On the Origins of Modern Fantasy

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One aspect of modern fantasy that has been given surprisingly little attention by fantasy scholars is the question of the genre's origins. Many critics recognize that in the mid-nineteenth century a new form of fiction began to be written by such authors as George MacDonald, Charles Kingsley, and William Morris, but rarely has anyone attempted to identify why modern fantasy emerged when and where it did. When such attempts are made scholars typically link the emergence of modern fantasy to a cultural disbelief in the supernatural. For instance, David Hartwell has written that "literary fantasy, the prose narrative written with the implicit or explicit declaration that 'this story is not real,' begins to occur in the English language toward the end of the eighteenth century" (xi). Likewise, John Clute echoes this sentiment with his statement that "Though fantasy certainly existed for many centuries before [the nineteenth century], whenever stories were told which were understood by their authors (and readers) as being impossible, it is quite something else to suggest that the perceived impossibility of these stories was their point" (338; emphasis in original).

While it is true that modern fantasy does not portray the view of reality embraced by contemporary scientifically advanced societies, the assumption that the genre developed because people began to view its subject matter as unreal is incorrect. Its emergence as a distinct literary genre was not due to a particular view of reality; in fact, it is only happenstance that the subject matter modern fantasy includes is, at present, commonly identified as "unreal." I will attempt to remedy the misperception of modern fantasy as a form of a fiction intended to be perceived as unreal, by examining the innovative features that characterized five of the earliest modern fantasies and their authors. Specifically, I will answer the questions: why did modern fantasy first appear in the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, and what features in the earliest genre works distinguish them from traditional and other contemporary fantasy forms?

However, before the origins of modern fantasy can be examined, the question of definition must be confronted. One difficulty in attempting to write about
“fantasy literature” is the fact that “fantasy” can be interpreted in numerous and often conflicting ways. Some writers view “fantasy” as a literary mode present in all fiction, others believe it is a limited and identifiable genre of relatively recent origin, and others assume it just means pornography. While “modern fantasy” has a somewhat more stable meaning than “fantasy” in general, consensus about the nature of the genre concerns only its broad outlines. Critics disagree about what features define modern fantasy; what the aim of the genre should be; and whether individual works, like Alice in Wonderland, should be included in the canon.

To distinguish the specific body of literature I am concerned with here from the many other possible conceptions of “fantasy” and “modern fantasy,” I will begin by defining modern fantasy as a post-Enlightenment prose fiction genre composed of narratives in which an extranatural power plays a fundamental role and that aim to create an illusion of reality. This definition is meant to identify the form of fantasy that is frequently linked with science fiction, that was not written with any frequency until the middle of the nineteenth century, and that became so popular in the 1970s that it received its own publishing category. It includes classic fantasies, such as The Wind in the Willows, The Wizard of Oz, and The Chronicles of Narnia, as well as more recent examples such as Little, Big by John Crowley and Tad Williams’ Memory, Sorrow, and Thorn trilogy, but does not include the Alice books or Mervyn Peake’s Gormenghast series.

By this definition of modern fantasy, five of the earliest works that can be identified as genre examples are Vathek (1786) by William Beckford, Phantasmion (1837) by Sara Coleridge, A Christmas Carol (1843) by Charles Dickens, The Rose and the Ring (1855) by William Thackeray, and Phantastes (1858) by George MacDonald. These are not chronologically the first five modern fantasies: certainly more than five examples of the genre were written between 1786 and 1858. They are simply five fantasies I have selected as my subject of study for the following three reasons.

First, they display the features that define modern fantasy and are some of the earliest works I have found to do so. Second, these narratives—except perhaps for Phantasmion—are well known and often referred to in studies of “fantasy” literature. Third, they have been identified as early examples of modern fantasy by critics who are writing more or less about the same body of literature I am.

For instance, of all the early fantasies, George MacDonald’s Phantastes (1858) is more often associated with the emergence of the genre than any other. The Encyclopedia of Fantasy suggests that it is “arguably the first serious Adult Fantasy” (Ashley 332), Fantasy Literature identifies MacDonald as one of the earliest authors of modern fantasy (Tymn, Zahorski, and Boyer xii), and in The Hills of Faraway Diana Waggoner lists Phantastes as the first fantasy in her timeline of the genre.
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William Beckford's *Vathek* (1786), probably the first modern fantasy novel, is often linked with the genre, though some writers hesitate to identify it as a genre example. David Hartwell notes that *Vathek* might be considered the earliest fantasy, but denies it that position solely because it appears half a century before long fantasy began to be frequently written (xii). Similarly, Lin Carter deems the novel "about the earliest" of the modern fantasies that appeared before the works of the writer he considers the first modern fantasist: William Morris (18).

Next, David Hartwell has identified *Phantasmion* (1837) by Sara Coleridge as the first English fantasy (xii) and Thackeray's *The Rose and the Ring* (1855) is specifically described by C. N. Manlove as a modern fantasy in the introduction to *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature* where he describes at length how it differs from the traditional fairy tale. Surprisingly, Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843), arguably one of the most popular modern fantasies of all time, is rarely referred to by genre scholars. Perhaps Dickens's short novel seems too far removed from the genre's central, Tolkienian tradition. Nevertheless, Dickens's *Carol*—along with all the other novels in my sample except *Phantasmion*—are listed in Waggoner's introductory bibliography of modern fantasy, so there is some precedent for including it in the genre.

Now that I have established why certain narratives are being considered the genre's earliest examples, I will examine the characteristics that link these five narratives and suggest why they appeared when they did. While many factors are instrumental in the genesis of any literary form, three features characterizing these five stories are particularly significant for understanding what modern fantasy is and why it appeared when it did: their writers viewed fairy stories as valuable and beneficial, they were not intended to be solely didactic works, and they were composed with the techniques of literary realism. I will examine each of these features individually and argue that the explanation of the genre's development they suggest is that modern fantasy emerged when authors began utilizing the techniques of literary realism to compose stories about the extranatural.

Modern fantasy grew out of and has been greatly influenced by fairy tales, the body of narratives derived from the oral folktales of magic. During the late seventeenth century, inventing fairy tales became a popular conversational game in French aristocratic salons, particularly among women. Players would take turns composing tales, often around a requested motif, with the aim of making the tale seem as natural and formless as possible, as if it had been spontaneously composed. By the 1690s a number of men and women began writing down and publishing their tales, some of the most notable including Madame d'Aulnoy, Mademoiselle L'Heritier, and Charles Perrault.

As these French fairy tales began to be translated, they stimulated a surge of interest in fairy tales throughout England and the rest of Europe. Several tales from Madame d'Aulnoy's *Tales of the Fairys* (1697–98) appeared in English
almost immediately after their French publication, and further collections from the Countess followed in 1707 and 1721–22. Then in 1729, Robert Samber brought out an English version of Perrault’s Histories, or Tales of Past Times (1697). Both writers’ collections met with enormous success and, for this reason, were quickly appropriated by the chapmen who distributed cheap editions of the individual tales throughout England.

At the same time as the French fairy tales were making their way across the Channel, the first translation of the Arabian Nights, Galland’s Les mille et une nuits (1704–17), appeared in French. The book was almost simultaneously translated into English and became immediately immensely popular in both manifestations. As early as 1715, the English collection was already in its third “Grub Street” edition, and by 1793 eighteen editions had appeared.

However, despite the popularity of the salon-inspired fairy tales and Arabian Nights in the late seventeenth through mid-eighteenth centuries, such fairy stories were not universally welcomed. Perrault aimed his collection at his colleagues in the French Academy, but they viewed the fairy tales as “beneath his Academic dignity” and simply ignored the collection—a reception the author may have anticipated, since he published the work pseudonymously (Zamcchi 19). A number of English readers lauded the pedagogic and entertainment qualities of the Arabian Nights, but even admirers advocated the Nights primarily for women and children. Other commentators were not content simply to dismiss fairy tales, but took a more pejorative stance: Locke warned parents about the danger of exposing their offspring to fairy stories, the Earl of Chesterfield urged his godson to avoid Perrault’s tales, and Rousseau had no use for “fantastic creatures” (qtd. in Darton 96).

In Children’s Books in England, F. J. Harvey Darton points out that this disparagement of fairy tales was in no sense a new phenomenon. Fairy stories had historically come under criticism in England, particularly by those of a moral persuasion. However, perhaps in part because of the increasing availability of the literary fairy tales, near the century’s end the anti-fairy mentality reached a previously unprecedented fervor. A band of children’s writers arose in the 1780s who considered it their duty to properly educate young minds and they churned out hundreds of didactic tales intended to inculcate diligence, obedience, and good manners in their readers. Romances, novels, and especially fairy tales fell under frequent condemnation for not providing useful knowledge, and worse, encouraging children to believe frivolous and untrue ideas.

By the early nineteenth century, the literary moralists disparagement of imaginative literature had taken its toll. Fairy tales were not viewed as proper reading matter for children and the Edgeworths could write confidently in Practical Education (1798), “We do not allude to fairy tales for we apprehend these are not now much read” (qtd. in Opie and Opie 25). But, despite the disappearance of fairy stories in nurseries, assumptions that the fairy tale was a dying genre were premature. The rise of romanticism would soon help to resurrect the genre.
One of Romanticism’s innovations that was particularly important for the status of the fairy tale was its allowance for as wide a conception of reality as possible. In contrast to Classicism’s exclusive focus on knowledge received through the senses, the romanticists believed the material realm only comprised a fraction of reality. Consequently, they began exploring dreams, mystical experience, and the supernatural, and this openness often translated into an admiration of fairy tales. Samuel Coleridge, Charles Lamb, and William Wordsworth all praised fairy tales and argued that they were beneficial reading matter for children.

The romanticists’ glorification of fairy stories did not immediately alter public perception of the tales, since most of their comments concerning fairy tales were made in private letters. But the Romantic revolution’s expanded view of reality instigated a shift in the cultural temper, symbolized by a change in the meaning of the word “fantasy.” The term, which before the nineteenth century had been used derisively to refer to a mental image of something unreal, had begun to take on a more positive connotation by 1825. The fact that fantasy’s inventions were “not real” suggested that they had an existence of their own independent of everyday reality (Prickett 1–2).

Another boon for fairy stories occurred in 1823, when a selection of tales from Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm’s *Nursery and Household Tales*, titled *German Popular Stories*, was translated into English by Edgar Taylor. The collection was an instant success and almost overnight the English Romantics’ favorable view of fairy tales began to be more frequently expressed. Then, in 1846, Mary Howitt published the first English collection of Hans Christian Andersen’s tales, *Wonderful Stories for Children*, and a number of rival volumes rapidly followed. With the dissemination of Andersen’s tales throughout England, the writing of fantasy and folk-tales became acceptable and even admirable. Hans Christian Andersen had finally legitimized the fairy tale.

Not surprisingly, most of the earliest modern fantasies were written around the 1840s, the time that fairy tales first began to gain widespread approval. *Phantasmion* was published in 1837, just three years before the decade that turned the tide in favor of fairy stories, while *A Christmas Carol, The Rose and the Ring*, and *Phantastes* all appeared after 1840. This phenomenon is partly due to the fact that magical literature is more likely to be written—and easier to publish—during a time when an audience exists for such stories. Nevertheless, the composition of the first modern fantasies was not stimulated by the fact that fairy tales had gained public respectability per se; *Vathek*, for instance, was written just as the literary moralists first began sinking their teeth into children’s literature. Rather, the earliest genre writers were among the first to exhibit the new attitudes towards fairy stories that took hold in the 1840s and wrote their tales in part because they held these favorable views of imaginative literature.

First, modern fantasy’s earliest writers thoroughly enjoyed fairy tales and were often deeply affected by them. William Beckford’s imagination was dominated by the *Arabian Nights* from the time he first found the book in his father’s
library at a young age. Throughout his childhood he read and re-read the collection of Eastern fairy tales and the stories made such an impression on Beckford that the boy's guardian ordered his tutor to keep the Nights away from him.

Fairy tales played a similarly prominent role in George MacDonald's life. He loved the major English fairy tale collections from the Grimms, Andersen, and Perrault, and was steeped in the German *Kunstmärchen*, which he had been introduced to around the age of eighteen. Hoffmann's *Golden Pot* was a particular favorite and he considered De la Motte's *Undine* to be "the most beautiful" fairy tale he knew (MacDonald, "Fantastic" 313). Occasionally, MacDonald would insert a fairy tale into a lecture he was giving, and his family's professional theater group frequently included performances of the tales in their repertoire. Likewise, William Thackeray admired a variety of fairy stories. He praised Hans Christian Andersen's tales, declaring the Danish writer a "delightful delicate fanciful creature" whom he was simply "wild about" (qtd. in Kotzin 86). "Cinderella" he deemed the "sweetest of all fairy stories" (88) and he felt sorry for anyone who didn't like the Arabian Nights.

Finally, Dickens's love of fairy tales is renown. His fascination with such stories began at a young age, with the terrifying yet mesmerizing tales like "Captain Murderer" and "Chips and the Devil" his nurse told him, and increased with his discovery of the Arabian Nights, Tales of the Genii, and other books in his father's library. He claimed Little Red Riding-Hood as his first love, and couldn't bear to have scholars correct the names of his beloved characters from the Nights that had been misspelled in early translations. Years later, Dickens could still recall many of the stories with an almost photographic memory.

Another characteristic shared by the earliest writers of modern fantasy was their belief that reading fairy tales was beneficial. Sara Coleridge wrote modestly of her novel: "I wish, however, I were only as sure that my fairy tale is worth printing, as I am that works of this class are wholesome food, by way of variety, for the childish mind" (*Memoir* 136–37; emphasis in original). In keeping with her view that fairy stories were nourishing and morally proper, she preferred her son to read "classical Fairy Tales" to "modern poverty-stricken fiction" and listed such tales along with the study of Latin, history, and geography as appropriate educational activities for him (qtd. in Griggs 83).

Charles Dickens was one of the most outspoken advocates for fairy tales in the mid-nineteenth century. He firmly believed that fairy tales cultivated the imagination and by doing so inspired kindness and compassion in their readers. As he put it, the reading of fairy tales imparted the virtues of "Forbearance, courtesy, consideration for the poor and aged, kind treatment of animals, the love of nature, [and] abhorrence of tyranny and brute force" in their audience (Dickens, "Frauds" 232). In the contemporary machine-dominated society, Dickens believed fairy tales were needed as a humanizing impulse, and so in his journal *Household Words* he published many essays describing fairy tales in a positive light.
While Thackeray did not champion fairy tales as vocally as did his compatriot, he still spoke highly of the stories. He described a series of fairy tales by Joseph Cundall as a “collection of treasures” and recommended imaginative works like Dickens’s *The Cricket on the Hearth*, J. E. Taylor’s translation of some of the Grimms’ fairy tales, and Hans Christian Andersen’s stories as appropriate reading fare for children and adults.

Finally, George MacDonald’s beliefs about the value of fairy tales, like Dickens’s, were intricately connected with his views about the value of the imagination. In his essay “The Fantastic Imagination,” MacDonald argued that some thinkers would be unduly constrained if their narratives were restricted to what exists in nature. While moral laws are sacrosanct and cannot be tampered with—it would be heinous, for instance, to present evil actions as “good”—a person can imagine new physical laws and can legitimately incorporate them into a story, so long as they are presented consistently in the imaginary world. Sometimes the resulting creations are simply pleasing inventions, “the work of the Fancy.” In other cases, however, they express “old truths” and are thus “products of the Imagination” (314).

Finally, all five writers were associated with, or at least appreciative of, the Romantic movement, which played such an instrumental role in sanctioning magical literature. William Beckford was one of the first English romanticists. Sara Coleridge grew up in the society of Wordsworth, Robert Southey, Charles Lamb, and, of course, her own father and, because of their influence, developed a deep affinity with the romantic philosophy. Young Thackeray was a devotee of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Lamb, and Scott. Dickens embraced Romantic notions like the idealization of the child and the value of the imagination, and for such reasons has been described as “the most important legatee” of the Romantic movement (Ackroyd 524). Last, George MacDonald came under the sway of the German and English romanticists as a young man and their sensibility so deeply impacted his thinking and writing that he could be considered a “belated Romantic” (McGillis 150).

During a period when fairy tales were ignored or, worse, denounced as frivolous and morally degenerative, the first writers of modern fantasy were distinguished by their enjoyment of fairy tales and belief that the tales were important and beneficial. The fact that all five had been influenced to some degree by the Romantic movement suggests that their positive view of fairy tales was shaped by this aesthetic. At least one apparent reason why genre works first appeared around the beginning of the nineteenth century is because it was at this time, with the rise of Romanticism, that a defense of the value of magical literature first developed.

The Romantic assumption that fairy tales and other kinds of imaginative literature are valuable created an environment amenable to the development of fantasy literature. Along with modern fantasy, gothic fiction, the German *Kunstmärchen*, and the nonsense tales of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll were
all inspired by Romantic ideals. A fifth prominent fantasy form that developed in the nineteenth century was the didactic fairy tale.

As fairy stories gained legitimacy and became primarily associated with children, writers for the young began to imagine that the tales could be converted into vehicles for inculcating moral precepts in impressionable young minds and many “fantasies” written during the nineteenth century were inspired by this moralistic aim. One of the most entertaining examples of this genre was Catherine Sinclair’s “Uncle David’s Nonsensical Story about Giants and Fairies” (1839) about a lazy, greedy little boy named Master No-book. When given the opportunity to visit one of two fairies’ palaces, Master No-book chooses to go with fairy Do-nothing, in whose home visitors never have to exert themselves and have their every wish granted, rather than with fairy Teach-all, who encourages activity, study, and moderate consumption in her young charges. When Master No-book is almost eaten by a giant the bad fairy is in league with, however, he repents of his idle ways and under fairy Teach-all’s guidance is transformed into a model of diligence, studiousness, and moderation.

One indication that modern fantasy is distinct from this kind of didactic literature is the fact that its earliest writers did not like overt didacticism in fantasies and often vehemently objected to it. Sara Coleridge disapproved of giving children didactic moral tales, primarily for practical reasons. In her opinion, parents ought to teach their offspring Christian principles straight from the Bible, rather than through “scraps” inserted in a work of fiction (Memoir 137).

A more impassioned protest against moral tales appeared in William Thackeray’s “A Grumble About the Christmas Books.” In this essay, Thackeray took the Brothers Mayhew to task for their moralistic Christmas story about Silvio, a poor forester who, by refusing to rob a beehive of its honey, is rewarded by a Fairy Bee-queen with the granting of his every wish. The good Fairy regains Silvio’s cottage, provides him with a more impressive abode when a princess comes to visit, and finally makes him a prince so he can win the princess’s hand. However, once Silvio attains his rulership he proves to be an inept king and suffers all sorts of misfortunes, including the loss of his throne and the magical goatskin jacket that is the source of his good fortune. In the end though, once Silvio regains his jacket, he wins back his kingdom and, with his family, lives happily ever after.

In response to the story Thackeray wrote, “I protest against the whole affair—against the fable—against the jacket—against the bee—against Silvio—against his bad fortune and his good—against the fairy turning everything into money, etc.” (“Grumble” 98) While he was not opposed to moralizing in a story per se, he did not approve of either the Mayhews’ method of incorporating moralization in their tale or the principles the authors were forwarding. As he put it:

If [a writer] wants to moralize, his proposition should be neat and clear, as his argument is correct. I am reconciled now to the wolf eating up Red Riding Hood . . .

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because I have given up believing that this is a moral tale altogether, and am content to receive it as a wild, odd, surprising, and not unkindly fairy story. But if gentlemen set out professing a laborious moral, inculcating the beauties of industry, and how it turns everything into gold or pinchbeck, as the matter may be, I and other little children have a right to demand a pure fable along with all this didactic solemnity ("Grumble" 98).

Thackeray found the Mayhews' tale particularly unsatisfactory because of Silvio's unrealistically benevolent behavior and because virtue was tied so closely to monetary reward.

If there were really your sort of good genius in the world, Socrates ought to have driven off from his trial in a coach-and-six to Xantippe, the loveliest and best-natured of women; and yet we know to the contrary. She was a shrew, and her husband was hanged. A banker's account is a fine thing when properly organized, and the balance agreeably preponderating upon your side; but there are other accounts we have to settle, and if they look at... the misfortunes of the good and the prosperity of their opposites... how can sublime moralists talk about goodness and gold together? ("Grumble" 98)

As Thackeray concluded, "I protest against neither pantomimes nor against Walker's Orrery, but I protest against Walker's Orrery in a pantomime" ("Grumble" 102). Sermons and lessons had their place, but they should not be inserted, undigested, into a fairy story, particularly one intended for children.

Dickens took an even stronger stance against the intrusion of didacticism in fairy tales than Thackeray did. As a child he had hated stuffy, moralistic children's books and in adulthood continued to believe that the vitality of fairy tales depended on their being maintained in their traditional form. In his opinion, the stories could only be damaged by being altered to suit popular ideologies. So when his old friend George Cruikshank presumed to rewrite "Hop o' my Thumb" to forward a personal agenda, some of Dickens's deepest sensibilities were offended.²

Cruikshank's first sin was in making many minor changes in the story's details, most notably omitting the important scene where the ogre, intending to slaughter Hop and his brothers, accidentally murders his own daughters. More offensively, he inserted numerous comments on topics like religion, trade, education, gambling, and tobacco, and turned Hop and his brothers into exemplary models of proper children's behavior. The little boys exhibited excellent table manners, washed with cold water "because it is most refreshing and healthy to do so," and went to bed early without complaining (qtd. in Stone 11). Worst of all, the tale was permeated with the principles of Cruikshank's pet cause, teetotalism. Most of the story problems, from the poverty of Hop's family to the ogre's loss of his captured prey, were due to drunkenness. In the end all is resolved when Hop's father realizes the errors of his ways and passes a law prohibiting the drinking of alcohol in the land, transforming the kingdom almost overnight into a paradise with virtually no crime or poverty.
Dickens, concerned that such an “intrusion . . . into the fairy flower garden,” if left uncontested, might lead to further and worse corruptions of his treasured childhood stories, responded with the essay “Frauds on the Fairies” (233). After making a plea for preserving fairy tales in their traditional form, he presented a revision of “Cinderella” that ruthlessly parodied Cruikshank’s book and attempted to demonstrate the absurdities such moralistic rewriting might eventually result in.

In Dickens’s tale, young Ella began her virtuous career by joining the Juvenile Bands of Hope, a group of children who had pledged to abstain from alcohol, at the tender age of four. After her mother died, her father remarried, but this second union was short-lived because his shameful practice of shaving with warm water rather than cold so “undermined [his] constitution” that he could not endure his new wife’s cross temper and shortly expired (235). With the father out of the way, the stepmother and stepsisters began dumping all the household chores on the little girl’s shoulders and relegating her to the cinders. But Cinderella maintained her sweet temper throughout and showed great practicality by rejecting dresses with tight-lacing as damaging to the female form and by subscribing to the Regenerative Record, a journal “which all good people take in” (235).

When the time came for the King to throw a ball to find a bride for his son, Cinderella’s family naturally left her behind, but she dealt with the situation pragmatically by losing herself in an oration on the “question of the Ocean Penny Postage” (236). In the midst of her reading, though, her grandmother appeared, declaring “Never . . . shall one of the Band of Hope despair!” (236) The magically endowed old lady swiftly rendered her granddaughter eligible to attend the ball by providing an appropriate mode of transportation, an American pumpkin (because some areas of that country outlawed alcoholic drinks), and a sensible costume, “rich sky-blue satin pantaloons gathered at the ankle, a puce-coloured satin pelisse sprinkled with silver flowers, and a very broad Leghorn hat” (237).

At the ball, which was essentially a temperance meeting, Cinderella won the Prince’s heart by sweetly calling out “Hear, hear!” during some of the delegates’ after-dinner speeches (237). The tale then continued in line with the traditional plot: Cinderella lost track of time the following night and had to rush away at the first stroke of twelve, the Prince found the slipper she left behind and instituted a search to find the lady whose foot it fit, and Cinderella was the only aspirant who could prove the shoe was hers. Once the two were wed, the king turned over the rulership of the kingdom to them, and Cinderella began governing with the same kind of “enlightened, liberal, and free principles” that guided the intemperate temperance movement (239). Everyone who ate, drank, or believed anything that she did not agree with was imprisoned or otherwise silenced.

After the virtuous royal pair had been dispatched to their happily ever after, Dickens concluded by writing: “Frauds on the Fairies once permitted, we see
little reason why they may not come to this, and great reason why they may. The Vicar of Wakefield was wisest when he was tired of being always wise. The world is too much with us, early and late. Leave this precious old escape from it, alone" (239). As Dickens insisted, fancy was valuable and necessary in and of itself. By using fairy tales to promote personal agendas, moralists destroyed the innocent charm that attracted people to the tales and perverted the "precious old escape" the imaginative stories could provide.

Thackeray and Dickens railed against fairy stories written primarily to propound specific moralistic and pedagogical ideas. George MacDonald also rejected this kind of simplistic didacticism by promoting a different sort of moralization in "The Fantastic Imagination." According to MacDonald, every fairy tale has meaning: “[A fairytale] cannot help having some meaning; if it have proportion and harmony it has vitality, and vitality is truth” (316). Without this kind of intrinsic truth, he argued, people would not respond to fairy tales with delight. However, a fairy tale does not aim to provide a one-to-one correspondence with some idea its author is trying to propound: “A fairytale is not an allegory. There may be allegory in it, but it is not an allegory” (317). Rather than simply feeding the reader ideas ready-made, fairy tales work by the more subtle process of awakening ideas that are already in the reader and making him think them through himself. A true fairy tale, one that is a legitimate work of art, is indefinite, multifaceted, and works by suggestion.

The kind of complexity MacDonald attributes to fairy tales is also present in the earliest modern fantasies. Like most fiction, the first fantasies, entailed moral presuppositions; the author’s moral agenda sometimes even provided one of his primary motives in composing the tale. For instance, The Rose and the Ring denounces arrogance and vanity and demonstrates that a little misfortune may have a more beneficial influence on a person than continual good fortune, Dickens hoped in A Christmas Carol to sensitize readers to the condition of the poor and to encourage a spirit of generosity and goodwill, and George MacDonald structured Phantastes to illustrate one man’s journey to spiritual maturity.

What distinguishes the earliest modern fantasies from their didactic brethren is the fact that they are not limited to their moral agenda. Where the didactic fantasists singlemindedly propounded their particular dictums, the modern fantasists aimed to create complex characters and situations that, among other things, sometimes demonstrated the importance of certain moral principles. Indeed, the modern fantasies did not always even have a clearly established moral premise.

Vathek, which relates how a hedonistic, ambitious prince’s greed for natural and supernatural power leads him to eternal damnation, does not come out as clearly against avarice and pride as the plot might suggest. For instance, Carathis, Vathek’s domineering, demon-conjuring, power-hungry mother, is one of the novel’s most clearly “evil” personalities, but she is also a formidable and even admirable character. As soon as she arrives in Hell she begins taking over: delving
into the Palace of Subterranean Fire’s deepest secrets and realms, nonchalantly paying her compliments to an Arabian Satan arrayed in his full Infernal Glory, compelling the Divas to revere her and attempting to remove one of the Solimans from his throne so she can take his place. One cannot help admiring her chutzpah. In contrast, Gulchenrouz, the “good” human character, is an insipid little weakling who hides or runs away whenever trouble approaches and is continually referred to as a child even though he is old enough to be betrothed to his young, but not pre-adolescent cousin Nouronihar. Even though Gulchenrouz is rewarded at the end with eternal bliss in a Genie’s abode and Vathek and company are consigned to eternal torment, his character is not an inspirational model of humility and self-denial.

The difference between the didactic fairy tale and modern fantasy is made explicit by Sara Coleridge in her response to the criticism that her novel lacked a moral:

In regard to “Phantasmion’s” want of general purpose and meaning, I can only say that it does not belong to that class of fictions in which a single truth or moral is to be illustrated by a sequence of events, of which Miss Edgeworth’s and Miss Martineau’s tales are instances, or in which, as in the “Faery Queen” and the “Pilgrim’s Progress,” the character and descriptions are all for the sake of an allegory, which . . . determines the general form to be produced. . . . It belongs to that class of fictions of which “Robinson Crusoe,” “Peter Wilkins,” “Faust,” “Undine,” “Peter Schlemil,” and the “Magic Ring,” or the “White Cat,” and many other fairy tales are instances; where the ostensible moral, even if there be one, is not the author’s chief end and aim, which rather consists in cultivating the imagination, and innocently gratifying the curiosity of the reader, by exhibiting the general and abstract beauty of things through the vehicle of a story, which, as it treats of human hopes and fears and passions and interests, and of those changeful events and varying circumstances to which human life is liable, may lend an animation to the accompanying descriptions, and in return receive a lustre from them. (Memoir 146–47)

As Coleridge suggests, her novel has no easily identifiable moral because it is not like allegories and didactic children’s stories that are intended to advance a single idea. Instead, like novels, the Kunstmärchen, and other fairy tales, Phantasmion aims to tell a story, to stir the reader’s imagination, and to examine human experience. What made Phantasmion and the other early modern fantasies unique was their emphasis on encouraging the imagination and exploring human experience through a story. It is this aim to examine human experience in the first modern fantasies that suggests the third and most important feature uniting them—their use of the narrative convention literary realism.

Literary realism is a narrative convention that first appeared in the eighteenth century with the writings of Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson and is particularly associated with the novel form. While the term “realism” might seem to imply a fidelity to the Real, most critics emphasize that literary realism is actually a set of narrative methods that aim to create an illusion of reality. Concep-
tions about the nature of reality change over time and are not universally held even when they prevail. So, rather than attempting to accurately depict Absolute Reality, realistic fiction attempts to relate a story that conforms to the author's understanding of the nature of the world and that conveys a "sense of life."

As Ian Watt describes in *The Rise of the Novel,* realistic writers attempt to establish the "truthfulness" of their stories using the methods that are always invoked when the accuracy of an account is being examined. A jury, for instance, wants to know all the details about the identities of the persons involved in an individual case, the particulars about the time and place of the events, and to hear the witnesses' own account of what happened. The novel in a similar way attempts to establish verisimilitude through original plots, an emphasis on particular characters and settings, and a prose style that aims more for an accurate description of its objects than for linguistic elegance. While it was not the first literary form to make use of these realistic techniques, it was the first to have its entire structure organized according to the method of literary realism.

