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The limits of magic: A study in breaking through barriers in fantasy fiction

Magic accompanies modern humans from birth to adolescence, and often throughout their lives. The age-long desire to understand and control the surrounding world has been an immanent feature of our civilisation. The desire to transcend that which is known, to make a step forward – which began with the utilisation of a stone as a tool millions of years ago – has become the driving force of growth, the pinnacle of which was Neil Armstrong setting foot on the Moon. In the common perception, magic today is no longer associated with science or development but, rather, with fairy tales and various kinds of fortune-tellers and horoscopes. The word *magic* in expressions such as *the magic of Christmas* – or *magical* meaning *exceptional beauty* – both carry a rather pejorative meaning as something unreal, something meant for children, something for naive people who believe in newspaper horoscopes and fortunes told by TV soothsayers. Yet, the period of childhood leaves in adults a certain fondness for magic, i.e. the ability to make real that which our knowledge rejects and considers impossible. That fondness, carefully nurtured in the sphere of literature, did not disappear with the emergence of the age of reason. On the contrary, after the rationalism of the Enlightenment there came the time for romantic folklore and related beliefs. That which seemed dead to the proverbial sage came to life and has even gained respect. The beyond, magic, and characters yielding superhuman powers were not ousted into oblivion, not for the lack of trying. Various kinds of extraordinary stories – e.g. the story of the monster created by Doctor Frankenstein or the story of Dracula and other terrible creatures hiding in some castle ruins, inaccessible swamps, or unexplored jungles – captivated the imagination of the people of the era of progress, arguing that we

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still do not know everything and that our power is not universal. Even Sherlock Holmes, the famous detective, despite using rational investigative methods, had in him something of a magical character, i.e. superhuman skills of deduction and associating of facts. Where, then – even though our knowledge continues to expand – does the undying belief in magic and search for magical lands in escapist literature, film, and games come from? Bruno Bettelheim associated the magical sphere with the childhood need for safety, a place where a child becomes, in their own perception, the centre of the universe, surrounded by magical creatures watching over them.¹ Whether the desire is realised or not, every person strives to guarantee their own safety, so they somehow verge on that magical sphere inherited from their ancestors and recalled from their childhoods. Therefore, one should not be surprised by the popularity of fantasy literature, sometimes referred to as “fairy tales for adults”², and which was defined by Stanisław Lem as a newer version of the fairy tale.³ Literature after the golden age of science fiction – which was the expression of the fascination with technological innovations, the development of science, and human achievements in the study of the cosmos – offered readers to turn away from the rigid framework of rationalism and logic, and move towards the not entirely understood⁴, mysterious, and understated sphere of magic.

What is magic, then? As I have already mentioned, most people end their adventure with magic when they step out of their childhoods and lose interest in fairies, dragons, and spells.⁵ The magic which readers know from fairy tales is – for the lack of broader descriptions or explanations – hard to define. A child, as Bettelheim argued, does not need rational statements⁶ explaining e.g. what enabled the wizard

1 Vide: B. Bettelheim, *Cudowne i pożyteczne. O znaczeniach i wartościach baśni*, vol. I, trans. D. Danek, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warsaw 1985, pp. 110–114. Bettelheim ascribed similar desires to ancient cultures, e.g. ancient Egyptians. Deities or care beings appear in basically every religion.

2 Vide, e.g.: K. Kaczor, *Geralt, czarownice i wampir. Recykling kulturowy Andrzeja Sapkowskiego*, Wydawnictwo słowo/obraz/terytoria, Gdańsk 2006, p. 117.

3 S. Lem, *Fantastyka i futurologia*, vol. 1, Kraków 1973, p. 95. The term ‘fantasy’ was not common at that time and the genre was not defined. In English-speaking countries, there existed the phrase ‘sword and sorcery’, yet it did not cover the entirety of the phenomenon known today as ‘fantasy’.

4 Interestingly enough, the existence of magic in fantasy fiction was considered by some critics as a factor devaluing the genre. Vide the polemic between Dukaj and Dębek: J. Dukaj, “Filozofia fantasy I i II”, *Nowa Fantastyka* 1997, issue 8(179) and issue 9(180); and P. Dębek, “Magia fantasy”, *Nowa Fantastyka* 1998, issue 3.

5 I intentionally avoided the issue of religious rites similar to magic as the question of the mutual relations between those spheres goes beyond the regular understanding of magic as an element of the world of culture intended as entertainment, which is the focus of this article.

