BOOK REVIEW:

The Canons of Fantasy: Lands of High Adventure

Mark Scroggins

Moran, Patrick. *The Canons of Fantasy: Lands of High Adventure*. Cambridge UP, 2019. ISBN 978-1108708678.

Patrick Moran's *The Canons of Fantasy: Lands of High Adventure* appears as one of Cambridge University Press's "Elements", very short digital-native books presenting overviews of particular subjects. *The Canons of Fantasy* is part of the series "Publishing and Book Culture", and more specifically of the gathering "Publishing the Canon", which also includes volumes on African literature and science fiction publishing. These contexts shape several aspects of Moran's book: it is very short, though it covers a great deal of conceptual territory; it is largely descriptive and analytical, rather than argumentative; and it is addressed to a broader audience than just scholars of fantasy – it is also aimed at students of literature in general, scholars of popular culture and media studies, even library collection specialists. This doesn't mean that fantasy scholars have nothing to learn from Moran's book, though they will certainly find much that is common knowledge in the sub-discipline. Nor does it mean that Moran has shied away from potentially arguable points. He tries to cover the entire history of the formation of the "canon" of popular fantasy in a very brief compass – some 75 small pages – not merely discussing fantasy fiction but touching on graphic novels, role-playing and video games, movies and television, and such transmedia franchises as "Pottermore", *A Game of Thrones*, and the Witcher series. Along the way, Moran manages to shoehorn in a number of thought-provoking questions and objections to critical orthodoxy.

Moran begins by drawing a parallel between canon-making and cartography, the mapping of a particular subject – both identifying the landmarks firmly within that subject's purview and tracing its sometimes debatable boundaries. His emphasis, refreshingly, is as much on process as product: that is, he is at least as interested in the processes by which a canon of fantasy has emerged as he is in defining what falls within that canon (and what is excluded). Moran's first chapter, "The Lay of the Land", surveys with admirable concision various attempts at defining fantasy; he lays out with clarity what's at stake in essentialist definitions of the genre.

Such definitions are made problematic, of course, by the genre's idiosyncratic history, laid out at length in Jamie Williamson's *The Evolution of Modern Fantasy: From Antiquarianism to the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series* (Palgrave, 2015) and summarised briefly by Moran. In short, while there were many books that could be classified as "fantasy" before the middle of the twentieth century, fantasy fiction only really emerged as a popular genre after *The Lord of the Rings* (in paperback reprint) became a massive cultural phenomenon in the late 1960s. Other writers responded to Tolkien's work with their own fantasy series (often trilogies), many of them also bestsellers, and editors and critics hastened to reprint earlier proto-Tolkienian books, with an eye to constructing retroactive genealogies or canons for what was becoming a remarkably popular genre.

Moran's second chapter, "The Tolkien Landmark", focuses specifically on the place of Tolkien's work within the fantasy canon. Playing off Brian Attebery's proposal that fantasy fiction can be defined as a "fuzzy set" of texts that bear some degree of resemblance to *Lord of the Rings*, Moran counters (winking to Pascal) that "The canon of fantasy has a Tolkien-shaped problem" (25). He surveys the array of immediate post-*LotR* Tolkien-imitations, then observes to what degree projects such as the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series constructed their retrospective genealogies of fantasy fiction as teleologically culminating in Tolkien. But he spends at least as much time examining parallel non-Inkling traditions, such as the pulp adventure genre that lies behind Poul Anderson's *The Broken Sword* (1954), published the same year as *Lord of the Rings*. From there, Moran confronts such issues as the evoking of "literary value" as a canonical yardstick, and the various subgenres of fantasy ("high fantasy", "sword and sorcery", "urban fantasy"). These ways of categorising fantasy, he argues, ultimately spring from the centrality accorded Tolkien within the genre as a whole; at the same time, a recognition of how varied fantasy fiction actually is has been occluded by too singular a focus on Tolkien as a normative model.

