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EngK01

6 Januari 2010

Realistic Fantasy or Fantastic Realism: On Defining the Genre in Susanna  
Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*.

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## Introduction:

”He hardly ever spoke of magic, and when he did it was like a history lesson and no one could bear to listen to him.” (1)

With these, the first words of her novel *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* (2006), Susanna Clarke might as well have been describing the entirety of her work, not only one of its protagonists. The character described is Mr Gilbert Norrell, the first practical magician in England for centuries. He is one of a pair of magicians working side by side, and against each other, in the novel. The other, Mr Jonathan Strange, is Norrell’s opposite in every possible way. Where Norrell thinks all magic should be learnt from century-old-books, Jonathan Strange wants to experiment; where Norrell finds fairy-magic appalling and quite detestable, Jonathan Strange sees it as intriguing; and, perhaps most importantly, where Norrell wants to destroy all traces of the Raven King, the great magician-king of northern England, ever having existed, Jonathan Strange secretly houses a want to bring him back from the otherworld of Faerie.

The quote above, together with the duality of the two main characters, create an excellent symbol for the whole novel. Whether or not the reader can “bear to listen” to Susanna Clarke’s narrative is, of course, a completely different question. The relationship between magic and history, however, is so much more important. Clarke combines footnotes and the illusion of thorough research to explain a reality as unreal as Tolkien’s Middle-Earth or Perumov’s multidimensional universe<sup>1</sup>. Yet, by using these and other techniques she borders on the realm of realism and the historical novel and thus separates herself from the genres of modern fantasy.

Genre is a difficult term to discuss. To some people it is completely irrelevant, others see it as almost impossible to apply to any given narrative and others yet consider literature where a generic analysis is possible ‘bad literature’. It is true that genre accounts for a multitude of categories and sub-categories; some as narrow as others are wide in scope. Many novels employ techniques belonging to several genres to create a blend or something entirely new; making the generic perspective all the more difficult to employ when looking at literature.

Why, then, does it make sense to study it in relation to a novel? The answer is twofold: First, finding what genre a novel belongs to automatically creates a set of implied readers, all with their expectations on what to find within the cover. This is probably most important to the publishers of the book, who want to get it out to the right customers, but can also be of use for someone who wants to map the implied author’s expectations and pictured implied readers. Second, genre can say

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<sup>1</sup> See Nick Perumov’s *Keeper of the Swords*.

quite many things about the time and place in which the novel was written. The rise of the realist novel, for example, happened in a time when scientific research became more and more important and many writers believed that only by retelling the real world as perfectly as possible was it possible to create a good narrative (P. Morris, 9-10). Much later, modern fantasy was born in the wake of wars that had shook the entire world and effectively killed all fairy-tales of old and, in an instant, rendered reality perhaps too real.

Susanna Clarke, with her *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, makes for an interesting study of genre since it, as stated above, employs techniques from both the most 'unrealistic' of genres and the most 'realistic'. She has been compared to J.R.R Tolkien as well as Charles Dickens and even Jane Austen by her reviewers. The novel is published by Tor's Fantasy and can be found on the fantasy shelf in a bookstore. Is this justified? What genre does Clarke's novel actually belong to, if any, and is a generic approach fruitful in studying a novel like this?

The aim of this essay is to map the techniques and elements of Susanna Clarke's novel in comparison to two fields of literature: fantasy and realism. This analysis is an attempt to define the genre of *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, as well as a discussion of genre, and more importantly, of the relationship between two seemingly opposite approaches to the written word. First is a comparison of the novel to realism, then follows a discussion about fantastical elements and last, there will be a discussion about Kathryn Hume's structuralist approach to both these genres.

### **Mirroring the world - Realism:**

“[U]ndeniably realism as a literary form has been associated with an insistence that art cannot turn away from the more sordid and harsh aspects of human existence.” (P. Morris, 3)

Following the Age of Enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, ideas began to circulate on how to best describe the properties of reality and represent these in textual form. People believed it to be possible to visualize both subjective and objective perspectives on the real world and how it is perceived (P. Morris, 9). Pam Morris writes in her book *Realism* that “[t]he values of accuracy, adequacy and truth are fundamental to this empirical view of knowledge and its representational form: realism.”(9) Thus, a new genre had been born.

In its infancy, realism was used exactly as a mean of representing what exists in the actual world. It can be said to have been a form of empirical research in narrative form; asking questions about the world and answering these same questions by observing and noting what had been seen. Realist texts were not meant to be art, but informative displays of the real world; in short, a looking-

glass through which reality could be observed as something factually described. (P. Morris, 10).

There has been much criticism to this idea presented by early realists and P. Morris uses a mirror as a symbol for the main argument against objective representation in fiction. Where a mirror reflects what is actually there exactly in the way and shape it appears, she writes, authors must choose for themselves in which order they want to describe, for example, a room and what properties they will put focus on. It is therefore impossible to state “this is how it is” but rather, every realist text is an interpretation of reality (11). Other critics have discussed what actually constitutes reality. Several realist writers describe different societies and apply different moral standards to them. How can a group of authors claim to describe reality when they differ in their views on it. Perhaps the reason it is so difficult to reach consensus is because reality is not made up of one single universe. P. Morris exemplifies this by saying that “Flaubert could not write like Balzac because he did not live in the same reality.” (69)<sup>2</sup> Perspectives, then, change depending on who you are, where you are and when you are.

