

ADDENDUM

Understanding Gormenghast: Interrogating the Lost Mythopoeia

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by

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Certified that the Addendum to the Thesis entitled

Understanding Gormenghast: Interrogating the Lost Mythopoeia, submitted by me in response to the corrections suggested by the External Examiner's report for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of Prof. (Dr.) Rimi B. Chatterjee (Department of English, Jadavpur University). It has not been previously submitted anywhere else.

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Addendum to Introduction:

The unequal reception of Peake with respect to contemporary fantasy writers, especially to Tolkien becomes more pronounced in the latter's recognition as 'the' template for fantasy literature in English while the former is more often than not left out of the discussion altogether. Brian Attebery argues for Tolkien's place as the most typical of twentieth century fantasy due to the imaginative scope and popularity of his work.¹ One of the objectives in this thesis then will be to make a comparative analysis of these two contemporary pieces of work and discover which elements in Tolkien appealed so well to the popular imagination, and why Peake's work didn't fare as well. Farah Mendelsohn in her essay titled 'Peake and the Fuzzy Set of Fantasy: Some Informal Thoughts'² discusses at length how "Tolkien was not what fantasy was" but what it became not what it was and "that Peake, not Tolkien was closer to the centre of the fuzzy set in 1950."³ Why is it then that Peake's work is not discussed as much? Do these authors have anything in common, and do the differences contribute in inducing the 'reservations' that contemporary readers may have felt despite being moved by *Titus Groan* or *Gormenghast*? In *The Lord of the Rings*, a king returns from the pages of forgotten legends to restore his kingdom. In Peake's saga, an earl runs from his earldom and finds it forgotten in the wider world. Tolkien celebrates the renewal of civilization while Peake's hero seems to run, rootless and bereft of a cultural identity. As Mendelsohn points out, Attebery's decision to place Tolkien at the centre of the 'fuzzy set' was determined by a survey conducted amongst readers with similar cultural and

¹ Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington: Indian UP), 1992, 14.

² Farah Mendelsohn, "Peake and the Fuzzy Set of Fantasy: Some Informal Thoughts," in *Miracle Enough: Papers on the Works of Mervyn Peake*, ed. G. Peter Winnington (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 61-74.

³ Mendelsohn, 65.

racial backgrounds. Notwithstanding the imaginative scope and beauty of *The Lord of the Rings*, the issue of its place in the canon in comparison to other works is thus a political one. Amongst the themes I will examine is the treatment of the past by both authors, their approach towards what they perceived as the nihilism of technological progress and modern civilization, and their conceptions of good and evil, human and monster, history and memory. Perhaps these discussions will help us at least partially answer why Peake's novels have been much less written about than Tolkien's.

A lot of work on Peake focusses on the influence of Peake's early childhood in China in the creation of Gormenghast. But if Gormenghast is China, then Titus's homesickness for the castle in *Titus Alone* may also be read as the white man's longing for his lost colony. Gormenghast with its ruined buttresses and abandoned towers thus becomes an architectural symbol of the Empire in decline. This thesis examines the parallels between Gormenghast and the China of Peake's childhood, both in terms of physical or descriptive similarities and from a postcolonial perspective.

The primary mode of Peake's novels is not gothic, however, there are hints of the supernatural or the eerie in the deaths of Sepulchrave (by ritual sacrifice) and of the Thing (by lightning), or even in the swarm of white cats belonging to the countess that swarm every rooftop of the castle on the day of Titus' earling. However, despite the pervading gothic atmosphere, the focus is less on any supernatural danger and more on an individual desire for freedom and significance. Thus to read these novels simply as gothic fantasy would be limiting.

In explaining how the Titus Groan novels fit the genre requirements of fantasy, Mendelsohn explains that they make use of what Todorov calls 'hesitation'. The "texts work by

manipulating our expectation that the fantastic lurks around every dusty corner of the castle.”⁴

As readers, we approach Peake’s world with all the anticipation of traditional narratives: a castle, a promised prince, machinations for power: all promise a typical fairytale. In belying those expectations, Peake is attempting to tell a new story, one that causes unease by refusing to conform to ingrained cultural expectations. This thesis will try to show that Peake’s disruption of the expected narrative patterns is a conscious, deliberate attempt to manipulate reader expectations and the resultant discomfort is an intended commentary on the politics of storytelling and cultural identities. Peake’s fairytales fail to offer resolution because the nostalgic reaffirmation of identity offered by those stories is no longer valid. I hope to show in my thesis that Peake wasn’t simply writing a dark, gothic romance about an imaginary, fantastical castle but about the socio-political and moral concerns of his time, and about Western civilization’s grappling with modernity and its attendant issues. Gormenghast with its empty ritual becomes a microcosm for a civilization in decline just as Titus’s sense of rootlessness and nostalgia for his lost earldom in the third novel reflects modern Western man’s struggle to come to terms with the collapsing institutions in a rapidly changing world, also to be found in the works of the High Modernists. Seen in this light, Gormenghast becomes a disintegrating architectural symbol of the Empire while the City functions as the new twentieth century urban metropolis. Titus’s escape from his home to the City is thus not simply an individual journey but depicts a collective socio-cultural transition from the medieval to the modern, from the feudal fief to the police state, from the colonial to the post-colonial.

⁴ Mendelsohn, 72.

Chapter One:

(Addendum to the concluding section of the chapter)

An ancient, derelict castle in the middle of a faraway nowhere, a lonely princess in a tower, the birth of a long-awaited prince and the general air of dream-like vagueness all suggest a deliberate creation of a fairytale tenor just as the depiction of Gertrude, Pentecost and the subtle motifs of sacred vegetation all suggest a studied use of mythic and folkloric elements. What is intriguing about the texts is that having invoked these familiar motifs, Peake then refuses to allow the narrative to move along expected patterns towards resolution. As repositories of archetypal material, fairytales and myths mirror the collective psychological structures reflecting the concerns and creative fantasies of the times and societies in which they originate. An examination of these elements in the novels could thus lead us to the ways in which Peake is retelling the stories of childhood to problematize the question of cultural affirmation. As Bettelheim says, “The fairytale proceeds in a manner which conforms to the way a child thinks and experiences the world; A child trusts what the fairy story tells, because its worldview accords with his own.”⁵ This applies also to adults since traditionally, these stories were not necessarily told only to children. And if Peake is revisiting his childhood in Tientsin through Gormenghast, the exercise then also becomes a revision of the simplistic assumptions of childhood. Thus even though it is High Silver in *The Umzibooboo Kaffirs* who is physically taken from his home, a Titus or Fuchsia Groan in Gormenghast remain much more lost than Hugh ever was. The mythical transformation of the author’s childhood memories, and the timeless, dream-like quality of Gormenghast thus leads us to an examination of mythic and fairytale elements in the novels, for it is in those that we find the patterns of examining the

⁵ Bettelheim, 79.

realms of the mind, and because “archetypal stories originate... through individual experiences of an invasion by some unconscious content, whether in a dream or in a waking hallucination.”⁶

This is what we’re going to explore in greater details in the next chapter.

⁶ Marie-Louise von Franz, *The Interpretation of Fairytales* (Boulder: Shambala, 1996), 24.