The Shape of Fantasy: Investigating the Structure of American Heroic Epic Fantasy, by Charul Palmer-Patel

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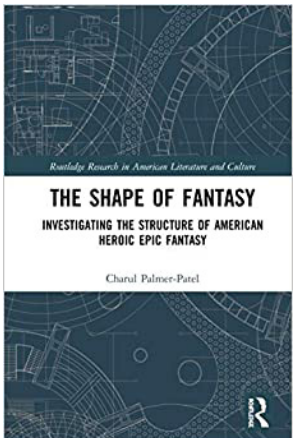

Charul Palmer-Patel shows a nearly encyclopedic scope in her innovative study of the formal traits of American Epic Fantasy, ranging across primary texts rapidly and with fluency. This book will delight readers with a similar breadth of reading in mainstream bestselling fantasy fiction from the 1990s onward while potentially dizzying some outsiders, but she is consistently engaging. The capaciousness of her argument in relation to primary materials is commendable even if some readers may skim the case studies by sticking to the critical arguments. Palmer-Patel is also specific in her scope and purpose: using the mainstream bestsellers in American fantasy fiction across twenty years from 1990 to 2010 to identify the key structural traits of the Heroic Epic as a sub-genre. This sets her work both parallel and contrary to many of the dominant trends in critical work on fantasy. Palmer-Patel echoes (while critiquing) the structuralist tendencies of Farah Mendlesohn's focus on rhetorics, an approach echoing all the way back to E.M. Forster's argument against defining the genre, and also follows in its path with a focus on structure (not form) in order to define a sub-genre. The focus on the epic and the heroic paired with a structuralist method places Palmer-Patel in line with the preponderance of major critical work from Rosemary Jackson and Tzvetan Todorov to Brian Attebery and C.N. Manlove while at the same time forcing her to break with them because "studies of Fantasy fiction have become dated" (13) and seem to largely end historically where her study begins. This leads to a critique via Paul Kincaid of Mendlesohn because "her choice of texts may lead to her criticism of the form" (12) and kindred implicit revisions of others. This is, in itself, enough critical complexity for one project, but she has a twinned thesis. This second thesis is continually present yet not with the same direct concision as her primary aim: the centrality of prophecy and determinism to the Heroic Epic sub-genre she identifies, which suggests an interest less focused on "form" itself than it is in "form" as a sublimation of "ideology."

This second thesis emerges immediately after the Introduction and shapes all of the subsequent chapters. She begins her project with Lois McMaster Bujold's *The Curse of Chalion*

(2001) based on "prophecy" and the "destined hero" (19), thereby broaching the contradictions of determinism and free will in fantasy's tropes. This, in effect, is the "shape" of American heroic epic fantasy. It remains constant across the book through to the final chapter on David Eddings, in which she contrasts her attention to the shape of free will and fate against Tzvetan Todorov's more dialectical focus on history in a straight-forward conflict followed by the temporary stability of a new synthesis (159). In the first instance, the fine distinction between fate and free will comes via Manlove and Mendlesohn, with Palmer-Patel's innovation being a dispute against her precursors who contend that "The hero does not have free will in a narrative driven by prophecy" (Mendlesohn 42; quoted in Palmer-Patel 19). This leads her to argue prophetic foreknowledge is not determinism so much as it is a matter of interpretation, but not the dodge that not knowing how to interpret determinism dissolves its conflict with free will. While Palmer-Patel then moves into archetypal criticism, mainly based on Frye and Campbell, she returns again and again to prophecy and free will without engaging with its long theological basis. There are, however, some thorny questions here. The argument uses Mendlesohn's and Richard Mathews's (contradictory) contentions that free will sits at the heart of *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955), although reference to the closing gestures to prophecy in *The Hobbit* (1937) would be helpful. In Tolkien, however, this conflict between fate and free will is bridged through Christian theology's long conversation about Providence, which leaves space for both. Palmer-Patel's most striking example in the chapter is not from Bujold, however, but comes from Terry Goodkind's *Wizard's First Rule* (1994), in which the heroes fulfill destiny only by rejecting it. Of course, this does not actually undermine the problem since choosing what is destined (or choosing what is not) does not alter determinism. What is fascinating, though, is Goodkind's fixation on a libertarian/Randian concept of freedom shaping his work's response to the theme of predestination and prophecy.

Once this twinned focus is established in the first chapter, Palmer-Patel proceeds to matters of time in Mercedes Lackey's *The Fairy Godmother* (2004). Here, the defining twist for fate and free will comes not through the subversion of *interpretation* as the problem surrounding fate but rather *time itself*. To Palmer-Patel, the paradox between fate and free will is structural, and that structure "captures and rearticulates current theories of time" (35). Some of this, with gestures to quantum mechanics and Stephen Hawking (35–38) or a light-cone charting of Campbell's the Hero's Path (40), may tread close to old memories of the Sokal affair, but the metafictional analysis this opens for Lackey and Robert Jordan in the third chapter is very productive. At the same time, as the work on Jordan turns to Brian Sanderson (the subject of Chapter 8) twinned again with the problem of interpretation of fate, new questions emerge. She focuses on how a protagonist's interpretation of fate mirrors our interpretation of plot and structure, both as a form of prefiguration, akin to the seeming oddity of working hard to prevent the impossible and bring about the inevitable. That oddity reveals the essentially ideological nature of fate in these instances, unveiling not the inescapability of Providence so much as our social systems of belief. This approach leads her to argue "the hero is confronted with a choice or an alternate path which provokes epistemological questions where the hero comprehends and then accepts or rejects their own identity" (61). The draw here is toward a fantasist not included in the study but whose literary

and philosophical work is deeply concerned with subjectivity, consciousness, and determinism: R. Scott Bakker, who also fits Palmer-Patel's timeframe but is Canadian not American (despite studying in the USA and publishing his novels there first).