However, there is need of a definition for the purpose of this essay. Realism, therefore, can be said to be an attempt to explain reality. Several effects of realism are described in Pam Morris’ book. First, realism has an empirical effect; meaning a conveyance of an existing reality and its properties in an empirical manner. Questions are asked and answered throughout the narrative just like it would be in a study of physics or biology (101-109). A second effect is that of repetition. Events are told and re-told from various perspectives to describe the actual happenings as objectively as is possible. This is similar to the empirical way of looking at the world (109).

Before moving on it should also be stated that for the purpose of this essay the realist genre is somewhat broadened to account for historical novels as well. The reason is that today, as P. Morris states, realism is not as clearly a genre as it was in the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century. Instead, realism will be the term for novels written using realist techniques with the intention of describing our empirically observable reality<sup>3</sup>.

Now that we have a definition of what constitutes realism it is time to move on to Susanna Clarke’s novel and analyze it in relation to this definition. There are several techniques used that closely connect the world Clarke has created to the world we, as real physical beings, exist in. First, she sets her plot in an actual country: England; second, she makes references to real, historical persons and connects these to her own characters which further strengthens these characters’ connection to history; third, she employs footnotes to describe historical events that differ from our perception of history, rather than explaining these differences in the running text.

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<sup>2</sup> Both these authors are French realists.

<sup>3</sup> “Empirically observable” is used to distinguish this type of reality from the “inner” reality that will be discussed towards the end of the essay.

The first thing that comes to mind is the historical setting. *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* is set in a real, historical England during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, most of the plot takes place here, in London, York and Newcastle. Later Jonathan Strange travels to both Spain and France to fight in the Napoleonic wars, and towards the end he makes a lengthy visit to Venice. In describing all of these places Clarke is very historically accurate. Historical events occur when they are supposed to and the fundamentals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century British society are in place. The similarities to historical novels are striking and Clarke uses these pieces of history to validate the events she describes which never took place in our universe.

One way in which she does this is by constantly assuming a basic understanding of the world she describes. Her implied readers are supposed to know how the 19<sup>th</sup> century British world looked. This is exemplified early in the book when she writes: “And I hope that all my readers are acquainted with an old English Cathedral town or I fear that the significance of Mr Norrell’s choosing that particular place will be lost upon them.” (32) The technique used here strongly suggests that the world she has created actually exists and can be observed by the readers themselves; a great contrast to, for example, high fantasy<sup>4</sup> where every place is new to the reader and has to be explained for the atmosphere to be set.

After the above quoted passage Clarke moves on to describe something entirely fictional, but with the same assumption that readers are acquainted with what she is portraying. The following quote explains something quite unrealistic as something actually part of the historical time-line of *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*:

“Upon the instant bells began to toll. Now these were nothing more than the bells of St Michael-le-Belfrey telling the half hour, but inside the Cathedral they had an odd, far-away sound like the bells of another country. It was not at all a cheerful sound. The gentlemen of the York society knew very well how bells often went with magic and in particular with the magic of those unearthly beings, *fairies*; they knew how, in the old days, silvery bells would sound just as some Englishman or Englishwoman of particular virtue or beauty was about to be stolen away by fairies to live in strange, ghostly lands for ever. Even the Raven King – who was not a fairy, but an Englishman – had a somewhat regrettable habit of abducting men and women and taking them to live with him in his castle in the Other Lands. Now, had you and I the power to seize by magic any human being that took our fancy and the power to keep that person by our side through all eternity, and had we all the world to chuse from, then I dare say our choice might fall on someone a little more captivating than a member of the Learned Society of York Magicians ...” (35-36)

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<sup>4</sup> J.R.R Tolkien and David Eddings are examples of high fantasy authors. A definition will be provided later in the essay. For now, high fantasy can be explained as the narrative covering a hero’s journey through a made up world where fairy-tale creatures such as elves and dwarves are common.

Here several mythical elements are presented – fairies, magic and the Raven King – all with the same matter-of-factness as is used to describe the Napoleonic wars or London. These exceptions to reality are not, in Clarke's fictional story-world, actually exceptions. Rather they are part of the world and she gives them the same historical value as she gives to the real history.

Another realist technique that can be seen used in the quote above is the empirical effect. P. Morris states that in realist texts "questions are raised about characters and situations which will be resolved by fuller knowledge gained during the course of the narrative." (11) This can be observed in the quote above by the appearance of *the Raven King*. Before the chapter from which the quote is taken this character is only mentioned a couple of times, mostly in footnotes. The reader learns that he is an Englishman, once a king of northern England and that he practiced powerful magic; nothing more. Yet the constant references to him in relation to the history of England creates a feeling of importance. Through the novel more and more information is added on the subject of the Raven King. First, the perspective is from Mr Norrell who sees the King as an evil magician. Second, the reader learns from Jonathan Strange that he is the one who actually shaped English magic and made it possible for future generations to study and employ it. Third and last the full story of John Uskglass, the Raven King, is given; both his relationship to England and Faerie<sup>5</sup>. Effectively a question has been asked and, by the use of empirical methods, answered.

Not only does Clarke use places to validate her story, she also makes many references to real historical persons. In one of the first of such references, John Childermass, who is Norrell's mysterious manservant, is described with a reference to Ann Radcliffe. Clarke writes that Childermass looks as one who would belong in some dark, gloomy places or "in a novel by Mrs Radcliffe." (17) Similarly, Sir Walter Pole is later described as a character not unlike something taken from a drawing by Thomas Rowlandson or James Gilray (82), both of whom were known caricaturists in 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century England. In both these instances Susanna Clarke ties her characters together with the history of England which serves to make them more believable.

A skillful combination of referencing to an historical person, a certain event and then using both these to validate a purely fictional element occurs when Jonathan Strange publishes his book *The History and Practice of English Magic*. It is his great attempt to discredit Mr Norrell for his views on magic and a way to spread Strange's knowledge on the Raven King. Of course, the book is too scandalous in Norrell's eyes and he fears what might happen to his own reputation should the book ever be allowed to be read by ordinary people. So upon publication Norrell uses magic to

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<sup>5</sup> Faerie is a supernatural phenomenon stemming from Celtic mythology. In English its inhabitants are called *fairies*, in Irish *Sídh*e and in Scotland they were called *Sith*.

make every page in every copy of the book blank. This leads to a total elimination of *the History and Practice of English Magic* (709-726). This particular event mirrors something that happened at roughly the same time to the same publisher and a contemporary writer; namely Lord Byron. John Murray, who in Clarke's novel is said to have published Strange's book, was at one time given a manuscript to publish by Lord Byron. The manuscript was so shocking to Murray that he, together with some friends of Byron, burnt it in order to, as they claimed, save Byron's reputation.

When Clarke references to this point of history she does so with dramatic irony. Strange's book is published and destroyed in 1816. At the time Strange is in Italy where he meets Lord Byron himself. The two, having met before and found each other irritating, now become friends over their passion for literature. In a letter to Murray, Strange writes that:

“I have made up my quarrel with Lord Byron. His lordship knows nothing of the great controversies which are rending English magic in two and frankly cares less. But he has the greatest respect for books. He informs me that he is constantly on guard lest your over-cautious pen, Mr Murray, should alter some of his own poems and render some of the more *surprizing* words a little more respectable.” (735)

Eight years later, in 1824, the suspicion of Byron would come true as that is the year when Murray burned his manuscript.

These numerous references show how Clarke ties her story-world to real world history and validates her characters, which are purely fictional, by placing them among non-fictional persons. This is exactly what happens in historical novels or alternate histories. Worth noticing is that several web-publishers do label *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* as one of these two genres, probably for the very reasons discussed up until now. One problem with seeing the novel as an alternate history, however, could be that it does not, in fact, alternate the outcome of historical events. Several alternate histories change something in the past and develop a new future based on what happened. Clarke does not. She describes historical events accurately and while the circumstances surrounding these events might not be real, the outcome of what happens stays the same – thus the future will remain as it is in our world. Now, there might be objections to the fact that in our world, there are no faeries and no great history of English magic. This will be discussed more in the last section of this essay.

Moving on with the realist techniques, the empirical effect is further strengthened by the use of footnotes. Clarke uses them almost as an essayist would, conveying further information and drawing upon sources to complete the picture of what she is describing. Her footnotes come in three varieties; source references, world descriptions and plot prolepses.



The first variety, source references, combines, just like the whole novel, fiction and history. Already in the third paragraph, there is a quote used to describe the properties of magicians. Clarke writes that magicians “ ‘... must pound and rack their brains to make the least learning go in, but quarrelling always comes very naturally to them,.’ ” (3) The footnote following this fictional quote says: “*The History and Practice of English Magic*, by Jonathan Strange, vol 1, chap. 2, pub. John Murray, London, 1816.” (3) *The History and Practice of English Magic* is, of course, a fictional work only existing within the story world. John Murray, however, as mentioned in previous paragraphs, was an actual London publisher in 1816. Clarke draws upon fictional sources but does so in a proper academic way, thus the world seems more plausible and realistic.

The second use of footnotes is to further describe Clarke’s fictional world. As mentioned earlier there are many assumptions made on the reader’s knowledge about real England, but also about the fictional parts of England concocted by the author. Naturally, most of these fictional aspects are unknown to the reader and so footnotes are used to describe these parts without having to break the flow of the narrative. One footnote holds a short ballad dedicated to the Raven King, describing how he abducts a young woman and brings her to stay at his court forever (36). This is an example of something which the characters would know, the ballad is even said to be well-known, but that a reader does not. Another comparison can be made to works of High Fantasy where authors, Tolkien is but one example, introduce poetry and other world-descriptions in running text. Where the implied reader of realist texts is assumed to know the fictional world, an implied reader of fantasy is not.

Third, footnotes are used as plot prolepses much of the time. In the first volume many of the opinions expressed by Mr Norrell on the subject of magic are contrasted to opinions that are to be held by Jonathan Strange much later in the novel. The reference to *the Practice and History of English Magic* above is but one example of this. When the novel begins it is the year 1806 but Strange does not write his book until 1816. Here Susanna Clarke creates a fictional time-line on which historical events have already occurred but are being retold from the very start; much like a historical novel narrates past events that will, by the time the novel is read, already have taken place.

In the beginning of this section it was mentioned that one of the effects used to create a realist text is that of repeating certain events as they are seen by the characters living them. This is something that Clarke uses vividly. One example is the Raven King, discussed under historical setting above, but there are many more and they enrich the story-world of *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*. Indeed, the whole book is built in three parts, the first circulating only around Gilbert Norrell and his view on magic, the second being dedicated to Jonathan Strange and the third to both

of the magicians and their relationship to each other and the Raven King. In these three volumes Clarke constantly returns to events she has described before but now with more information and through the perspective of someone else.

As an example of this writing technique, there are the books of magic which Norrell gathers to ensure that dangerous knowledge will not be spread to the world. When following Norrell in the beginning of the novel the reader is subjected to the old man's views on this and his views only. All the reader knows is that Norrell has a great library, and that he buys many books. Thus, we are led to believe that Norrell is an amiable collector with the intention of protecting valuable writings. As the narrative shifts, however, several of the occasions when Norrell bought books are mentioned again, this time from the perspective of his pupil. Strange wants to learn more about magic but is obviously hindered in his progress by his master. He is not allowed to read the greatest books on magic and whenever he tries to buy one for himself Norrell gets there first and buys every single copy which he then locks into his library in Hurlfrew. Suddenly Gilbert Norrell appears as the great censor who denies others a possibility to an objective view on the subject of magic. Where at first his intentions seemed good they now look more like they belong to a dictator with hubris rather than someone who wants to, as he claims, bring magic back to England.