Moran's third chapter, "Crossing Boundaries", expands fantasy from an affair of books to one of books and other media; in some ways this is the most timely chapter of the book, as contemporary audiences are offered an extraordinarily broad and rich array of fantasy through television series, films, role-playing games, and graphic novels. Fantasy fiction, the literary canon explored and promoted by Lin Carter with the Ballantine series, is now only a single subset of what is perhaps our time's most expansive cultural genre. Contemporary fantasy fans, I venture, are more likely to enter the genre through Peter Jackson's films or HBO's *Game of Thrones* than they are through J.R.R. Tolkien's or George R. R. Martin's fat novels.

In "Alternative Cartographies", his final chapter, Moran explores some of the emergent regions of fantasy, and some corners and counties many readers and viewers might find unfamiliar. After discussing some of the ideologically unsavory origins of fantasy, its roots in a racialised, nostalgic nineteenth-century culture, which have led some critics to consider it "an inherently reactionary genre" (59), Moran surveys fantasy writing that gives voice to female, non-white, and LGBTQ+ subjectivities, and that questions the hierarchical neo-medievalism of so much Tolkien-derived work. Finally, he gestures toward non-Anglophone fantasy. Obviously, as Moran is well aware, the subject deserves a full-length monograph of its own; within his constrained compass, however, he provides a fascinating example in a brief survey of the history of French fantasy.

Moran's most penetrating insight is that while all canon-making is a process of struggle – of the inclusion or exclusion of various works on the basis of criteria which are always ideologically weighted, even when they are characterised as purely aesthetic – the process by which fantasy has established and continues to establish its canon differs in fundamental ways from that of "mainstream" literature (what one finds in the Norton Anthologies of English or American literature, for instance). For one thing, fantasy is a relatively young genre, even compared to its cousin science fiction, and every decade sees new volumes that seem destined to be "classics": just in the past quarter century, Philip Pullman, J. K. Rowling, China Miéville, and N. K. Jemisin have written books redefining the genre. More importantly, since fantasy as a field still remains rather marginal within the academy, the genre is not subject to "hegemonic" (74) pressures of academic canon-formation: in short, the canons of fantasy are constructed by readers, fans, and writers themselves.

The canons of fantasy, then, are in constant flux. So far as I can tell, Tolkien's place, thanks to an army of enthusiasts, a strong cross-platform presence (Jackson's six films, numerous role-playing games, and the forthcoming Amazon series), and a tradition of academic scholarship, seems assured – though the arguments for canonicity advanced by Tolkien scholars at least seem to smack of Arnoldian Culture: "sweetness and light" and so forth. Marion Zimmer Bradley, whose Avalon novels were immensely popular and influential over the 1980s, but who was posthumously accused of child sex crimes by her daughter in 2014, has been largely erased from contemporary discussions. "This", Moran comments, "is a rare case of a conscious decision to de-canonize an author previously considered a notable representative of the genre" (58n81). H. P. Lovecraft, I think, is a more ambiguous example. While most recent readers have acknowledged the extent to which Lovecraft's racism and anti-Semitism permeate his fiction – the World Fantasy Award decided after 2015 no longer to use a bust of Lovecraft as its prize – his works retain their compelling fascination and seem more popular than ever. Such recent fantasy works as Alan Moore's graphic novel *Providence* and the series *Lovecraft Country* (after Matt Ruff's novel) show creators interrogating Lovecraft with both a loving and critical eye. He is the Ezra Pound of fantasy.

Moran's book, for all its brevity, is a strong one. It joins Williamson's *Evolution of Modern Fantasy* and James Gifford's *A Modernist Fantasy: Modernism, Anarchism, and the Radical Fantastic* (ELS Edition, 2018) as one of the three most intelligent historical surveys of the fantasy field. For newbies,

Moran's *Canons of Fantasy* is a first-rate, sophisticated introduction to the scholarly debates over popular fantasy; for those already engaged in the critical discussion, it offers a refreshingly clear overview of what's at stake, and along the way raises some issues that might have been forgotten or overlooked.

Biography: Mark Scroggins is the author of five collections of poetry; among his nonfiction books are *The Poem of a Life: A Biography of Louis Zukofsky* and a critical monograph, *Michael Moorcock: Fantasy, Fiction and the World's Pain*. He has edited a selection of the erotic poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne.