative with *The Lord of the Rings,* we find that here war and conflict are factors that are more or less a necessary evil, as there are

malevolent forces who threaten the continuation of peaceful society. Conflict, for Tolkien, results in the eucatastrophe, the sudden turn for the better, through which the forces of good prevail, evil is defeated and order is restored. In this fashion, war is as much a moral conflict as it is a war for the continuation of ordered and peaceful existence. There is never any question as to which side of the conflict the preferred morality resides: the mythic heroes of Tolkien's fiction exclusively represent the forces of good. When it comes to Erikson's cycle, a point is made never to be clear as to which side of the conflict has the moral high ground, and in several instances a clear cause of conflict is never revealed. For Erikson, with a background as an anthropologist, war and conflict are given consequences of human nature, and can therefore in many cases not be completely understood or properly justified.

Much of the story is located around a selected group of individuals in the Empire's armies, known only as the Bridgeburners. An elite military unit, they constitute a group of people united by their shared experiences rather than their loyalty to their ruling faction. Here sergeant Whiskeyjack looks upon his soldiers after a long journey:

Grimacing, Whiskeyjack twisted further to survey his soldiers. The array of faces could have been carved from stone. A company, culled from the army's cast-offs, now a bright, hard core. "Gods," he whispered under his breath, "what have we made here?" (*Memories of Ice* 362)

As many of them frequently admit, soldiering is all they know, and a return to an ordinary life would be impossible due to their experiences; they are past the point where they could function in civilized society, and they know it. They no longer fight

for a just cause or what they believe in, they fight because they know no other way of life. This is an example of how Erikson breaks with traditional character types found in fairy-tale and myth.

In many cases conflicts are caused by the simple lust for power, such as the expansion of the Malazan Empire. Characters get caught in the middle of these conflicts, either because they are simply ordered to, such as the Bridgeburners, or because they are citizens of whatever settlement the Empress has ordered conquered. In many other instances, conflict is dictated by cultural factors, such as the continent-wide uprising on the continent of Seven Cities against the Malazan rule. Although the different peoples brought under Malazan rule have been given freedom of religion and culture as well as medical, architectural and infrastructural advantages, the populations of these conquered nations refuse to be governed by "outsiders," which results in another bloody conflict.

These seemingly pointless conflicts serve a purpose in relation to the evolving of the plot, and they flesh out the history of the world. Furthermore, they serve as a framework within which characters reflect on the more cruel sides of human nature. But as the narrative progresses, conflicts gradually evolve into one great cosmic struggle for survival, as the Crippled God gains power and subsequently launches a war against the world, including the other gods. When this happens, there is a sense of unification, when under the threat of extinction former enemies unite to counter evil. What separates this from other instances where good and evil enter into battle, such as in Tolkien's mythology, is that the "good" side, that is, those opposing the Crippled God, are not "good" in the sense of representing harmony or order; they are simply "less evil." In this example, a soldier of the Imperial army and Imperial Historian Duiker contemplate the meaning behind the violent conflict they have become entangled in:

"Do you find the need to answer all this, Historian?" he asked. "All those tomes you've read, those other thoughts from other men, other women. Other times. How does a mortal make answer to what his or her kind are capable of? Does each of us, soldier or no, reach a point when all that we've seen, survived, changes us inside? Irrevocably changes us. What do we become then? Less human, or *more* human? Human enough, or too human?"

Duiker was silent for a long minute […]. "Each of us has his own threshold, friend. Soldier or no, we can only take so much before we cross over … into something else. As if the world has shifted around us, though it's only our way of looking at it. A change of perspective, but there's no intelligence to it – you see but you do not feel, or you weep yet look upon your own anguish as if from somewhere else, somewhere outside. It's not a place for answers, Lull, for every question has burned away." (*Deadhouse Gates* 760)

In many ways, Erikson's narrative has several aspects in common with the subgenre of high fantasy Richard Mathews calls "sword and sorcery," most commonly associated with Robert E. Howard's *Conan the Barabarian.* The most prominent (and indeed defining) difference between this subgenre and Erikson's work can be found in the consequences certain violent events have for the characters involved. Howard, Mathews says, "reversed the path to the throne by choosing a brute as hero, thereby creating a model of barbaric superman for heroic fantasy, a path to power through muscle and might, with little affirmation of civilization or philosophy along the way" (Mathews 118). Although Erikson describes several violent and catastrophic events throughout his cycle, the consequences for, and questions raised by, the characters

involved are just as important, if not more so. A great deal of time and space is spent to reflect upon these events, and for some characters the experiences represent a psychological breaking-point, which, in the end, "Irrevocably changes" them, to borrow the Imperial soldier's words. Much more so than in Martin's narrative, Erikson's texts is concerned with reflections about consequences and trauma, and accordingly, his tale is more dependent on action-driven progression to maintain the momentum throughout.