An excellent example of the repetition effect occurs towards the middle of the novel in the volume about Jonathan Strange. Here, Mr Segundus is at Starecross Hall trying to make it a school for magicians. He makes arrangements and everything is set to go when Childermass appears to stop him on behalf of Mr Norrell who does not want more magicians in England. Being without any connections, Mr Segundus sends a letter to Strange for help. The two gentlemen are good friends and both dislike Norrell's view on magic, so Segundus is fairly certain that Strange will help him. However, Jonathan Strange does not even answer the letter (580-593). Now the reader pictures an image of Strange as neglectful and too caught up in his own quest for greatness. What the reader does not know at this time, and what will be shown when the case of the letter is revisited later in the novel, is that when Strange received the letter from Mr Segundus his wife had just disappeared, and so the letter was lost and forgotten (666). Both these perspectives are needed in order for the picture to be complete, and together they make for a more objective view on what really occurred.

All the techniques mentioned here are used by Susanna Clarke to create an atmosphere of authenticity and place her work among realistic texts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She explains her world truthfully and with the illusion of empirical research. Can *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* then be said to belong to the genre of realism? To answer that it is necessary to analyze to a fuller extent the aspects of the book which, seemingly, have no relation to reality whatsoever.

## Summoning the otherworld – Fantasy:

“Fantasy is a literature of liberation and subversion. Its target may be politics, economics, religion, psychology, or sexuality. It seeks to liberate the feminine, the unconscious, the repressed, the past, the present, and the future.” (Mathews, XII)

What is required for a book to be called fantasy? Not much, it seems if one takes a look at the fantasy section in most bookstores. Modern novels about fairy-tale worlds where elves and dragons live stand right next to stories more heavily connected to mythology and legends such as texts about King Arthur. Thereby it might be easy to conclude that fantasy is about made up things. Of course, that makes no sense if we study it more closely. While we do find stories about Merlin and King Arthur here there are no traces of Homer’s *Iliad* or *Odyssey*. Neither will a reader find Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* or a *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, even if many elements in these texts are completely imaginary. Of course, the two latter are dramas, but it is still interesting to ask the question if anyone would consider these ‘fantasy dramas’.

Obviously there is no consensus on what constitutes fantasy as a genre and which works should or should not be part of it. Even inside the field there are many varying views on which sub-genres to include or even what to call various sub-genres. On *Macmillan.com*, distributors of Tor publishings, which have *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* as one of their books, there is a list of the following categories for their selection of novels: “adventure”, “contemporary fantasy”, “epic fantasy”, “general fantasy”, “general science fiction”, “high tech”, “historical fantasy”, “short stories” and “space operas”. (Macmillan) Excluding short stories and the science fiction genres we are still left with four (five if adventure is counted) sub-genres. This list is far from standard. Richard Mathews, for one, in his *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination* mentions both “sword and sorcery” (29) and “dark fantasy” (18). Some of these sub-genres are widely recognized, such as “sword and sorcery”, “epic fantasy” and “dark fantasy”, others appear to have been invented for a select number of novels only and feel both forced and non-inclusive. Examples of this is the genre where Macmillan places *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, namely “historical fantasy”. (Macmillan) While certainly fitting for novels of this type the term is not widely used by publishers, neither is it clear on how novels belonging to this genre are different from alternate histories. The definitions circulating on the web implies that “historical fantasy” is real world history with the addition of fantastical elements. The question that invariably follows is: what is a fantastical element?

At first glance the answer is obvious. Most readers of fantasy would probably say that a fantastical element is something like magic, elves, faeries and dragons; i.e beings or entities that do

not conform to the laws of our real world or our perception of reality. This is one of the definitions that Laetz and Johnston proposes in their article “What is Fantasy?”. They are of the opinion that elements such as these can make a work fantastic if it is part of the main narrative (162). The problem that arises from this definition is that we still have not explained why *the Iliad* or *the Odyssey* are not called fantasy, nor do we have a satisfying reason for not calling the Bible a fantasy novel. Laetz and Johnston attempts to remedy this by saying that fantasy cannot be purely mythological, even if it may be inspired by mythology. The myths or religious stories any fantasy builds on must also not be believed in today. Furthermore they must have been believed in at the time of writing, or they would be classified as fantasy. *The Iliad* and *the Odyssey* are therefore mythological and not fantastical because scientific data today shows that it is likely that the ancient Greek believed in these myths (166). It appears as if the definition is quickly getting more and more difficult. This is not helped by the fact that Richard Mathews implies that both *the Iliad* and *the Odyssey* are works of fantasy; in fact among the first to ever have been written (9-11).

Another definition discussed in “What is Fantasy?” is the existence of supernatural content. A work is fantastical if it contains elements that are supernatural, although, in order for them to be seen as supernatural, Laetz and Johnston says, they must not be naturalized within the fictional story-world (167). As a result of this definition, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* could not ever be said to belong to the genre of fantasy due to the amount of effects Susanna Clarke uses to create a realistic and believable world in which all magical events are part of that worlds culture and history. However, simple as this may seem, the very same definition would also exclude from the fantastic genre basically every fantasy novel ever written. Everything taking place in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* is clearly part of that world and believable to the characters, i.e: naturalized within the world. The same can be said about most fantasy works and, in fact, the only novels remaining would be the ones normally said to belong to the genres of magical realism or surrealism. It might therefore be necessary to go back one step and claim that supernatural content, no matter how naturalized, is part of a fantastical narrative.

How well does Susanna Clarke’s novel then conform to the definitions of fantasy mentioned here? In order to see that it is necessary to discuss what fantastic elements she makes use of and how each of these can be categorized. In doing so it is obvious that the greatest departure from realism found in the novel is the realm of Faerie. It is a world drastically different from the story-world England Clarke describes. First, Faerie is unchanging. While England progresses historically the many kingdoms of the other-world remain exactly the same. Even the inhabitants are the same people they were hundreds of years earlier and humans travelling to Faerie will find they are gifted with the same immortality the faeries possess. Second, Faerie appears to be an internal world rather

than an external. While magic in England can only be used by scientific means, magic in Faerie is activated through pure thought. People in Faerie exist as products of their own minds, and the mind here is more capable of altering the world than the body is.

At first glance it would seem that Faerie is, indeed, highly fantastical. Some minor objections exist, however. First, it is heavily influenced by western mythology: In Celtic myths there are several mentions of other-worlds existing in unnamed places and faeries are common occurrences in these same myths. If an element containing mythological influences is fantasy, as Mathews points out and as Hume discusses when she talks about various modes in which fantastical elements occur (Mathews, 9-11; Hume, 151), then Faerie is a fantastical element. Even Laetz's and Johnston's definition seems to work as Faerie is not part of the majority's religion today. It is therefore safe to assume that Faerie in *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* is not described as something plausibly real but as a fictional realm only existing within the story-world of the novel.

Of course, it is possible to debate the existence of Faerie even inside the story-world. This brings out the second objection to Faerie being a fantastical element. Laetz and Johnston says that for a work to be classified as fantasy it must not be allegorical, and in Perry Nodelman's "Some Presumptuous Generalizations About Fantasy" there is a description of how the fantastic world must be real and plausible to the narrator; thus, it cannot be allegorical (Laetz and Johnston, 162; Nodelman, 6). Richard Mathews points out something similar when he says that "fantasy cannot be reduced to mere allegory or symbol; it is not a product of madness, superstition, or satire. Fantasy has a compelling and even dangerous reality." (21) Here he argues that the world depicted is depicted as something meant to be believed in for the duration of the narrative. There are no connections to the real world either explicitly or implied.

How allegorical, then, is Faerie? If it does exist for every character in Susanna Clarke's universe it is, probably, not allegorical at all. The problem here lies in the fact that not every character in the novel fully believes in Faerie. To most people it is seen as something mythical belonging to old stories about the Raven King and abductions of mortal beings, but nothing more. Only a few characters in the novel ever enter Faerie and none of these are, at the time, at their best mental state. Strange is driven by jealousy when he first enters the King's Roads as he has just been cornered by some men from the country claiming that Norrell holds the title of "the Greatest Magician of the Age" (492) and it is his hubris and need for recognition that finally makes him complete the spell of walking into Faerie. The second time he enters is when Arabella has been abducted by the gentleman with the thistle-down hair and he is, at this time, almost completely mad. Other characters to enter Faerie are Stephen Black and Emma Pole, both of whom are abducted by the gentleman with the thistle-down hair and brought to Lost-Hope. It is possible to see even this

occurrence as an allegory for madness since Lady Pole suffers from a grave illness which does, in fact, kill her early in the story (she is brought back to life by Mr Norrell); Arabella is pestered by the gentleman with the thistle-down hair to the point where everyone around considers her mad; and Stephen Black goes through something similar. Lascelles, who enters Faerie towards the end of the book, is by this time so caught up in his need for power that he also should be considered quite mad. This is shown by how he so carelessly kills the champion at the Castle of Plucked Eye and Heart without realizing that by doing so he has sealed his fate as the future guardian of the Lady at the Castle (939).

Now, this shows that there is a possibility for an allegorical interpretation of Faerie as a realm of madness, existing only within the mind of the people affected by the words of the gentleman with the thistle-down hair. Judging by the rich history Susanna Clarke has created for this other-world, however, it is probably not her intentions for Faerie to be allegorical and Laetz and Johnston also claim that for a narrative to be classified as an allegory the audience must see it as such (162). The latter is by most indications not the case in *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*. Therefore, it is safe to assume that Faerie is used as a fantastical element in the story.

Next is the gentleman with the thistle-down hair. He is the typical antagonist of the novel, devilishly seducing the characters, and like a puppet-master controlling their lives. Once again, it is possible that the gentleman with the thistle-down hair is an allegory for evil, greed or even madness. This is not particularly fruitful, however, going by the same argument as for Faerie. What makes this character a fantastical character is the fact that he is not human, but a faery. He has lived for several hundreds of years and wields magic more easily than any of the human characters. This is true also for other faeries in the novel as well as the Raven King; all of whom can be seen as fantastical elements.

Another thing that confirms the gentleman with the thistle-down hair as a fantastical element is his importance as a fantastical entity. In *Fantasy and Mimesis*, Kathryn Hume mentions “action-orientated fantasy” when discussing various types of fantastical narration. Here she talks about how there is, in some narrations, a story-world which is created by using fantastical elements but then works in exactly the same way any mimetic story-world would. The only difference is that the place where the plot unfolds does not exist (159). Something similar is brought up in Laetz’s and Johnston’s article where fantastical elements must not be minor/interchangeable but necessary for the story itself in order to be classified as fantasy (162). The question that arises now is whether the fantastical attributes of the gentleman with the thistle-down hair is necessary for the main action. Of course, it could be that the main story is the relationship between two men, master and apprentice, in which case none of the fantastical elements is needed and could be exchanged for mimetic

elements instead. It is obvious, however, that Clarke also has created a world she intends to explore in her novel; which means that the gentleman with the thistle-down hair must be a faery in order for the world to exist as it is meant to.