6 Vide: B. Bettelheim, *op. cit.*, pp. 103–105.

in *Puss in Boots*⁷ to turn into a lion, or why the protagonist can speak. For a child, it is something completely natural that a magical cat can do that, just as the magical mirror in which Snow White's stepmother views her reflection can. A child does not realise that magic has its limits, nor where it comes from, and a child does not need this knowledge either for enjoying the reading or receiving the content. Neither are adult readers of fairy tales able to infer anything more; we never learn where magical animals, wizards, and magic wands come from. It is not clear how big their power is and what they can and cannot do. Clearly, all magic in fairy tales has a unifying quality: by means of it one can break through barriers and achieve things impossible for regular humans. Owing to magic beans, Jack reaches a land high in the sky, Cinderella in her magical disguise attends a ball where she meets a prince, Aladdin flies a carpet, the magical table sets itself and is filled with food, seven-league boots enable one to travel quickly, and the Golden Duck gives money to a pauper. The protagonists receive things which in real life would be beyond their reach. This can be an extraordinary ability as well as a thing not available to them not due to human physical limitations, but because of their status, as in the case of Cinderella or the pauper in *The Tale of the Golden Duck*. What is the situation in fantasy fiction?

For fantasy fiction, magic is one of the immanent genre-defining elements.⁸ It appears in the genre's first works: in Robert E. Howard's short stories about Conan and in J.R.R. Tolkien's novels. In both cases, despite it being a major component of the world depicted in them, readers learn little about its internal workings. In *The Lord of the Rings*, magic came from the creator of the world and it is possessed by some beings, i.e. the Ainur who fulfil a role similar to that of angels in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The Ainur were great spirits and each was given a mighty voice so that he could sing before Ilúvatar for His pleasure. (...) This was what the tales call the Music of the Ainur, in which great themes were made as individual spirits sought supremacy or harmony according to their nature. Some proved greater than others; some were powerful in goodness, some in evil; yet in the end, though the battle of sound was terrible, the Music was great and beautiful. From this harmony and strife Ilúvatar created a vision that was a globed light in the Void. With a word and the Flame Imperishable He then made Eä, the "World that Is".⁹

7 A folk tale published by, e.g., Giovanni Francesco Straparola, or Charles Perrault.

8 Even though Andrzej Sapkowski in his compendium on fantasy fiction did not write about magic as a feature specific to this genre, the set of readings he indicated seems to prove the above assumption. Vide: A. Sapkowski, *Rękopis znaleziony w smoczyczej jaskini*, SuperNowa, Warszawa 2001, pp. 9–12. Vide: N. Leman, "Science fiction", [in:] *Słownik rodzajów i gatunków literackich*, G. Gazda, S. Tynecka-Makowska (eds.), Universitas, Kraków 2006.

9 D. Day, *Bestiariusz tolkienowski*, trans. R. Giedrojć, J.Z. Lichański, J. Kokot, Zysk i S-ka, Poznań 1996, p. 20. [English version: D. Day, *A Tolkien Bestiary*, Random House, New York 2001.]

Therefore, magic is part of creation and every being endowed with it by the creator has its share in creation. Readers can only infer that the magical powers of those of the Ainur who descended onto Eä are limited to the domain of which they sang in the act of creation. Hence, Gandalf is the guardian of fire: "I am servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor. You cannot pass. The dark fire will not avail you, flame of Udûn. Go back to the Shadow!"¹⁰ the wizard said to Balrog, his enemy, in the battle scene on the bridge in Moria. Deducing further, one might conclude that the flame of Anor represents the light and positive aspects of fire – fire as light illuminating darkness, a source of warmth, fire warming food, and a bonfire gathering people and creating a community. Then, the fire of Udûn is responsible for the destructive power of fire. Further fortunes of the characters prove that the powers of both beings were in such a state of equilibrium that their fight concluded in their deaths.¹¹ Gandalf's powers are limited only to the domain of fire. The ability to communicate with animals and other magical beings is an immanent quality of all Ainur, just like the ability to predict events¹² and the immortality of their spirit form. Some of the magical abilities were transferred during the act of creation onto races inhabiting Eä – Elrond, an elf, has the ability to heal; Galadriel, the queen of elves, can read the minds of humans, elves, dwarves, and hobbits, and influence them. She also holds a magical artefact, i.e. a mirror which can show scenes from the past, the present, and the future. Yet the mirror cannot be controlled; it shows what it wishes to. Elves, similarly to the Ainur and unlike dwarves, humans, and hobbits, are immortal. The death of their corporeal form means the return of their spirits to a land beyond, created especially for them, where if their corporeal forms die, they will await the end of the world. Other races do not possess such magical abilities unless they are endowed with those by an Ainur, as was the case with the nine Fallen Kings, who were turned into Ringwraiths.