Since the location in which the narrative takes place varies to such a great extent, it is difficult and somewhat redundant, to describe the many different aspects of the various cultures and societies that exists on the various continents Erikson focuses his story. Superficially, one could say that his world resembles the primary world in the extensive number of various cultures and histories, traditions and peoples which are involved, and the scale of the narrative is intended to reflect the multitudinous cultural nuances of our world. Erikson's archaeological background is evident throughout the narrative, in the manner in which bits and pieces of an extensive history are revealed as the story progresses, both in the form of retrospective scenes and in discoveries. The fact that many of the characters have lived through millennia adds yet another dimension. As we become familiar with the different kind of characters, ancient history and events are recounted and retold by characters with far-reaching memories and first-hand experiences of these events. There are a couple of points that deserve special attention when it comes to Erikson's narrative. The first is the overarching organization of human society in Erikson's world, and the second is the role of religion and magic, which are closely interconnected.

Social Structures in *The Malazan Book of the Fallen*

As I have already mentioned, most of the continents of Erikson's unnamed world are ruled by the Malazan Empire, a ruling body which in many ways resembles the Roman Empire both in its military organization and it custom of governance. Although the presence of a senate or a democratic ruling entity is absent, (the Empress is the supreme ruler,) the Malazan Empire practices local governance and almost complete autonomy in its conquered provinces. After a conquest, most of the power is handed back to the previous local rulers, but is combined with the presence of representatives of the Empire. When "less civilized" provinces or city-states are conquered, the Empire allows for complete freedom of religion and the continuation of local traditions, but attempts to introduce an improved infrastructure, and secures the employment of a greater number of citizens by recruiting locals into both the local militia and the greater Imperial army.

Another recurrent feature among the various cultures and races Erikson presents in the narrative is the contemporary western approach to the social status of women. For a society that has stagnated in a quasi-medieval period of time when it comes to technology and structures of government, women enjoy a rather modern standing. Throughout the cycle they have an equal standing to that of men, and there are virtually no instances where any differences are focused on. Erikson describes a world in which women are completely and thoroughly integrated into all aspects of society, from soldiering to political positions (for instance the Malazan Empress), and this extends even unto the deities of the pantheon.

Also uncommon for a medieval setting are homosexual relationships, which are featured in several cases. No ethical or moral judgements are passed, neither implicitly by the writer nor explicitly by focalized characters. These aspects contribute to setting Erikson's cycle apart from what has been a tradition in fantasy literature. Brian Attebery

argues: "A strength and a weakness of fantasy is its reliance on traditional storytelling and motifs. […] But a willingness to return to the narrative structures of the past can entail as well an unquestioning acceptance of its social structures" (*Strategies* 87). Although Erikson's narrative structure and style do not really represent a "return to the past," his portrayal of a quasi-medieval society could easily have featured a world like Martin's, in which so many aspects of medieval society are represented.

Magic as Science

Erikson's fictional world operates with a number of parallel dimensions or "planes of existence." The focus is on the unnamed world ruled mostly by the Malazan Empire, but along with this world there are a greater number of co-existent worlds accessible only to practitioners of magic. These parallel dimensions are referred to as "warrens." One can easily claim that the name refers to their unmapped and unexplored nature, their shifting and unfixed locations, and the countless entrances and exits. Some of these Warrens exist solely as independent realms for non-human races and represent a source of their power, while others are abandoned or unvisited by civilized races. The Warrens are closely connected to both the religious and the magical aspect of Erikson's world. Some of these Warrens are ruled by immortal gods and can only be accessed by worshippers of the respective deity, but are also the source of the divine power of these gods. Some gods are vulnerable outside the confines of their own realm, particularly if they stray into the realms of other gods. The fact that gods and demigods are major characters of the narrative is a trait it shares with myths and fairy-tales. Completely opposite to Martin's cycle, the existence of deities is represented as a fact rather than a belief. Religious groups have an actual divine being with whom to interact, and priests have direct interaction with their respective deities.

