

Colin Manlove

---

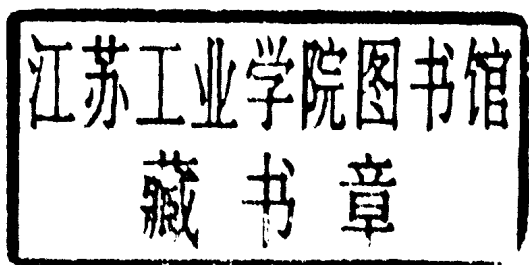
**THE FANTASY  
LITERATURE  
OF ENGLAND**

# The Fantasy Literature of England

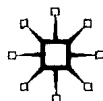
---

Colin Manlove

*former Reader in English Literature  
University of Edinburgh*



palgrave



© Colin Manlove 1999

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1P 0LP.

Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

The author has asserted his right to be identified as the author of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Published by

PALGRAVE

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10010

Companies and representatives throughout the world

PALGRAVE is the new global academic imprint of  
St. Martin's Press LLC Scholarly and Reference Division and  
Palgrave Publishers Ltd (formerly Macmillan Press Ltd).

*Outside North America*

ISBN 0-333-73019-4

*Inside North America*

ISBN 0-312-21987-3

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

A catalogue record for this book is available  
from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Manlove, C. N. (Colin Nicholas), 1942-

The fantasy literature of England / Colin Manlove.

p. cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-312-21987-3

1. Fantastic literature, English—History and criticism.

2. National characteristics, English, in literature. I. Title.

PR149.F35M36 1999

820.9'15—dc21

98-46271

CIP

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3  
08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham, Wiltshire

# THE FANTASY LITERATURE OF ENGLAND

*Also by Colin Manlove*

AN ANTHOLOGY OF SCOTTISH FANTASY LITERATURE (*editor*)

CHRISTIAN FANTASY: From 1200 to the Present

THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA: The Patterning of a Fantastic  
World

\*CRITICAL THINKING: A Guide to Interpreting Literary Texts

\*C. S. LEWIS: His Literary Achievement

THE GAP IN SHAKESPEARE: The Motif of Division from *Richard II*  
to *The Tempest*

THE IMPULSE OF FANTASY LITERATURE

\*LITERATURE AND REALITY 1600–1800

MODERN FANTASY: Five Studies

SCIENCE FICTION: Ten Explorations

SCOTTISH FANTASY LITERATURE: A Critical Survey

*\* from the same publishers*

# Acknowledgements

---

This book could not have existed without the bibliographers of fantasy – Brian Stableford, Neil Barron, Everett Bleiler and most recently John Clute – who have so thoroughly mapped the genre, and whose inclusiveness I have tried to match. I also owe a debt to Glen Cavaliero's *The Supernatural and English Fiction* (1995): I hope he will forgive the annexation to fantasy of several of the texts he considers supernatural fiction.

My debt over the years to Sheila Campbell, for her almost fault-free typing of my tortured handwriting, is immense.

So far as I know this is the first book on the fantasy literature of England: I hope it will not be the last. I am certainly sorry to have it no longer before me.

C. M.

# Contents

---

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
1 Introduction	1
2 The Origins of English Fantasy	10
3 Secondary World Fantasy	37
4 Metaphysical Fantasy	64
5 Emotive Fantasy	90
6 Comic Fantasy	114
7 Subversive Fantasy	142
8 Children's Fantasy	166
9 Conclusion	191
<i>Notes</i>	200
<i>Index</i>	213

# 1

## Introduction

---

In the many books written on fantasy over the past 30 years since its recognition as a literary genre, most have treated it as an international and mainly Anglo-Saxon form: writers mix American and British examples freely, without regard to their origins. There is little yet written on fantasy as the product of individual countries: few have addressed the topic of, say, German or Russian or Cuban fantasy; and none has written on the extraordinary nature of English fantasy. Yet fantasy might be said to be peculiarly expressive of the country in which it grows. For one thing, its source in the imagination and the free play of mind often makes it uniquely sensitive to areas of the national psyche which are elsewhere hidden or ignored. For another, fantasy frequently involves a very strong sense of landscape. Then again, it will often use its native land's mythology, as in the frequent use of Arthurian materials in English fantasy. And in addition it is coloured by the particular society, history and mores of its country. Fantasy is a highly localized form: within the British Isles alone there are at least two very different kinds, for English and Scottish fantasy are almost totally opposite in character.

