
The overall argument of Matthew Oliver’s *Magic Words, Magic Worlds* (2022) is that the style of epic fantasy shapes readers’ experiences in what he broadly calls “political ways” (26). Politics here includes the identity positions that authors, readers and characters can take, and empathy is discussed as one of the prime mechanisms facilitating such political involvement. By extrapolating larger observations on the genre and its politics from stylistic details, Oliver convincingly shows that magic is as much an element of the oft-derided style of epic fantasy as of the plots of these works. Moreover, by highlighting the self-awareness inherent in the genre, he shows that epic fantasy’s reputation for hegemonic, essentialist worldviews is not entirely justified.

As may be expected, much of the theoretical groundwork regarding definitions, main concerns and selection criteria is laid in the introduction. Drawing on Caroline Levine’s terminology, Oliver particularly addresses the affordances of epic fantasy as a form as well as the “core collision” of the genre, namely that “between stable historical narrative and contingent narrative” (17). The approach taken is thus broadly postmodern. Oliver aligns himself with Susan Mandala’s *Language in Science Fiction and Fantasy* (2010) and Charul Palmer-Patel’s more recent *The Shape of Fantasy* (2019), while frequently finding himself at odds with Farah Mendlesohn’s *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008), particularly when trying to fit epic fantasy into Mendlesohn’s category of portal-quest fantasy. Yet much of the disjunct seems to be due to the vastly different natures of their projects, although Oliver probably correctly identifies Mendlesohn’s somewhat dismissive attitude to epic fantasy.

The project’s postmodern approach is also reflected in its structure: each of the book’s four sections is focused on a particular aspect of the style of epic fantasy. Instead of aiming to provide closure or synthesis, analyses strive to remain open-ended, as each of these sections in turn comprises two chapters that juxtapose typical and atypical examples of the aspect under the discussion without a concluding synthesis. It should be noted that Oliver has made
excellent use of the book-length format, and chapters are best read sequentially, because arguments are often sustained across chapters and sections.

Section I of *Magic Words, Magic Worlds* focuses on the uses of narrative style to elicit emotional responses from readers. Here the typically (over)elaborate language used in epic fantasy is discussed with reference to Steven Erikson’s *Toll the Hounds* (2008) and Stephen R. Donaldson’s *The Last Dark* (2013) in Chapter 1 and George R. R. Martin’s *Storm of Swords* (2000) in Chapter 2. Their stylistically excessive language is contrasted with the sparse, editorial style of R. F. Kuang’s *The Poppy War* (2018) and Ursula Le Guin’s *The Tombs of Atuan* (1970) and *Tehanu* (1990) to show how the use of such excess can be critiqued by contradicting readers’ expectations.

Narrative perspective and point of view are the subjects of Section II. Epic fantasy’s overwhelming preference for a distanced, “totalizing world view” (28) is discussed in Chapter 3 by way of rather different examples of third-person narration and focalisation from Donaldson’s novella “The King’s Justice” (2015) and R. Scott Bakker’s *The Thousandfold Thought* (2006). These are juxtaposed with examples of first-person narration from Glen Cook’s *The Black Company* (1984) and N. K. Jemisin’s *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* (2010) in Chapter 4, to demonstrate that epic fantasy itself can undermine “the ideology of epic essentialism” (29) from within “by combining elements of the epic with features of the novel” and thereby “presenting epic subject matter in a subjective fashion through the first-person point of view” (145).

In Section III, Oliver shows how a sense of wonder is textually constructed, for example through the gradual revelation of information. The examples in Chapter 5 are mainly drawn from Brandon Sanderson’s *Mistborn* (2006–) and Michael Moorcock’s *Elric of Melniboné* (1961–) series. The counterexamples offered in Chapter 6 are from writers like David Gemmell and Fritz Leiber, “who resist ‘fantasy’ as a category even as they deploy its tropes” (29), and shed light on the mundane foundations needed for the creation of a sense of wonder.

The final section deals with the relation between texts and their paratexts. Chapter 7 examines the manner in which the paratexts of epic fantasy – maps, epigraphs, glossaries and appendices – not so much mediate between readers and the secondary world, but rather call attention to the constructedness of the fantasy world itself. Here Oliver’s examples include
various works by Sanderson, particularly his Stormlight Archive series (2010–), as well as Robert Jordan and Sanderson’s Wheel of Time (1990–2013). Chapter 8 looks at the potential frame narratives have of upsetting totalising views of history through irony, focusing on Erikson’s *Forge of Darkness* (2012) and Samuel Delany’s *Tales of Nevèrÿon* (1979). Somewhat disappointingly, but in keeping with the resistance to closure characterising Oliver’s approach, the very brief conclusion to this chapter also forms the overall conclusion to the volume.

As should by now be clear, *Magic Word, Magic Worlds* is ambitious both in scope and execution. Oliver deals with primary sources from a genre notorious for the length of its texts and series, and makes a laudable effort to both include canonical and less well-studied examples. I also appreciated the inclusion of passages juxtaposing fantasy writers to traditional modernists like Joseph Conrad. The greatest strength of Oliver’s book is his meticulous attention to detail. *Magic Words, Magic Worlds* is above all a testament to the value of close reading that should be especially useful to fantasy students, scholars and all readers interested in the stylistic mechanics of epic fantasy.

Alas, my main objection to Oliver’s approach is that the combined weight of the theoretical machinery at work seems somewhat unnecessary at times. These exemplary close readings do not always need the additional theoretical scaffolding. Oliver is theoretically eclectic: he ranges from Todorov to Kristeva, Bakhtin to Genette, Kant to Rancière, Adorno and Iser, to name but a few. The jumble of theories used accurately reflects the sprawling primary material and the ambition of the project, but the overall impression created is one of disunity. I suspect this to be intentional: a theoretically streamlined version of the study would necessarily also be poorer.

Oliver certainly succeeds in demonstrating the instability of the masculine, conservative streaks of the genre, yet a nit-picking reader may level the criticism that the danger of valorising postmodern constructivism as necessarily good and desirable remains largely unacknowledged. The author’s dedication to his subject is admirable, however, Oliver at times also appears to overestimate the particularity of epic fantasy. Some of the affordances deemed specific to the genre may well be regarded as affordances of literature or art more generally. As an example, I found the claim that epic fantasy demands greater “mental flexibility” (11) from readers than other genres, due to its second-world setting, rather
unconvincing. Cannot similar claims be made about the mental flexibility required of
teatregoers, or the readers of comic books? Nevertheless, these are minor detractions from
an impressive demonstration of the strength of close reading. In her essay “From Elfland to
Poughkeepsie” (1973), Ursula Le Guin observes:

Many readers, many critics and most editors speak of style as if it were an ingredient of a book, like the
sugar in the cake, or something added on to the book, like the frosting on the cake. The style, of course,
is the book. If you remove the cake, all you have left is a recipe. If you remove the style, all you have
left is a synopsis of the plot. (1989, 90)

Matthew Oliver’s Magic Words, Magic Worlds is exactly about such metaphorical cakes,
their frostings, and how the choices made in their baking shape and sustain communities of
connoisseurs.

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