In a world which has been in its current technological state for several millennia, and where technological advancement seems to be in a more or less stagnated state, magic is the source of great power and serves as the narrative's equivalent to science and technology. For the human race of this world, access to magic is somewhat restricted, and only extremely gifted or learned individuals have access to the properties of the magic of Warrens. Non-human races, such as the ancient Jaghut, have a quite different relationship to magic; they have far greater powers and unlimited access to it, but their magic is more primeval, it is elemental in its nature and far more difficult to control, and as such their relationship to it is more conservative and symbiotic, more dependent on a mutual balance. For humans, who make up the majority of the characters of the story, magic has taken the place of technology. Magic is an unlimited source of healing, personal protection, intercontinental travel and warfare. People unpracticed and unlearned in the arts of magic can simply procure the services of a person that is, provided they have money.

One can easily argue that Erikson's fictional world is a reversed version of Martin's. As already mentioned, Martin operates with a relatively historically realistic world where elements of the fantastic are introduced to evoke wonder. Erikson operates with a fantastical world where sorcery is commonplace, animals speak and gods walk the earth. His entire narrative is based around this framework of an "impossible" place. Verisimilitude, the "faithful representation of reality," is first and foremost introduced through the experiences and reflections of focalized characters and the way that human nature is explored through complex and believable characters.

The Potential for Subversion and Reflection

The social, political and economic systems of the fictional worlds of Erikson and Martin represent a more or less direct opposite to high fantasies by prominent writers such as Tolkien and LeGuin. If we consider their place in the tradition of the genre, these aspects are generally not only unimportant, but Attebery also asserts their improbability. This is explained simply by their creators' "lack of interest in such matters." The focus of a fairy-tale structured story is elsewhere; it has to do with larger themes like, for instance, the struggle between good and evil, or the restoration of past glories in a nostalgically oriented narrative. In *Strategies of Fantasy,* Brian Attebery refers to Rosemary Jackson and her work *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981) when he discusses fantasy in relation to contemporary society: "Jackson proposes, first, that fantasy is fundamentally a literature of desire and, second, that its ventures into the nonexistent are really ways of challenging the existing political, social, and economic order. According to Jackson, desire is not a simple psychological drive, but the tension produced by the social inhibition of such drives […]. A literature of desire is of necessity a literature […] of subversion" (*Strategies* 20-21).

On one level, what Attebery calls formula fantasy satisfies the demand for this desire, a desire for what may be called escapism. By presenting to readers what may seem completely unfamiliar, this desire is, if properly executed, satisfied by the narrative. On its own terms, formula fantasy may provide a desirable and fulfilling story, but fantasy-as-formula and fantasy-as-mode, as discussed by Attebery, are two completely different things. Fantasy-as-formula, or formulaic fantasy, relies on quickly recognizable features, such as stock characters and plotlines, and is more often than not a simple quest narrative. It is inherent in the term "formula" that it makes use of familiar territory; it does not attempt to move beyond the boundaries of this formula.

Fantasy as mode, representing a way of telling rather than simply employing "stock characters and devices," allows for a "means of investigating the way we use fictions to construct reality itself" (Attebery, *Strategies* 1). This is what Rosemary Jackson is speaking of when talking about subversion. But can subversive elements be found in the works of Erikson and Martin? Can we locate features that challenge "the existing political, social, and economic order" (21)? It is clear that fantasy fiction has the potential for subversion. By the act of subcreation, the creation of an "other world," the fantasy writer is indeed at liberty to provide such constructs that may reflect and explore aspects of the primary world. When it comes to Martin's cycle, the way he has faithfully reproduced a medieval society that in so many ways resemble European history makes subversion somewhat problematic. This is because his focus is more on the re-imagining of history in a realistic way, and introduces borrowed elements of realism, romance and gothic fiction in order to create a story set in an immersive fantasy world; there is little in these novels that attempts to explore contemporary issues of the primary world. His characters are distanced from the customs and ideas of the cultures of contemporary Europe, and readers are rather led to imagine that the characters act and reason the way people of medieval society would.

