The history of fantasy in the realm of children's literature has been one of forceful contradictions: on the one hand, fantasy is criticized as being fraudulent, irrational, and overly imaginative; on the other, it is criticized for being formulaic, escapist, and not imaginative enough. The seeds of this debate lie in early uses of the word, which seem to have little to do with literature per se, but nevertheless powerfully influenced the activity of imagination over centuries. Fantasy's potency in relation to children's literature reflects its potency in relation to literature in general: it takes us into the heart of story-making—imagination and reason.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the origin of the word “fantasy” lies in the Greek word fautasia, literally “a making visible,” “to make visible,” or “to show.” It begins its career in English as both “fantasy” and “fancy” (derived from its alternate spellings, “fantsy,” “phantsy,” “fansy,” “fancie”). Its earliest and primary meanings belong to scholastic psychology and refer to a faculty of mind: “mental apprehension of an object of perception; the faculty by which this is performed,” or “the image impressed on the mind by an object of sense.” A primary sense of fantasy in the early modern period is “imagination; the process or the faculty of forming mental representations of things not actually present”—that is, showing oneself, in the mind, images perceived through sensory experience and retained in the memory. This meaning supplies the silent foundation of its use to describe characteristics of twenty-first-century fantasy literature—a literature distinctive for its abundant visual imagery.

The operation of fancy/fantasy is central to debates over children's literature. In the eighteenth century, the valorizing of science and utility, as well as the exercise of prudence, moderation, and reason, tussled with children's enjoyment of reading materials that some educators felt undermined rationality and proper understanding (Summerfield 1984). Early in the century, English translations of
Charles Perrault's fairy tales and Antoine Galland's version of the Thousand and One Nights brought new, rich fodder to the chapbook trade, augmenting its fare of romances, fairy tales, and adventure stories such as Guy of Warwick, Jack the Giant-Killer, and legends of Arthur. Such tales found an avid audience in children, although rationalist educators such as Thomas Day and Maria Edgeworth (and, earlier, John Locke) sometimes deplored them as dangerous and confusing to mind and soul.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, “fairy literature” was understood to pertain to children and to the “childhood of man.” “All nations love fairy tales when they are young: our old forefathers did, and called their stories ‘sagas,’” wrote Kingsley (1856), reflecting prevailing attitudes toward civilization and cultural maturity. Studies in anthropology and folklore throughout the nineteenth century (the Grimm brothers, Andrew Lang, Joseph Jacobs) brought fairy tales into publication as never before, acknowledging the rich relationship between fantasy, imagination, childhood, and culture.

In the face of the many thousands of children's fantasies that have been written, sold, and read in the past fifty years, adults still show some fear that fantasy literature will draw the young into unhealthy escapism and an inability to manage in the “real world.” Some protest the “occult” or heterodox content in stories of magic—most recently targeting Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials and the Harry Potter stories. But critical debate now centers on how we categorize fantasy literature, as well as what exactly fantasy literature is and does—a conversation which, thanks in part to the legacy of MacDonald, Tolkien, and Lewis, is one of the few in which literature for children and adults are considered together (Attebery 1992; Mendlesohn 2005).

The failure to define “fantasy” lies, perhaps, with its current primary meaning as a type of literature instead of as a faculty of mind. Echoing the latter idea, Le Guin (1973/1979) writes that fantasy is “a different approach to reality, an alternative technique for apprehending and coping with existence. Fantasy is nearer to poetry, to mysticism and to insanity than naturalistic fiction.” Le Guin claims that the role of the child is central to the creation of fantasy worlds, and likens fantasy
to play—“pure pretense with no ulterior motive whatever ... the game played for the game's sake.”

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