In Howard's short stories about Conan the Barbarian¹³, magic exists as an element of the presented world and – apart from the short stories titled *A Witch Shall Be Born*¹⁴

¹⁰ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Władca Pierścieni*, trans. M. Skibniewska, Atlantis SC, Warsaw 1992, p. 226. [English version: J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, Harper Collins, London 2001.]

¹¹ More precisely: when the lives of their corporeal forms end on Eä. Gandalf was sent again to finish the task with which he was entrusted, and to complete the fate inscribed in the Music of the Ainur.

¹² That power, which could be treated as magic, probably resulted from their presence during the creation of the world and singing its fate. Yet only the creator knows everything. No one knows whether the corporeal form of the Ainur present on Eä retains all the recollections from existence prior to the descent.

¹³ In this analysis, I have considered only Howard's texts about Conan and I omitted the numerous works by various later authors of the franchise.

¹⁴ R.E. Howard, "Narodzi się wiedźma", [in:] idem., *Conan z Cimmerii*, Wydawnictwo ALFA, Warsaw 1988.

and *The Frost-Giant's Daughter*¹⁵ – it does not play any major role. It only constitutes an embellishment, the local feature of the barbarian world. Magic, without any explanation and not necessary for the story line, appears, just like in fairy tales, as something which is obvious for readers as an element of the presented world, adding variety to it and being a factor which differentiates it from the world outside the text. Apart from increasing the attractiveness of a text, its presence does not convey through the text any additional message or subtext.

What is magic like in the trademark work of the Polish fantasy fiction? Already in the first short story in the *Witcher* series¹⁶ by Andrzej Sapkowski, readers get to know Visenna, a sorceress and mother of Geralt, the series' protagonist. From that moment on, the Witcher's fortunes connect and intertwine with magic constantly. Geralt himself was partly altered by magic, owing to which he now possesses special abilities, e.g. superhuman speed, the ability to see in the dark, the ability to amplify his strength, endurance, reaction speed, and other qualities available through the use of elixirs which are deadly for regular humans; increased pace of regeneration, and lowered sensitivity to pain. I am, however, getting ahead of myself. The Witcher's world is a place originally inhabited by gnomes and dwarves. Later, through magic, elves arrived in the land and it was probably them who brought or awoke magic in this world as there are no indications of gnome or dwarf wizards, nor are there in the whole series any representatives of those races who practice magic. Hundreds of years later there occurred an unspecified event of alignment of spheres and gates between different worlds opened offering passage for other beings, mainly humans¹⁷ but also various monsters, e.g. vampires and ghouls. People discovered magic and started sending their children to learn from elvish sorcerers, the Aen Saevherne or the so-called elven sages. However, not all can do magic – as it turns out, it is an extremely rare skill and its source is not entirely defined. Magical abilities predispose those who possess them to find themselves among the elite of the new world, i.e. on the same level as the aristocracy and priests are, right below monarchs. Therefore, usually the fact of being a sorcerer or a sorceress entails not only the fact of possessing extraordinary abilities, but also being

15 R.E. Howard, "Córa lodowego olbrzyma", [in:] idem., *Conan z Cimmerii*, Wydawnictwo ALFA, Warsaw 1988.

16 A. Sapkowski, "Droga, z której się nie wraca", [in:] idem., *Coś się kończy, coś się zaczyna*, SuperNowa, Warsaw 2001.

17 People came from a world which could be defined as 'ours' in the Middle Ages, which is indicated by the usage of Latin as the language of diplomacy, and some of the proper names which often are used for intertextual games with readers, e.g. giving the name of Franklin to a halfling who tried to catch a bolt of lightning in a bottle. Vide: A. Sapkowski, *Czas pogardy*, SuperNowa, Warsaw 1995, pp. 97–98. More on this subject can be found in: K. Kaczor, *Geralt, czarownice i wampir...*, and E. Żukowska, *Mitologie Andrzeja Sapkowskiego*, Gdański Klub Fantastyki, Gdańsk 2011.

ranked at the top of the social ladder and having the ability to accrue wealth from providing services to the wealthiest of the world, and charging enormous payments on those. If you add longevity, never-fading beauty (improved through magic¹⁸), absolute health (magical immunity to all illnesses¹⁹), the fact of having an actual influence on rulers and the fate of the world, and other privileges – e.g. the ability to travel almost unrestricted around the world owing to the ability to create magic portals – the magic profession seems to be a dream. However, wealth, power, beauty, and health must come at a price. From the very beginning of their magic careers, candidates²⁰ for members of the magic community must be aware of the possible consequences that fate might throw at them.²¹ The first and one of the most important disadvantages of being a sorcerer/sorceress is the complete loss of one's bonds with their family. The academy, which they do not leave for many years, becomes for the students their only home, a home devoid of warmth or feelings. After completing the training, the graduates are changed so much that they do not seek contact with their families, becoming complete strangers to them. Owing to their longevity, they outlive their parents and siblings by many years.²² Growing up separated from one's family and the world outside the walls of the academy results in raising individuals devoid of feelings and empathy, who are egotistic and focused only on gaining benefits for themselves or their magic community. Relationships between sorcerers/sorceresses are mainly concentrated around satisfying their sexual drives without any emotional bonds. This is how Vilgefortz, a sorcerer, described his first lover, a sorceress: "I left her. Because she was promiscuous, arrogant, malicious, callous and cold."²³ His sentiment was not uncommon. Many times throughout the novels, similar opinions are voiced about sorceresses. In his ballads, Dandelion

18 The beauty of sorceresses and the refined presence of sorcerers was associated with the prestige of the profession and the fact of belonging to an elite caste. This is why all flaws in one's appearance were magically removed already during the education at the academy. Thus, e.g. Yennefer, as Geralt guessed correctly, was a hunchback when she was a child. Vide: A. Sapkowski, "Ostatnie życzenie", [in:] idem., *Ostatnie życzenie*, SuperNowa, Warsaw 1998, pp. 273–274.

19 There were some exceptions. For example, Triss Merigold is not able to heal herself using magic, because she is allergic to it.

20 Most of the details regarding the magic academy and the magic folk in general apply to women. Only through analogy one can assume that in most cases the same applies to men.

21 In most cases, candidates for the magic academy are taken away from their parents as children and they have no say about their own fates.

22 When the story of the series unfolds, Yennefer is around ninety years old (while looking like a twenty-five-year-old), and Hen Gedyndeith, the oldest of the living mages, is one of those who were as children given away to elves for education immediately after humans had landed in this world, which means he must be at least several hundred years old.

23 A. Sapkowski, *Czas pogardy*, pp. 142–143.

compared Yennefer's heart to a block of ice. The sorceress is the protagonist of the short story titled *A Shard of Ice*²⁴; the character is a reference to Hans Christian Andersen's Snow Queen. The relationship of Geralt and Yennefer is astounding; it often seems to be bringing more pain than happiness and yet, against all odds, it endures. Their relationship is surprising for another reason as well: witchers undergo a mutation which is supposed to deprive them of feelings so that these cannot distract them in combat. Considering their original conditions and the magical alternations they both underwent, their affection is unique and theoretically impossible. At this point it must be stated that their fates have been bound by a spell cast by a genie in the short story titled *The Last Wish*.²⁵ The novel lacks a literary answer to the question about whether their love is true and whether it is natural or a mere outcome of strong magic. Readers cannot be certain as to whether they managed to break a barrier, i.e. whether nature triumphed over artificially created conditions.²⁶ A hint in this matter might be offered by their attitude towards Ciri, who after the loss of her family became their assumed daughter. Even before meeting the girl, Yennefer displayed a desire unusual for a sorceress, which was to reverse the transformations she had been subjected to during her magic training, and regain her fertility. In the short story titled *The Bounds of Reason*²⁷, the sorceress admits that she desires the skin of the unique golden dragon not for profit but to pay with it for regaining her fertility. When faced with her inability to have a child of her own, the fact of being a mother to Ciri enables Yennefer to fulfil her biggest dream. The sorceress is ready, just like the Witcher, to sacrifice anything to find her assumed daughter. That fact seems to prove that the love between Yennefer and Geralt is true. Magic can do much, but to restore the ability to become pregnant – supposedly natural for every woman – is beyond anything even the most talented mages can do.