Furthermore, the idea of exploring a fictional universe as part of the purpose of Clarke's novel is applicable to the rest of the fantastical elements she uses. The fictional history of magic she has created can probably not be seen as allegorical, nor is it a minor part of the plot. It is thereby obvious that there are many elements in the novel which can be said to be fantastical or non-realistic. Up until now these elements have been part of the plot rather than Clarke's writing style, which, according to the first part of this essay, is more realistic in style. Is it possible then that Clarke uses realism as a technique to describe both realism and non-realism? Before jumping to this conclusion there is one obvious departure from realism in style that must be discussed.

As was shown in the first part of the essay, realism wants to describe reality. This is best done by relating reality to what is used to represent it in text form. Realists are thereby determined to describe elements of the world as truthfully as is possible. Objectivity is so important that the style attempts to stay clear of creating pictures that invariably are subjective (P. Morris, 9-12). It is this dedication to objective truth that Clarke so obviously departs from when she describes certain magical objects. In his first appearance, the gentleman with the thistle-down hair is said to wear a coat which "was of the brightest green imaginable – the colour of leaves in early summer" (106) which is a way of using imagery that stays true to realistic values. However, when describing the clothing of another Faerie, Clarke says that "she wore a gown the colour of storms, shadows and rain and a necklace of broken promises and regrets." (190-191) While the first example points to something observable to everyone, the reader would just have to step outside in early summer to understand what Clarke is describing, the latter cannot possibly create the same picture for everyone. How can the colour of storms, rain and shadows be described? It is possible that many readers will associate these elements with gray and black colours. Nonetheless, this quote lacks the exactness of the first, which signals something other than a realistic approach. An even greater metaphysical conceit<sup>6</sup> occurs when the gentleman with the thistle-down hair pulls out "a little box, the colour of heartache." (772) The colour of heartache is highly personal and what picture invoked here depends entirely on what reader is currently holding the book.

How fantastical are these examples? The structuralist Tzvetan Todorov discusses fantasy in

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<sup>6</sup> Metaphysical conceit is the use of unexpected metaphors or similes when describing something. In the examples above, most readers would most certainly be surprised at the connection between a gown and rain or a necklace and suffering. While it might be possible to say that the "necklace of broken promises and regrets" is a metaphor for the faerie's physical traits, e.g. she might have an aura of sadness or suffering around her, there are other references to the actual "necklace", which should work as evidence for it being an actual object with an unusual description attached to it; thus, a metaphysical conceit.

his *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Genre*. In it he mentions “hesitation” as one of the building blocks of fantasy. A reader of any novel will compare the fictional universe depicted in the text to his/her own perception of the real world. Whenever confronted with something that clash with this perception of reality, the reader will feel a certain hesitation towards the events described. This hesitation is what constitutes fantasy according to Todorov (quoted in Mathews, 3). This definition of fantasy will be discussed in greater detail in the last part of the essay but for now it serves to show the fantastical attributes of the metaphysical conceit Clarke makes use of. The probability that a reader will hesitate when confronted with the problem of determining the colour of heartache is fairly large.

At this point it is possible to compare *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* to various genres of fantasy and see to which it fits best. If it fits one of the many sub-genres of this literary style, then it should be easy to say that, yes, Clarke’s novel is a piece of fantasy fiction and not a realist text. Of course, it is almost impossible, and probably not very fruitful, to discuss each sub-genre of fantasy ever concocted, so for the purpose of this essay only three will be discussed. These are, by far, the largest and most inclusive. They are also the sub-genres critics usually use when speaking of generic fantasy. All other sub-genres most often fall under one of these three, all of which were mentioned in preceding paragraphs. These are “epic fantasy”, which is sometimes called “high fantasy”, “sword and sorcery” and “dark fantasy”.

First, the easiest to eliminate is dark fantasy. While *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* indeed does include some elements of a cynical or darker nature, such as the gentleman with the thistle-down hair and his coldness in discussing people he has killed, it does not revolve around these elements. Laetz and Johnston point out that dark fantasy authors “are preoccupied with graphic depictions of violence and sexuality.” (169) This definition is not applicable to Clarke’s novel.

Second, epic fantasy is one of the most renown types of fantasy. It includes works by J.R.R Tolkien, David Eddings and William Morris. Richard Mathews says of Morris that he creates “a fully consistent and coherent fantasy reality, he in effect provides a parallel world.” (52) Similarly, both Tolkien and Eddings create worlds from scratch in which they set their action. While indeed creating a fictional world in her novel, Clarke cannot be said to write epic fantasy since she does not include an adventure as is the norm in epic fantasy. When discussing Tolkien, Mathews also mentions the struggle between greater forces, something which is common in this type of literature (82). *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* cannot be said to revolve around a battle between dark and light, good and evil. Instead, it is the relationship between two men and their quest for validation which is in centre.

Third, sword and sorcery is a genre similar to epic fantasy in that it is mostly set in alternate



worlds. This difference here, Mathews explains, is how sword and sorcery (also called ‘low fantasy’ by some; my note)<sup>7</sup> does not describe the battle between good and evil or the greatness in following the path of light and moral truths. Instead, it focuses on depicting a down-to-earth reality in an unreal world. Characters are seldom divine or archetypical, they are the way people in this world would be, only somewhere else (118). It seems as this definition fits best with *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*. In that case, it is a fantasy novel belonging to the sub-genre of sword and sorcery with realistic characters in an unrealistic setting.