Of all the fantasy in the world, that of England has first claim to our attention. England has been uniquely, while often contemptuously, hospitable to fantasy – has indeed been the home and origin of much of it. It is the English who gave us the Gothic novel in the eighteenth century, who developed the tradition of the ghost story in the nineteenth and who created much of the secondary world fantasy in the twentieth. It is the English who, from Beckford's *Vathek* to Carroll's *Alice*, and from Anstey to Milne and Pratchett, have transformed the sub-genre of comic fantasy; England too which originated and developed children's fantasy and produced most of its major figures. And all this from a people often seen as practical and hard-headed, materialist, prudish, repressed and insular; and mainly from only the south-eastern corner of England itself, a little sliver of prolific mud anchored on the edge of Europe.



One explanation for fantasy's growth in England is that the English have always valued freedom of expression – even while they have often suppressed it. The land is full of eccentrics with hobbies, follies, idiosyncrasies, obsessions and neuroses; it is also marked for the brilliance of its often shoestring inventors. Fantasy depends for its life on the free working of the imagination, and in England this has often been taken to extreme lengths of peculiarity. Some English fantasy has been the product of rebellion against repression: the Gothic novel, Romantic fantasy, and the children's fairy-tale as it developed in the nineteenth century, are all variously violent expressions of the imagination during a long period when it was condemned. And recent subversive fantasy has in part been a rebellion against all confining imperatives and stereotypes – literary, political, sexual or racial. Fantasy also gives scope to the English love of play – play with the imagination, play with the rules of fairy-tale, play with philosophical ideas concerning such topics as time or a fourth dimension, play by mixing the supernatural comically with real life, by animating toys, having speaking animals or inventing wholly new worlds with their own rules.

There is also that in the English temperament which continually looks to a supernatural reality. No other nation, not even America, has so marked a tradition of Christian fantasy, from the Middle English *Pearl* to the myths of C. S. Lewis. The subject of the supernatural has vexed English philosophy throughout history, and nowhere but in England was Darwin's influence so catastrophic for faith. The Gothic novel is one response to the rationalism of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, the vogue of the ghost story one literary refuge, however terrifying, from nineteenth-century religious doubt.<sup>1</sup> The popularity of metaphysical fantasy, most recently seen in the work of Peter Ackroyd, is peculiarly English: the English have a special hunger for the infinite.

Yet as successful as it has been, fantasy has also often been suppressed or unacknowledged in England. While Christian fantasy might have claims to be the 'highest' form of literature in the pre-1700 period, there was always considerable suspicion of the inventions of the imagination.<sup>2</sup> The moralism of the period 1750–1850 meant that the 'supernatural' was often reduced to the merely functional. And the realism that prevailed in fiction from about 1850 to 1960 removed status from fantasy, even while much was produced. Only postmodernism, which turned reality itself to a fantasy, gave fantasy a more than marginal literary status. And even

now, when fantasy is both more popular and a candidate for the new democracy of literary taste, it is subject to continued cultural exclusion by the English press and the universities.

The beginning of modern English fantasy is uneven. There is first the vogue of the Gothic novel in the late eighteenth century, then the outcrop of Romantic poetic fantasy. The nationalism that was then giving impetus to the collecting of folk tales, stimulated in England the tradition of the invented fairy-tale, mostly for children. Little fantasy for adults appeared in nineteenth-century England, apart from the ghost story: it is really only with William Morris's late romances that the adult form is fully developed. Yet for all this, the fairy-tale and fantasy have held a central place in English hearts, right back to Sir Philip Sidney's delighted view of the poet as making another world by 'freely ranging within the zodiac of his own wit'.<sup>3</sup>

English fantasy is extraordinarily diverse. We might hazard that the Americans specialize in 'high' or secondary world fantasy and in horror, the Europeans in subversive or satiric fantasy, or the Latin Americans in 'magic realism', but the English have excelled in almost every area, and even at the level of 'areas', the writers are often still so sheerly different from one another, as for instance Lear or Carroll in the field of nonsense, or Peake and Tolkien as makers of secondary worlds, as to appear almost unrelated.

To speak coherently of English fantasy we need a definition, a ring fence; but it must be a wide one, a rule of thumb rather than a thumbscrew. The definition of fantasy in this book is 'a fiction involving the supernatural or impossible', which fits with the English preoccupation with the supernatural. 'Supernatural' implies the presence of some form of magic or the numinous, from ghosts and fairies to gods and devils; 'impossible' means what simply could not be, such as Mervyn Peake's world of Gormenghast, or A. A. Milne's animated toys in the *Pooh* books: for the purposes of this book 'impossible' will be subsumed under 'supernatural'. There are of course questions regarding who decides what is supernatural, and how much of it is present, when many disagree on its limits: but often it is the text itself which signals what is supernatural or not within its own world.<sup>4</sup> Obviously the amount and the kind of the supernatural will vary: in the ghost story it will terrify, in moral fairy-story it may be only functional, in metaphysical fantasy it will awe, in subversive fantasy it will often be indeterminate, in comic fantasy it will amuse; sometimes it will ask a measure of real belief,

sometimes only suspension of disbelief. What we will be exploring is the survival of the supernatural in any fictional mode within our increasingly secular and materialist culture.