Most sorceresses, just like Yennefer, cannot have children, but none of the others regrets it; their egotistic attitudes exclude the possibility of having any progeny to which they would have to devote time and feelings, which they do not possess. Visenna, Geralt's mother, gave him up to the witchers' school and never cared for his fortunes. The fluke meeting between the sorceress and Geralt when she is summoned to heal a wounded witcher ends in the son once again being abandoned by his mother. She completes her medical duties and leaves, not waiting for the patient to regain consciousness. She avoids the inconvenient questions which he might ask

24 A. Sapkowski, "Okruh lodu", [in:] idem., *Miecz przeznaczenia*, SuperNowa, Warsaw 1998.

25 A. Sapkowski, "Ostatnie życzenie", [in:] idem., *Ostatnie życzenie*, SuperNowa, Warsaw 1998.

26 This question was answered by the creators of the video game titled *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt RED, Poland 2016). If a player decides to free Geralt and Yennefer of the love spell cast by the genie, their love survives the trial. The fairy-tale aspect, i.e. the triumph of love, outweighs in this instance the anti-fairy-tale convention of fantasy fiction.

27 Sapkowski A., "Granica możliwości", [in:] idem., *Miecz przeznaczenia*, SuperNowa, Warsaw 1998.

and the possible objections she might hear.²⁸ That lack of interest in her own child is also a result of how sorceresses are brought up – i.e. in isolation from their families²⁹ – and of their loss of their maternal instincts. They gain much through magic, yet they lose the ability to fulfil their humanity, i.e. the ability to create life. Women who hold magical abilities and who have never been sent to the academy, and sorceresses who, like Visenna, have retained their fertility, often give birth to cata-tonic types or morons whose uncontrolled magical abilities destroy their minds. Such cases are so common that mages themselves have postulated a requirement of unconditional sterilisation³⁰, as if nature wanted to punish mages for violating the barriers it established, for transgressing the limits it intended for humans.

Apart from emotional problems, mages also face barriers which they encounter in the society. This particularly applies to women whose position in the patriarchal society is low due to their sex. Katarzyna Kaczor argued that:

Upon demystifying the stereotypes created by the Christian culture, women regain through their association with nature the title of the Knowers. (...)

Yet the demystification of the stereotype of the witch can also occur if one realises that the Western culture is the actual creator of the monster known as the witch, a culture in which female druids, priests, ancient goddesses and heroines served as the prototypes of all kinds of witches. Based on that realisation, the prototypes of fairy-tale fairies and sorceresses regain their original image of the Sages³¹

Despite the author's argument, not all aspects of that liberation from under the rule of the stereotype are socially acceptable. While female druids, priests, or even female village healers acting as midwives and providing first aid did regain their once lost position within the society – and their role of the wise and the knowing is accepted – the situation is somewhat different in the case of sorceresses.

Their unchanging beauty, wealth, skills, and their ability to do 'miracles' using magic become the source of jealousy among all those who lack such abilities; jealousy combined with frustration as one's own fate often leads to hatred cunningly fuelled by male priests. In a scene of a trial of a challenged girl unjustly accused by a priest of performing dark magic, at a refugee camp on the Chotla River, the

²⁸ During that encounter, Geralt remains under the influence of elixirs, the side effect of which are hallucinations. Neither the protagonist nor the readers can be sure as to whether the sorceress healing the witcher is, in fact, his mother. Possibly, those hallucinations were the result of his subconscious desire to find his mother and ask her why she had abandoned him.

²⁹ Upbringing itself might be only one of the reasons. Even though it is clear that candidates for witchers undergo mutations, in the case of sorceresses it is not clear what changes they are required undergo when applying for the academy.

³⁰ Vide: A. Sapkowski, *Krew elfów*, SuperNowa, Warsaw 1994, p. 244.

³¹ K. Kaczor, *Geralt, czarownice i wampir...*, p. 82.

attitude of most priests towards mages becomes evident. A priest delivers a sexist sermon in which he indicates women as the sources of evil, and proceeds to politics and accuses sorceresses (emphasising their sex) of plotting against the rulers. The motif of women as the source of all evil is a reference to the Judeo-Christian myth in which Eve is accused of the sin because of which people were banned from the garden of Eden, as well as to a time when Christians burnt witches at the stake³² for their alleged conniving with the devil. The priest abuses the prestige of his profession to convince simple villagers about his position.