Just as the novel is separated from previous literary forms by its reliance on realistic narrative techniques, the earliest modern fantasies are distinguished from traditional fantasy forms by their use of original plots, particular characters, particular settings, and a largely referential prose style. This change that Beckford, Coleridge, and the other early writers of modern fantasy instigated in the composition of fantasy literature can be demonstrated by comparing their writings with Perrault's fairy tales.

Historically, tradition had been accepted as the standard for determining truth and, for this reason, ancient and medieval fiction consisted primarily of retellings of history, legends, myths, and folklore, whose original stories could not be traced to an individual author. Literary merit was determined by how well narratives conformed to their genres' literary conventions and free invention only began to become acceptable around the publication of Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1485).

Charles Perrault, like other pre-realistic writers, drew his stories from a traditional source: the oral folk tradition. "Cinderella," "Bluebeard," and "Hop o My Thumb" were popular French folktales and numerous variations can be found of each in France and elsewhere. While Perrault was responsible for the form of the written tales and put his unique stamp on them, the Frenchman's genius lay in giving new form to the traditional stories.

In contrast, the first novelists, in their quest to accurately depict the experiences of individuals, emphasized the construction of non-traditional plots, since each human experience is new and unique. The plots of the first modern fantasies followed this same innovative trend. Lewis Melville emphasizes that despite the influence of the *Arabian Nights* on *Vathek,* the novel wasn't simply a copy of the Eastern tales and, indeed, owed more to Voltaire's satirical romance (142). Also, even though there was an historical figure "Vathek" who exhibited many of the characteristics Beckford gave to his fictional Vathek, critics have been unable to locate an existent tale on which Beckford based his story.
Similarly, *Phantasmion* and *The Rose and the Ring*, while inspired by the traditional fairy tale, are original stories. Like many fairy tales, both books have a medievalesque setting, include royal figures as the main characters, display a plethora of supernatural beings and acts, and their romantic leads are in the end married and set securely on their thrones. But even though the stories were cast in the form of fairy tales, they were not based on existent oral folktales and the degree of individuality and particularization they exhibit breaks with the typical fairy tale conventions of brevity and universality. Each is a unique, individual story.

Another realistic feature separating modern and traditional fantasy is the former’s construction of particular characters. One of the most effective ways for establishing the individuality—or the lack thereof—of particular characters is through the method of naming them. In the past, writers typically gave their characters names that were descriptive, carried literary or archaic connotations, or in some other way indicated that the fictional person should be perceived as a universal rather than individual figure. These pre-realistic characters, unlike real people, usually also boasted only one name.

Most of Perrault’s characters, in pre-realistic fashion, are nameless “kings,” “stepmothers,” and “good fairies.” The title character in “The Sleeping Beauty” is simply “the princess,” Bluebeard’s wife has no name, and Puss-in-Boots’ owner is referred to as “the cat’s master.” When a character is given a more specific name it often just describes something about her. Little Red Riding Hood is named for her cloak, Cinderella for sitting in the chimney cinders, and Donkeyskin for the hide she disguises herself with.

One significant indication of the first novelists’ break with pre-realistic tradition was their practice of individualizing their characters by giving them both proper names and surnames that sounded as if they could belong to contemporary people. The first modern fantasies also followed this pattern. All their main characters had individual names and, while most of them were not the ordinary, modern-sounding names that were the ideal of realistic fiction, the names were appropriate for the authors’ settings and purposes.

For instance, even though Sara Coleridge gave her characters single names—and fanciful ones at that—“Glandreth,” “Potentilla,” and “Malderyl” suit the novel’s Fairyland setting and poetic style, while it is credible that characters living in an apparently medieval period would not yet use surnames. Dickens’s “Fred,” “Tiny Tim,” and “Bob Cratchit” are fitting names for *A Christmas Carol’s* contemporary, nineteenth-century London setting. Finally, George MacDonald’s “Anodos” is a more original name than such typical allegorical examples as “Christian,” “Suffering,” or “Faith;” but its androgynous quality and the lack of a surname help to convey the sense that the main character is a symbolic figure as well as a particular man who wakes up one day in Fairyland.

A third realistic feature separating modern and traditional fantasy is the former’s use of particular settings. The pre-modern emphasis on the Universal
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that led most writers before the eighteenth century to use timeless stories and general characters in their fiction, also extended to their construction of settings. Since ancient and medieval writers were influenced by the Platonic belief that the true reality was comprised of timeless Forms existing behind objects in the material world, they assumed that there was no essential difference between the past and present or between one place and another. As a result, their stories were typically set against generic backgrounds divorced from a particular historical period or location.

This pre-realistic indifference to time and place is apparent in Perrault's fairy tales. Occasionally a geographical feature in one of the tales is named or a minor land is given a proper name: "Patient Griselda" boasts a river Po and in "The Sleeping Beauty" the good fairy responsible for altering the princess's enchantment must be fetched from the kingdom of Mataquin when the princess pricks her finger. However, except for rare references to specific locations, the stories are vaguely set in a distant, medieval-like past. Almost all the tales begin with the indefinite "There was once" and none of the kingdoms and villages the principal characters live in are named.

Perrault's tales are also not devoid of setting particulars: realistic details are sprinkled throughout describing objects, clothing, and rooms. One of Cinderella's sisters wears a "red velvet gown... with English trimming" to the prince's ball; the other goes attired in "a simple skirt," her "shawl with the golden flowers," and a "diamond cummerbund;" and both break "more than a dozen corset laces" while getting dressed (61-62). Similarly, "Bluebeard" includes a grisly scene when the young wife goes into the forbidden room: the windows are shuttered so it is almost too dark to see, the floor is "sticky with clotted blood," and the corpses of Bluebeard's previous wives hang on the wall with their throats slashed (38). Nevertheless, such detailed descriptions are infrequent, and, while they add to the credibility of the tales, they do not establish the stories' settings as fully realized places.