Once this ring fence is established, the highly idiosyncratic inhabitants may be assembled in as natural groupings as possible within it, which will then provide a means of talking coherently about the various texts. These groupings resolve themselves into six types in English fantasy: secondary world, metaphysical, emotive, comic, subversive and children's fantasy. Some of these types actually formed the bases of the often provincial treatments of fantasy before the mid-1980s: Tolkien and Lewis wrote on secondary world, metaphysical and emotive fantasy, Rosemary Jackson on subversive fantasy, Ann Swinfen on children's fantasy.<sup>5</sup>

First is secondary world fantasy, in which the writer invents an alternative world with its own rules: it could be said to be the kind of fantasy at the greatest remove from our reality. This has pre-1800 antecedents, but really only gains its expansive modern form with William Morris's late work of the 1890s, when fantasy writers reached a level both of confidence and of self-awareness in the use of the genre. Because the secondary worlds created are often desired, and sometimes to be feared, there are links with emotive fantasy; and because such worlds often contain supernatural powers for good or evil, there are also affinities with metaphysical fantasy. Insofar as it involves construction rather than deconstruction, secondary world fantasy is usually at the opposite pole from subversive fantasy. Intermittent at first, it gained considerable impetus from Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-5), to the point where much fantasy is now set in other worlds or in transformed versions of this one. Many of the best-known works of English fantasy are of the secondary world kind.

In the next kind, metaphysical fantasy, we are often asked to take the supernatural presented as in some sense potentially real. The supernatural is subsumed in a larger pattern, Christian, religious, mythic, cosmic or temporal. Metaphysical fantasy, in usually Christian form, is a dominant type before 1800, and continues into the modern period in such writers as Bulwer Lytton, Arthur Machen, G. K. Chesterton and Charles Williams. In more recent form it is more religious or occult than Christian (Iris Murdoch, Peter Ackroyd, Lindsay Clarke). This fantasy often constitutes a fictional effort to preserve the metaphysical view of life in a world where belief in it is fading.

Emotive fantasy is fantasy in which the evocation or portrayal of feeling is central. Since this feeling often has to do with the supernatural or quasi-supernatural, emotive has links with metaphysical fantasy. Emotive fantasy includes fantasies both of desire and wonder, and of fear and horror; pastoral and elegiac fantasy; and animal fantasy. Its authors range from Kenneth Grahame to M. R. James, and from Hugh Lofting to George Orwell. It really only begins with the new emphasis on sensibility and imagination in the eighteenth century. Gothic novels and ghost and horror stories occupy the darker side of emotive fantasy, and take up the period from about 1765–1914, and dark fantasy has returned in force in the 1980s and 1990s. The fantasy of desire and wonder only really becomes marked towards the end of the nineteenth century. Much of this desire is nostalgic, or tinged with elegy: it belongs with a threatened conservative culture, and since the new emphasis on youth in the 1960s it has been less central, though still sustained by the new ecological drive, and the continuing power of the childhood idyll.

The fourth kind, comic fantasy, can involve parody, satire, nonsense or play, and ranges from the grotesque blasphemies of William Beckford's oriental tale *Vathek* (1786) to the domestic mock-heroic of Robert Irwin's *The Limits of Vision* (1986); and from the fairy-tale parodies of Horace Walpole's *Hieroglyphic Tales* (written 1766–72) to the flights of imaginative and verbal fancy in Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels (1984–). Comic fantasy gives extreme freedom (while also demanding very careful structure) to the English penchants for play, for turning things upside-down or throwing opposites together in little worlds of wit (this last aspect linking it to secondary world fantasy). No other nation has produced anything like the variety of English comic fantasy: the Germans have Munchausen, Brentano, or Hoffmann's terrifying *Struwwelpeter*, the French Rabelais or Voltaire, the Italians Collodi's *Pinnocchio* or Calvino, but they do not have the range of fantasy that we see in, say, Thackeray, Dickens, Meredith, Kingsley or Carroll, to speak only of a few years' worth of English writers. Together with metaphysical fantasy, comic fantasy is the oldest of the sub-groups, beginning in literature with Chaucer and doubtless further back in oral tradition.