The problem now is that the book could still belong to the field of alternate histories or even the historical novel. The definitions used this far have not been fruitful in completely including or completely excluding the novel from either of these genres. It seems as if some new terms are necessary.

### **Beyond reality – Fantasy and Mimesis:**

“Reality is not what we ordinarily make it; it is less easily assumable than we think.” (Morris, John S; 85)

Reality can only be described. The purpose of literature is to represent existence in text-form and create a picture of our universe which is unquestioned, and thus objective. Anything that is not a description of reality is a description of something unreal and non-existing; a concoction of the brain: a fantasy. Up until recently, Kathryn Hume claims in her *Fantasy and Mimesis*, this is the way literature has been seen. Since Ancient Greece, the purest form of narrative has been the mimetic: the description of reality by retelling, representing and narrating. For this reason, most literary analyses have had as their purpose to determine how well a narrative describes the world. The descriptive techniques are the only ones that have received proper attention, Hume states, and as a result, fantasies and imaginative events have been seen as a departure from reality (5-9).

By looking at literature from this perspective it is easy to separate something purely realistic from something purely unrealistic. If a work describes things that we can see around us it belongs to realism, and if it describes things we cannot see it belongs to fantasy (Hume, 8). Hume agrees to the separation of these two extremes, but not by saying that fantasy and realism are two opposing genres. Instead, she claims, these are techniques which create a multitude of varying texts depending on how they are used (Hume, 20). Saying that something is purely fantastic is one thing, but how do we account for all the works that use a mixture of these two techniques; works that can

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<sup>7</sup> The use of the oppositional words “high” and “low” in labeling fantasy is only to distinguish the divine from the mundane, i.e the setting of the story. These are no tools of ranking literature based on quality.

neither be called realistic texts nor fantastic texts? How do we account for *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*?

According to Hume, this is done by looking at literature from a different perspective. A perspective that is similar to Todorov's approach and, indeed, both these two are structuralists with like-minded views on literature. The core of both critics' definition is that the extent to which a text describes reality is decided by the reader, based on that person's moral values and perception of reality (Hume, 9-14). Kathryn Hume is opposed to a literary framework which centralizes the work surrounded by our real-world universe, the author and readers of the work. The idea Hume proposes is that instead of having one all-encompassing universe, all individuals have their own universe which they relate literary texts to. This universe is made up both of the empirically observable reality and the reality of an individual's inner mental realm (Hume, 8-13). Todorov's hesitation would then occur when someone reading a narrative finds elements which clash with their own universe; i.e. their perception of reality. So far, everything seems fairly similar to what has been discussed before, only from a slightly different viewpoint.

What Hume proposes should change is the terms used when discussing how a literary text deals with the universe. She claims that where there were previously only one way of dealing with reality, namely describing it, there should in fact be two. These she calls impulses and she names them fantasy and mimesis. Only mimesis is used to describe reality. Fantasy, on the other hand, is used to alter it. Both these impulses can be found in all literature in between the two extremes: pure realism and pure fantasy (Hume, 20).

The idea of fantastical elements in literature as something that alters our universe is probably difficult to grasp, especially if the perspective is based on the idea that there is only the one all-encompassing reality in which we all exist. It is, of course, not possible to create faeries and dragons simply by writing about them, at least not to the extent where they can be seen, felt or observed by each and everyone in the same way a car or a tree can be observed. On the other hand, by using Hume's framework with several universes, one for every individual, this will be much simpler. The idea is that a person has certain inner ideals, moral values and other attributes which he or she ascribes to the real world. Whenever presented with a text a reader is also presented with the author's own ideals, moral values and other mental attributes. In some cases the reader and author will agree on how they perceive reality, in other cases they will not. This is where the clash occurs. At some point the reader will have to compare his or her universe to the author's and decide what to make of the text. They might learn from the novel and ascribe the values presented to their own universe or they might wave them off as purely imaginative. In the case of the latter the work will be seen as merely unrealistic, in the case of the former it will have altered the universe of the

individual confronted with the text (Hume, 8-13).

Combining the hesitation of Todorov with the universes of Hume it should be possible to state that fantastical elements are elements that belong to the author's subjective perception of reality.<sup>8</sup> Whether these are accepted or not by the audience is a different matter, but each of these elements has the power to alter a reader's own universe. Therein lies their fantastical nature.

It might be good to state that not only Hume views fantasy in isolation from the standard definitions of content and form. John S. Morris, in his article "Fantasy in a Mythless Age", says of fantasy that it is "not just story, it is enchantment. Otherwise only some external features would distinguish it from fiction, and it would have no power over us." (83) While still being of the opinion that Fantasy is a certain genre, Morris touches Hume's idea of a universe being altered by a text. Perhaps enchantment is what we, as readers, feel when presented with an alien apparition in a narrative. Morris' ideas could then be compared to Todorov's hesitation.

Moving on: Where does *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* fit in all of this? When using only descriptive terms before it was not possible to say that the novel was a historical novel simply because there are no faeries in our world and there has never been a history of English Magic, nor any Raven King for that matter. The simple answer was that it belonged to the genre of low fantasy or sword and sorcery, or perhaps that it was an alternate history novel. However, at this point it should be possible to claim that the book is indeed a historical novel, only with the addition of fantastical elements. Clarke uses both mimetic techniques to describe the reality we all can see and fantastic techniques to alter it and create the plot she narrates. The reader will then decide whether the novel is plausible or simply unreal; whether the events described are allegorical or non-symbolic; and if the text will alter their perception of reality or leave it as it is.