On the other hand, the settings in the first novelists' stories reflected the modern emphasis on individualism evident in their use of original plots and particular characters. Since the novelists were influenced by the modern recognition of time's significant role in shaping human lives and history, their plots depicted the influence of past events on present ones, they often specified exactly when events occurred, and they attempted to keep their time scales consistent with historical and natural events. Also, since it is difficult to imagine a particular point in time without also imagining where it occurs, the landscapes, interiors, and objects in the first novels were detailed as carefully as their time schemes.

This emphasis on the construction of a particular setting is evident in the earliest works of modern fantasy. William Beckford demonstrated a realistic fidelity to the specifics of time and place to a particularly impressive degree in his fiction. Years before he even conceived the idea of Vathek, Beckford had been reading extensively in Oriental literature, and when he began the novel, he
drew on his earlier reading to give *Vathek* the illusion of an authentic Oriental background.

This concern with the accuracy of *Vathek*'s details is evinced in Beckford's correspondence with Samuel Henley, a friend who translated his tale from French to English. In one letter, Henley claimed that he had “ransacked” many volumes of information on the East and was amazed by the reliability of Beckford's details: “you will be yourself surprised to find how accurate you have in most instances been” (Melville 130). In another letter, Beckford gave his translator the sources for his references to the Domes of Shaddukian and Amberabad, the Cocknos bird, and the butterflies of Cachemire, declaring that “I believe in most respects I have been exact in my costume” (Melville 135).

A more public indication of Beckford's intention to accurately establish *Vathek* in a particular time and place is the collection of more than two hundred notes he appended to the novel. In these notes, which comprised more than a third of the published book, Beckford extensively cited most of the best-known scholarly works on the Orient to explain the references to Eastern customs, places, and history in the novel. The notes were so voluminous that one reader exclaimed to the *Gentleman's Magazine* that *Vathek* had apparently “been composed as a text for the purpose of giving to the publick the information contained in the notes” (Melville 140).

The Eastern setting depicted in *Vathek* does not correspond exactly to the real East, since Beckford drew on fictional sources for some of his ideas and the scholarly sources he consulted were sometimes inaccurate. But within the context of information available on the Orient in his day and in comparison with other writers of Oriental tales, Beckford's faithfulness to the East was commendable.

Similarly, George MacDonald's intention to create a particular setting is evident in his detailed description of Anodos's transportation to Fairyland. The conveyance begins when Anodos awakens to the sound of running water: “and looking out of bed, I saw that a large green marble basin, in which I was won't to wash, and which stood on a low pedestal of the same material in a corner of my room, was overflowing like a spring; and that a stream of clear water was running over the carpet, all the length of the room, finding its outlet I knew not where. And, stranger still, where this carpet, which I had myself designed to imitate a field of grass and daisies, bordered the course of the little stream, the grass-blades and daisies seemed to wave in a tiny breeze that swayed with every motion of the changeful current”(19).

As Anodos continues to watch, his dressing-table sprouts ivy, his bed curtains turn into tree branches, and by the time he finishes dressing his bedroom has completely transformed into a woodland setting. Here, MacDonald is not describing a generic bedroom or forest. The furniture has a specific appearance and location, the carpet designs visibly change into literal grass and daisies, and the time of day is evident: “I found myself completing my toilet under the boughs
of a great tree, whose top waved in the golden stream of the sunrise . . . as the cool morning wind swung it to and fro” (20). By concretely describing how the transportation occurs, MacDonald establishes his scene in specific places at specific times.

A fourth realistic feature that distinguishes modern fantasy from previous fantasy forms is its use of a largely referential prose style. Before the rise of the novel, writers aimed for an elegant, figurative prose that displayed a suitable degree of “linguistic sensitivity” for its subject, and were evaluated by their ability to achieve these stylistic qualities. Perrault’s fairy tales do not illustrate this pre-realistic feature as clearly as some of the other traditional features. They are written in a plain, simple style, rather than the elevated, refined language heralded by the critics of his day. Nevertheless, the concision and economy Perrault’s prose displays is in keeping with the ordered precision common to pre-realistic writing. The first novelists broke with traditional practice by introducing a prose style that had a primarily denotative aim. The condensed, poetic style employed by previous literary forms was too mannered to relate stories that were intended to realistically depict individual human experiences. While the earliest novelists’ prose was often inelegant and repetitive, those features added to the apparent authenticity of their stories.

The stylistic method adopted by the first novelists also appears in the first modern fantasies. For instance, Dickens begins A Christmas Carol with: “Marley was dead, to begin with, there is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it. And Scrooge’s name was good upon ‘Change for anything he chose to put his hand to” (30). This prose is plain, simple, and natural, as if the narrator were relating the tale to another person and in realistic fashion the narrator belabors his point. The first sentence does not simply pronounce Marley dead, but drags the declaration out an extra phrase and clause, while the next three paragraphs continue to elaborate on Marley’s demise. By specifying all the people who signed Marley’s burial register, philosophizing about the relative deadness of nails, describing Scrooge’s reaction to his partner’s death, and emphasizing the importance of Marley’s inanimate status, the reader is not only convinced that Scrooge’s partner is indeed dead, but the accumulation of particular details renders the report concrete and believable.

The natural style used in A Christmas Carol is also apparent in The Rose and the Ring’s dialogue. For instance, a quarrel between Giglio and Angelica, instigated when Giglio thanked the princess for a dinner he thought she had sent him when he was sick, is related in a manner comparable to the way people actually speak:

“What do I know about fowls and jellies, that you allude to them in that rude way?” says Angelica.

“Why, didn’t—didn’t you send them, Angelica dear?” says Giglio.
"I send them indeed! Angelica dear! No, Giglio dear," says she, mocking him. "I was engaged in getting the rooms ready for his Royal Highness the Prince of Crim Tartary, who is coming to pay my papa’s Court a visit."

"The—Prince—of—Crim—Tartary!" Giglio said, aghast.