Continuing some of the methods and aims of comic fantasy, is subversive fantasy, which, whether through dream, nightmare or postmodernist dislocation, seeks to remove our assurances concerning reason, morality, or reality – or, more recently, all fixities of

whatever kind, narrative, temporal, sexual or linguistic. Subversive fantasy includes Gothic novel, ghost story, Romantic fantasy poetry, Victorian nonsense and dream fantasy; and it has also been prominent in recent postmodernist fiction, at a time when 'reality' has been more widely destabilized in philosophy and literary theory. Subversive fantasy is actually the dominant form in Europe, and in Scotland. Some of the most sophisticated examples of English literary fantasy, from Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner* to Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor*, are displayed here, not least because of the acuteness of their engagement with the human predicament.

Last is children's fantasy, the dominant form in the nineteenth century, and represented by such figures as Lewis Carroll, Edith Nesbit, C. S. Lewis or Diana Wynne Jones. Children's fantasy is more a category than a different kind, and is made up of fantasies drawn from the other five sub-groups, particularly comic, secondary world and emotive fantasy, shaped to a different readership. Children's fantasy is treated separately here because it has its own internal development and preoccupations; none of which is to say that children and adults do not read one another's books, nor that children's fantasy is without adult features, or cut off from adult literary tradition. One also has to allow for the way that the concept of the 'child' is partly shaped by adults who either wish to preserve a province they recall as childhood, or have designs on those inhabiting it. This said, children's fantasy is a large and well-defined form. It is additionally defined by the market, in which, unlike most other groups of fantasy here, it has become a recognized category.

These six sub-groups of English fantasy are quite distinct, even though they overlap with one another. However, it would be unreasonable to pretend that a given fantasy text always belongs wholly to one rather than another. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* belongs first to the secondary world category, but it also has qualities of emotive fantasy in its pastoralism and desire. Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books could be placed in either of the children's and comic categories, and they also have links with the subversive in their continual underminings of 'sense'. Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* (1985) is highly evocative of a kind of dark wonder that might place it with emotive or even with metaphysical fantasy, but it is primarily subversive in its dislocations of reality. For this reason, the same book may appear in more than one chapter, though usually only highlighted in one. This even applies to certain sub-provinces,

such as Gothic novel and ghost story, which feature in both subversive and emotive fantasy.

Within each group too, some works are more central than others. The critic Brian Attebery has recently suggested that 'fantasy', rather than comprising works with equal claims to the title, is in fact a 'fuzzy set' (a logicians' term) in which one or two works are central and others less so, to the point where the orbital pull fades out.<sup>6</sup> This is a useful observation and certainly applicable to our groups of English fantasy. For instance, it can be argued that while C. S. Lewis's *Perelandra* (1943) is quintessentially metaphysical fantasy, E. A. Abbott's *Flatland* (1884) is more marginally so; or, where John Fowles's *The Magus* (1966) is deliberately subversive, Mervyn Peake's 'Titus' books (1946-59) are so more accidentally. This serves the purpose of showing that we are not dealing with uniform or homogeneous types.

The point extends to categories within certain kinds of fantasy too. For instance, in treating metaphysical fantasy, we will use another 'fuzzy set', with Christian fantasy at the centre, then posthumous fantasy, religious fantasy, myth fantasy, 'timeslip' fantasy (someone from one time entering another) and speculative fantasy. On the margins of such a category the signal may be quite weak. With this particular kind, it is because they often deal with or radiate a sense of the numinous that timeslip and speculative fantasy belong there, though they cannot be said to make an urgent claim.

For all its diversity, English fantasy has a coherent history, seen both in the way each group changes over time and in the development of the entire genre from the beginning. No account of it would be adequate that neglected the thousand years of its existence before 1800, and Chapter 2 will give an account of the origins and growth of the genre through to Blake. In that period it was of course never known as 'fantasy',<sup>7</sup> and it was written against a background of religious belief; but it is an essential part of our story, containing as it does some of the major works in the kind, written in an age when 'fantasy', in our sense of 'fiction involving the supernatural', was often seen as one of the highest of literary forms. These works also trace the early history of the ambivalent view the English have of the imagination; and several of them are sources of modern English fantasy.

The order of the chapters is based on two groupings: secondary world, metaphysical and emotive fantasy on the one hand, and

comic and subversive fantasy on the other; children's fantasy, which partakes in them all, then follows. The first group often invites us to look beyond our world, whether to an alternative one, a supernatural reality, or a greater wonder or terror than we can know; it asks a measure of belief; it is often conservative and nostalgic; and it is more contemplative in tendency. The second often alters our own reality, turning it upside-down or questioning its very nature; it can undermine our settled convictions; it is innovative and revolutionary; its essence is continual metamorphosis. Of course, there will be more and less on either side, and texts that do not fit the distinction, but the two groupings are real enough, and measure the poles of earnest and play in the English character that interact in their fantasy.