In Erikson's fiction, where the fantastic is central to his subcreation, elements of subversion are easier to locate. I would argue that the clearest cases of subversive elements can be found in the constant conflicts and large-scale wars that frequent his cycle. I also discussed the fact that magic has replaced the functions of science and technology. The many destructive conflicts that are described during the course of the narrative can be considered as ways of exploring the wars of our own world, such as the war in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and the many conflicts on the African continent, where the general population suffers to such a large extent. Erikson is both an educated

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archaeologist and anthropologist, and it is likely that his background in these fields in some way has influenced his writing (Erikson, "Steven Erikson: No Lies, No Holding Back"). The reflections of characters such as Imperial Historian Duiker contribute to exploring the nature and consequences of war and genocide, where the power of magic has replaced the functions of modern weapons of mass destruction. It is indeed tragedy that is central to Erikson's fiction, and the cycle's title *The Malazan Book of the Fallen* reflects this. By not making it a narrative of heroes (although cases of heroism occur), it becomes a tragic narrative that has the potential of challenging our attitude to destructive conflict.

Conclusion

> One of the virtues of the diversity of modern fantasy is that it forbids writers to take the nature of the goals of heroism too much for granted. (Stableford lxii)

The high fantasies of the two writers I have chosen to focus on in this thesis represent two different ambitions with regard to the characterizing features of their subcreations. Martin's is a naturalistic world inspired by medieval history in which fantastic elements are gradually and increasingly introduced. Erikson's world is a more utterly fantastic world, an "otherworld" in its utmost manifestation, even though it contains what might be called realistic elements and reflections. I have chosen to employ the term "high fantasy" when discussing these works, in spite of the fact that theorists have proposed new subgenres and "subsubgenres" of fantasy. For instance, Mathews mentions "sword and sorcery" as one such "subsubgenre," and refers to Robert E. Howard as the foundation for fantasy fiction that has inverted the structures of fairy-tale and "eucatastrophic" fantasies as proposed by Tolkien. The problem of classification is further illustrated through Attebery's reflections on *swords-and-sorcery,* which he proposes is synonymous with the fantasy formula (9). Thus Mathews' discussion of this kind of fantasy would fall outside Attebery's concept of fantasy as genre.

Brian Attebery's arguments regarding formula, mode and genre have been valuable when trying to establish fantasy fiction as a genre. But by employing the terms formula and mode in order to limit the area of study, the discussion runs the risk of becoming a question of aesthetics and literary qualities, aimed at establishing whether or not the text in question is formulaic or not. One suggestion would be to abandon the

concept of formula altogether, although one could probably argue otherwise, since the need to classify imitations and clichés will probably always exist. Considering the large and comprehensive stories and narrative worlds that Martin and Erikson present, it is difficult to argue the case that they represent imitations of other works, or that they employ a range of "stock characters and devices" (Attebery, *Strategies* 1). Furthermore, Attebery's notion of formula is based on the success of J. R. R. Tolkien and his concept of "eucatastrophe," a positive resolution, something these writers do not employ, mainly due to the fact that the characters involved are not heroes or protagonists in Tolkien's sense, and Tolkien's notion of a "sudden joyous turn" ("On Fairy Stories" 22) is based on the reader's moral allegiance to the protagonists. It is at this point important to point out that these reflections on the "eucatastrophic" nature of the cycles are based the separate volumes independently, not on the cycles as a whole, since neither is completed as of yet.

When it comes to the notion of subversion, and the question of whether fantasy fiction may offer a critique of or perspective on the real world, there can be no doubt that the genre offers a significant potential for subversion. We can find elements in the texts under consideration, particularly in Erikson's, that could be said to have a subversive potential. But here we run in to the problem of "the intentional fallacy" as discussed by Wimsatt and Beardsley. If one were to speculate, the intention of Martin and Erikson would arguably not be to offer a critique of the real world, but rather to draw inspiration from it, or to offer an escape.

Fantasy literature as a field of study is by all indications a significantly large one. Because fantasy fiction draws on so many different elements of mode and genre, and encompasses so many variants of storytelling, genre theory and the infinite possibilities of the genre itself will be the subject for constant discussion and revising.

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The texts of Martin and Erikson exemplify this tendency: at the same time as they stick to some generic conventions – for instance in being stories concerned with one version or another of the past – they also transcend the boundaries of other conventions, for instance of characterization. Thus the need for addressing new developments in fantasy fiction arises. Hopefully, this thesis has succeeded in contributing to this ongoing discussion. Although my analysis merely touches the surface of the field, I hope I have been able to produce an insight into contemporary fantasy that will encourage further study.

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