"Yes, the Prince of Crim Tartary," says Angelica, mocking him. "I daresay you never heard of such a country. What did you ever hear of? You don’t know whether Crim Tartary is on the Red Sea or on the Black Sea, I dare say." (227)

Here Thackeray does not beautify his prose, but uses ordinary words that people employ in everyday conversation: "know," "getting," "heard," "rude," "papa." The few formal terms he does insert into the dialogue—"allude," "indeed," "engaged"—seem appropriate for a princess’ diction and are infrequent enough that they do not give the whole passage a formal air. Similarly, the way Giglio stumbles over the word “didn’t” and gasps out the visiting prince’s title, gives the impression that Thackeray is transcribing Giglio’s words exactly as the prince would say them. Last, Angelica’s repetition of the phrase “I dare say,” is reminiscent of the way people tend to repeat themselves in real conversations. While dialogue is always artificial, since in real life people do not speak as succinctly and colorfully as characters in fiction do, Thackeray still succeeds through word choice, punctuation, and repetition in creating the illusion that he is transcribing a real conversation.

In contrast, Sara Coleridge’s novel is written in a more refined style than the other early fantasies. The poetic quality of her writing is apparent in one passage where Phantasmion is traveling around the countryside in search of Iarine:

Phantasmion pursued the same track which his gentle princess had taken through Tigridia, and excited curiosity in all who beheld him by his noble aspect and kingly air. The first discourse of his cottage hosts was ever concerning the fair pilgrim Iarine, and this tale was sure to be followed by an animated history of Ulander as its counterpart. Phantasmion glowed and trembled when he heard those names wedded in description, and scarce dared inquire about Nemorosa lest he should hear some unwelcome eulogy on the graces of its youthful chief. Thus he fared, tracing his lady’s footsteps to the house of Malderyl, where he learned that the ancient queen had repaired to the forest with a most beautiful maiden (241).

This passage lacks the conversational tone evident in Dickens’s and Thackeray’s stories. Instead of relating her tale in natural, simple language, Coleridge makes more formal word choices. Phantasmion is not just seen by onlookers, he is beheld; the cottagers do not talk, they discourse; and Malderyl does not visit the forest, she repairs to it. Coleridge’s language give her writing a polished air, but also creates a distance between the reader and the story’s events. The stylish writing suggests that readers are being presented with a filtered report of incidents that have already occurred, rather than observing events as they actually happen.

Stylish writing is not inherently incompatible with literary realism—many successful novels are written in elevated language. Nevertheless, Coleridge rec-
ognized that her prose in some ways detracted from the novel. She acknowledged that her story had an "over-depth of colouring, and prodigality of beauty," which might be considered a fault. However, she felt that this poetic quality added more to the novel than it took away. The realistic defects in her prose she "could not afford to lose, being substitutes for better things" (qtd. in Griggs 118). Since pre-realistic writers would ostensibly not consider an "over-depth of colouring" a weakness, the fact that Coleridge commented on this "problematic" aspect of her style indicates that she had an essentially realistic aim in her fiction.

One of the most significant features uniting the earliest modern fantasies is their employment of the narrative convention literary realism. Unlike traditional fantasy forms that reflected their conception of reality as universal and unchanging in their use of timeless plots, general characters, and general settings, the first writers of modern fantasy manifested a modern emphasis on the individual by developing original plots, particular characters, and particular settings. Their realistic aim was further evinced in their use of a largely descriptive, referential prose instead of the refined, condensed style that had been traditionally employed. Like the first novelists, the earliest writers of modern fantasy broke with previous tradition by adopting methods that would convince readers that their stories truthfully depicted individual human experience.

Now that we have completed our examination of the earliest modern fantasies, we are in a position to evaluate the claim that the fantasy genre developed when people began to view extranatural powers as "unreal." As I have indicated, the earliest works of modern fantasy are linked by three significant features: their writers viewed fairy stories as valuable and beneficial, they were not intended to be solely didactic works, and they were composed with the techniques of literary realism. On the basis of these patterns in the first fantasies, I think the best explanation for the genre's emergence is that modern fantasy originated when writers began applying the techniques of literary realism in stories in which the extranatural played a fundamental role.

One reason why modern fantasy did not appear until the late eighteenth century is because the convention of literary realism, which is essential to the genre, did not fully develop until the beginning of that century. Even after the first novelists began orienting the whole structure of their fiction according to the methods of literary realism, these techniques were not immediately applied to fantasy works because of the indifferent and sometimes hostile attitude towards fairy stories that predominated throughout the century. It was not until the Romantic movement took form and provided a justification for fantasy literature that modern fantasy could blossom.

Once writers began composing modern fantasies, their stories could be distinguished from much contemporary fantasy because they were written out of a legitimate interest in their extranatural subjects; the authors did not view their stories solely as didactic vehicles for forwarding a moral agenda. The first fantasies
were also separated from much traditional fantasy because they displayed the peculiarly modern narrative convention literary realism.

In short, my analysis of the earliest modern fantasies suggests that the genre’s formation can be accounted for without reference to a widespread disbelief in the extranatural. While readers since the eighteenth century have generally been more skeptical about the existence of the supernatural and magical than were their forebears, it is not this skepticism per se that inspired the genesis of modern fantasy. Only with the adoption of literary realism did a form of fantasy literature become distinctly modern fantasy.

Notes

1. An “extranatural power” is a non-physical substance similar to the anthropological concept “mana.” It is the stuff that composes supernatural beings and the medium by which magic works. In other words, it is neither material nor electromagnetic in nature. More specifically, it is not composed of the four elementary forces (gravity, electromagnetism, the strong force, and the weak force) and three classes of elementary particles (leptons, hadrons, and exchange particles) that are the fundamental constituents of the physical universe.

   I prefer the term “extranatural” to the more frequently cited “supernatural,” because the latter carries a religious connotation and means that the force is operating in a realm above the workings of the material realm, implying that characters would react to it with awe or amazement. Neither of these features is universally characteristic of modern fantasy. Since “extranatural power” simply means a force operating outside of physical processes, it avoids prescribing what the nature of the “non-natural” force in a fantasy should be.

2. A thorough description of the events surrounding the publication of Cruikshank’s book and Dickens’s response as well as the motivations of the parties involved can be found in Stone 1–17.

3. My description of literary realism is drawn primarily from this source.

4. A variety of spellings are offered for the historical Vathek’s name: “Vathek” (Gemmett 99), “Caliph al-Wathik Bi’llah” (Alexander 91), and the “Caliph Watik” (Chapman 108). For more information on the characteristics attributed to the original “Vathek” see Alexander 91–92; and Gemmett 99–100.

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