Is this approach the right way to go? Unlike previous definitions of fantasy this one seems to be applicable to every type of narrative. Suddenly it does not matter if there are faeries and dragons, to what extent they are present or if they are in any way related to ancient mythology. In the same way, texts containing fantastical elements will not be separated from texts that do not, simply because even though it is possible in theory to only use mimesis and describe reality truthfully, it is not possible in practice. Robert Scholes says in *Structural Fabulation* that "it is because reality cannot be recorded that realism is dead. All writing, all composition, is construction. We do not imitate the world, we construct versions of it. There is no mimesis, only poesis. No recording. Only constructing." (quoted in Hume, 24) While describing reality might be possible, it is not possible to

<sup>8</sup> Naturally, this is not to say that the author must actively believe that what he or she adds to the narrative actually exists. The relationship between text and author goes much deeper than that. Hume claims that in some cases the narrative alters the universe of the author as well as the reader, thus making the framework more complex (10). For the purpose of this essay's argumentation, however, only the text's relationship with the reader will be accounted for.

only describe it. At the same time, Scholes says of fantasy that “no man has succeeded in imagining a world free of connection to our experiential world, with characters and situations that cannot be seen as mere inversions or distortions of that all too recognizable cosmos.” (quoted in Hume, 27) These two quotes show how fleeting definitions of genre truly are and that each and every narrative probably belongs to more than one genre. The latter is why one could go on forever, calling Clarke’s novel a “marvelously realistic historical fantasy” or something in those lines, but that will only serve to complicate matters further. If it is necessary to invent new genres for every novel written, then perhaps the term has become superfluous and only a mean to satisfy the reader or even worse, the publishers.

### **Conclusion:**

Susanna Clarke has been inspired heavily by the realist/historical novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and combined this with more modern influences to create something new, or, indeed, something not new at all but merely a potpourri of already used techniques. She recreates realism, not as a study of the world outside us, but of the world inside.

It is certain that *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* is meant to entertain. At the same time, however, it works excellently as an example of how close realism and fantasy really can get. It is not a matter of two opposite poles, but rather impulses that work parallel to each other and often intertwine to create a picture of the individual’s surrounding. While the world mimetically described can be empirically explored, the inner world of fantasy is equally real. Every individual lives in one shared, objective universe and one personal, subjective world. Literature works in the same way and *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* stands exactly in the middle of these two realms, one foot in each.

Defining any genre is ultimately left to the reader. This essay has tried to show that Clarke’s novel could belong to several genres and, naturally, each labeling focuses on something different. As a result, some readers will invariably turn away from the novel if generic labeling is used. A person expecting it to be a purely fantastic novel will be as disappointed as someone expecting it to be a historical novel only based in recorded history. For this reason genre can be destructive to a novel and perhaps more openness is needed from publishers, bookstores and critics in order for a work to be seen for its qualities, isolated from set formats and frameworks.

Furthermore, a text is never separated from the reality we live in. It exists in this world and, as Scholes states, can neither create things completely different from what we know, nor can it mirror reality in a truthful way. Fantasy is therefore based in our imagination, but actively altering

our own perception of the universe; even to the point where what we accept as real might be distorted and changed to accommodate for more or less. The Bible is not fantasy, because people accept its message. In the same way, all fantastical impulses could be applied to our reality, making them realistic impulses instead.

Concluding, it is the latter that makes it so wrong to disregard spiritual or magical elements because they are not mimetic. As a mimetic study of history, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* does not work. However, as a fantastic study of history it fits perfectly. English magicians might not have existed externally in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but to say that they do not exist at all is false. Susanna Clarke has written about them, therefore they must exist; if only in the perception of reality belonging to a few enchanted readers.

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Susanna Clarke's ingenious first novel, *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*, has the cleverness and lightness of touch of the Harry Potter series, but is less a fairy tale of good versus evil than a fantastic comedy of manners, complete with elaborate footnotes, occasional period spellings, and a dense, lively mythology teeming beneath the narrative. Mr. Norrell moves to London to establish his influence in government circles, devising such powerful illusions as an 11-day blockade of French ports by English ships fabricated from rainwater. But however skillful his magic, his vanity p

Susanna Clarke's debut novel *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* was first published in more than 34 countries and was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize and shortlisted for the Whitbread First Novel Award and the Guardian First Book Award. It won British Book Awards Newcomer of the Year, the Hugo Award and the World Fantasy Award in 2005. *The Ladies of Grace Adieu*, a collection of short stories, some set in the world of *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, was published by Bloomsbury in 2006. She lives in Derby shire. Related to *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*. Related. Related Books. *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* is the debut novel by British writer Susanna Clarke. Published in 2004, it is an alternative history set in 19th-century England around the time of the Napoleonic Wars. Its premise is that magic once existed in England and has returned with two men: Gilbert Norrell and Jonathan Strange. Centred on the relationship between these two men, the novel investigates the nature of "Englishness" and the boundaries between reason and unreason, Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Dane, and *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* is absolutely compelling- I could not stop reading until I finished it. The author captures the period and its literary conventions with complete conviction. I was fascinated by the mixture of historical realism and utterly fantastic events I almost began to believe that there really was a tradition of 'English magic' that I had not heard about. It's an astonishing achievement. I can't think of anything that is remotely like it. Reader Reviews. liannebatcheler. *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* I purchased this novel in a charity shop havi