With these critical successes in the study, there are also components likely to garner critique. Palmer-Patel's reliance on archetypal criticism in her excavation of the "shape" of fantasy recalls many hesitations, from poststructuralist challenges to these kinds of grand narratives to the self-conscious use of Campbell's works by authors after the famous promotion of it by George Lucas, who hosted Bill Moyers' interview with Campbell on Skywalker Ranch (later becoming a bestseller published as *The Power of Myth* just two years before the start of Palmer-Patel's period of study). We know that many of the authors in Palmer-Patel's study are or were conversant with Campbell's work and archetypal criticism generally, perhaps most especially Campbell's early book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949) that would prefigure his four volume magnum opus, *The Masks of God* (1968). Some of Palmer-Patel's authors acknowledge this in interviews, and others like Eddings make it more overt in their manuscripts. However, some readers will be old enough to remember (or had professors old enough to be committed to archetypal criticism to know) why archetypal criticism fell from academic favor in the same moment as it gained its greatest popular appeal. The mainstreaming of postcolonial and poststructuralist critical work in the 1990s prioritized attention to forms of difference that an archetypal method makes difficult by prioritizing forms of similarity. This means that some of the ways Palmer-Patel employs Frye and Campbell may jar particular groups of readers. While we have poststructuralist psychoanalytic theory, Palmer-Patel's contention that "Campbell's psychoanalytic approach suggests that acts that seem to be accidental are a result of suppressed desires" (2) may generate disagreement around "psychoanalysis" and the return of the repressed or sublimation. A Jamesonian understanding of psychoanalysis as the ideological manifestation of a bourgeois mode of production would also offer an alternate interpretation to her assertion that "this is not a result of suppressed desires, but instead an active declaration of free will" (24). Such a declaration could, especially in this historical moment, be aptly understood as a surrender to the coercive ideological forms of neoliberalism and its conflation of choice with freedom. These same rifts emerge again when Campbell returns in relation to messianism and David Farland (81) or the fact of repetition as the monomyth's implicit messianic mode (164).

The closing chapter on Eddings offers an effective culmination of the project, both in terms of Palmer-Patel's analysis based on the refinements each of the preceding chapters made possible, as well as Eddings's own self-conscious play with choice, determinism, and dialectical history across *The Mallorean* (1987-1991) series (the subject here) and its precursor *The Belgariad* (1982-1984). This is especially effective given Eddings's relative exclusion from fantasy criticism. As Palmer-Patel notes, the characters realize and discuss the problems of repetition, free will, and determinism. That Eddings would be the subject of the conclusion to the study is not surprising given the extent to which his works consider repetition, archetypes, prefiguration, and choice as their central themes (and as anticipated in his teaching notes held in his archives at Reed College –

these are prevalent themes in his fiction precisely because they were central concerns in his critical study of literature as a professor). In a sense, Palmer-Patel's critical summation sits in parallel with Eddings's, with both pointing to time, open form, and an ideological nostalgia for the Edenic in the "nostos" of return in Eddings's epilogue to *The Seeress of Kell* (1991): "And so, my children, the time has come to close / the book. There will be other days and other stories, / but this tale is finished" (171; quoting Eddings 374), which Palmer-Patel interprets as the "novum" enacted in repetition by a new cycle implied in "other days and other stories" (171). What strikes one here is Eddings making overt the contrition and repetition compulsion (back to psychoanalysis) in his series: he and his wife Leigh lost custody of their adopted son and daughter then spent a year in jail after being convicted of physical abuse, for which the books seem some ongoing impossible attempt at recuperation, healing, or reconciliation. This is not merely an opportunistic observation. The "novum" with which Palmer-Patel closes inevitably reminds the reader of Darko Suvin's work, which reads fantasy very differently and considers a very different sense of history, determinism, and dialectics. The newness of exploring the traumatic past through a fresh repetition and a new cycle may be an expression of free will (conjuring up the willful "fort/da" game of little Hans in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*), but it is also the traumatic repetition compulsion crushing the free choice of the self, for which the "unexpectedly new" is also the failure to recuperate the repeated past and to move forward.

A number of minor infelicities are worth noting, ranging from "James [sic] Campbell" (22), missing adverbial forms and past tenses (161), misspelled character names (165), and some repetitions in the Index (185). These are minor slips inevitable in the nature of the production of Routledge's series. Palmer-Patel excels in her fluid ease with the primary texts of her study and her demand that fantasy criticism do more and extend its scope to a metacritical frame. Anyone at work on contemporary fantasy should respond to her challenges in *The Shape of Fantasy*. Her call for an extension of the critical "canon" on fantasy in order to respond to work of the past twenty-five years is entirely convincing. It can only be imagined what a computational "distant reading" of the sub-genre would reveal about its traits, which might both support and surprise Palmer-Patel's work. Regardless of the supports or surprises it may bring, any future work on heroic epic fantasy as genre will need to contend with this book.

James Gifford is Professor of English at Fairleigh Dickinson University – Vancouver Campus. He is the author and editor of several books, including *A Modernist Fantasy: Anarchism, Modernism, & the Radical Fantastic* (ELS Editions, 2018), *Personal Modernisms: Anarchist Networks & the Later Avant-Gardes* (University of Alberta Press, 2014), and *Of Sunken Islands and Pestilence: Restoring the Voice of Edward Taylor Fletcher to Nineteenth-Century Canadian Literature* (Athabasca University Press, 2022). Find him on Twitter @GiffordJames.