When we speak of English fantasy we speak of a distinctive kind in Britain, as will be seen further in the conclusion. However, fantasy writers of Scottish, Welsh or Irish parentage living in England will be mentioned where their work seems relevant, because they become part of the English literary tradition. Thus Yeats, George MacDonald, Arthur Machen, Lord Dunsany, Kenneth Morris or David Lindsay can all be claimed for Irish, Welsh or Scottish literary traditions, but much of their work was published in England, and had a large part of its readership there. We will do this only where it is necessary to the understanding of some development, as, for instance, MacDonald to the growth of Christian fantasy, Dunsany to emotive fantasy, or Lindsay to secondary world fantasy. Similarly we may mention writers who came from other countries to England, such as Henry James, T. S. Eliot or Salman Rushdie. Nor is there any geographical restriction on subject matter: included are works set in France (George du Maurier's *Peter Ibbetson*), India (Kipling's tales), Egypt (Robert Irwin's *The Arabian Nightmare*), or Sweden (Clive Sinclair's *Augustus Rex*). Nevertheless there is still the rule of the 'fuzzy set': some fantasies will be more centrally English than others, even when to arrive at a satisfactory definition of 'English' we must consider them all.

Between 1800 and about 1970 modern English fantasy is not particularly permeable to 'outside' influence (the case is far different before 1800). The orientalism often seen in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fantasy is perhaps the most pronounced foreign strand, though there is also a French-derived tradition of the *femme fatale* in the late Victorian period.<sup>8</sup> The influence of German Romantic writers is seen in George MacDonald's work; of French

*conte fantastique* in the work of Henry James and, indirectly, of French literary theory in the English subversive fantasies of the 1980s; of the work of Kafka in that of Peake or Anna Kavan; of Old Norse and Germanic literature in the fantasy of J. R. R. Tolkien. These are only examples, but they are the most prominent, and this speaks volumes of the degree to which English fantasy is for most of its modern life uninfluenced, *sui generis*, islanded – and for that reason the more singular and bizarre. Indeed it is rather English fantasy that for long does the influencing, particularly on that of America, which is thin in amount before the Tolkien revolution there in 1965. The situation is now however reversed, with English fantasy heavily coloured by American models. Fantasy is now a more international, mass-market genre, and the scope for national idiosyncrasy, at least in England, has been reduced. And criticism, too, is treating it as a homogeneous international form. It is to gain an awareness of the individuality of English fantasy that this book has been written.



## 2

# The Origins of English Fantasy

---

Our story begins with the classic English fairy-tales, since whenever they reached England, their analogues are to be found as far back in time as stories have been told. By whatever route they arrived, via Neolithic wanderers, Roman legions, the invading galleys of Hengist and Horsa, the longships of the Vikings, or Norman *jongleurs*, we hear nothing of their existence till Chaucer begins to use them; and it is not till George Peele's *The Old Wives' Tale* (1595) that we find the clearest evidence for the existence of a body of English popular narrative, nor till the seventeenth century that we see their first appearance in chapbooks. For all the amplitude of its more literary fantasy, England is one of the most impoverished of nations so far as indigenous fairy-tales are concerned.<sup>1</sup> From the repression of Saxon culture by the Normans, through sixteenth- and seven-teenth-century identification of fairies with the devil, and on to eighteenth-century disdain for vulgar culture, the fairy-tale has not had many sustaining breezes in England; and to that we may add the absence in England of a tradition of communal story-telling.<sup>2</sup> Whether through accident or their inherent worth, we are left with very few classic fairy-tales from which to make generalizations concerning the English character. Among these are 'Jack and the Beanstalk', 'Jack the Giant-Killer', 'Tom Thumb', 'Dick Whittington', 'St George of Merrie England', 'Childe Rowland', 'The Three Little Pigs', 'Tom Tit Tot', 'The Laidly Worm', 'The Rose Tree' and 'Cap o' Rushes'. These are the tales which for one reason or another, a mixture of accident and popularity, have survived the formidable obstacle course of time and prejudice. Any generalizations we make about them will be founded on shifting ground.

If for the sake of argument we put the accent of survival more on popularity than chance, it will be interesting to note the kinds that are missing. Few of the tales concern the high life of kings, queens and princesses, or attaining it – which is remarkable when one considers how often English imitations of the fairy-tale in the