“Since the dawn of time woman has been the root of all evil! The tool of Chaos, the accomplice in a conspiracy against the world and the human race! Woman is governed only by carnal lust! That is why she so willingly serves demons, in order to slake her insatiable urges and her unnatural wantonness!”

(...)

“And of what, if not female witchery, are our current calamities and misfortunes the result?” the priest continued to yell. “For no one else but the sorceresses betrayed the kings on the Isle of Thanedd and concocted the assassination of the King of Redania! Indeed, no one else but the elven witch of Dol Blathanna is sending Squirrels after us! Now you see to what evil the familiarity with sorceresses has led us! And the tolerance of their vile practices! Turning a blind eye to their wilfulness, their impudent hubris, their wealth!”³³

The above statement concerns political events. It includes keywords which reveal the true reasons behind the priests’ hatred towards sorceresses, i.e. “wilfulness”, “carnal lust”, and “wealth”. Unlike other women, sorceresses can decide about their own fates, but – as advisers to monarchs – they also have an influence on the fates of kingdoms, so wealth in this context also means power. Their independence from men and the freedom of sexual life are for priests a thorn in the side as they expect them to behave like Penelope, i.e. faithfully waiting at home for her husband who, unlike her, was allowed by the morality of his time to engage in momentary love affairs in his journeys and even to produce children out of wedlock. Therefore, it was not magic that was the main reason of the animosity, but the liberation from under the rule of men. However, magic cannot be treated only as a pretext of the hostile attitude of the priests as it was magic that enabled women to gain independence in the first place. Independence which they emphasise at every step:

³² The girl is supposed to be punished for her magic by being burnt at the stake.

³³ A. Sapkowski, *Chrzest ognia*, SuperNowa, Warsaw 1997, pp. 155–156. [English version: A. Sapkowski, *Baptism of Fire*, Gollancz, London 2014.] The thread of the animosity between priests and mages was further developed in the video game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, op. cit., where mages are persecuted by Radovid V King of Redania and the followers of the Eternal Fire.

Beautiful, long, loose hair was a rarity, an indication of a woman's position, her status, the sign of a free woman, a woman who belonged to herself. The sign of an unusual woman – because “normal” married women hid theirs beneath a caul or a coif. Women of high birth, including queens, curled their hair and styled it. Warriors cut it short. Only druids and magicians – and whores – wore their hair naturally so as to emphasise their independence and freedom.³⁴

That flaunting of one's own independence is a natural defensive mechanism in a world dominated by men. This is why the priest's tirade included one more keyword: “hubris”. Yet in this case the priest was quite right. Hubris resulting from the fact of having power, knowledge, and wealth unavailable to most people leads mages to a conviction that they are superior. And this, in turn, leads to a conviction that mages as the elite of the world are predestined to rule and enjoy impunity regardless of their actions. The sorceresses establish a secret lodge, the aim of which is to rule the world. Many mages are psychopaths. They create monsters which kill people, they experiment on them, they trigger wars to “limit” population growth and “eliminate” weaker individuals; they treat everyone else as mindless toys which have no feelings and which they use only to reach the goals defined by magic. They themselves are devoid of any feelings and they cannot understand the rest of the humankind. The benefits of having their wonderful abilities dwindle when compared to the threat of great power being yielded by people who cannot comprehend the meaning of life or its essence.

When discussing magic, one cannot omit a novel of the new genre of science fantasy, i.e. *Pan Lodowego Ogrodu* by Jarosław Grzędowicz, as magic plays a major role in it. In the not too distant future, humans on Earth discover a planet inhabited by intelligent humanoids whose development is at the stage of the early Middle Ages (prior to the invention of gun powder). A characteristic quality of the planet is that all electronic and mechanical devices brought to it from Earth quickly stop working and no scientific attempt at explaining this phenomenon offers any useful results. Scientists discover that, most probably, it is caused by a mysterious agent, which they refer to as “M”, derived from the word “magic” – a word which they, being rationalists, refuse to use. Surprisingly, despite their objections, they very quickly become proficient in using magic, unlike Vuko Drakkainen, the novel's protagonist, a ranger/rescuer, whose mission is to evacuate the scientists off the planet. For a long time, Drakkainen cannot master even the basics of “magic-making”; just like the indigenous people, he tries – and fails – to find any rules governing this supernatural, in his opinion, power. Through observation and deduction, Drakkainen eventually arrives at the most important conclusion: magic cannot work in contradiction with the laws of nature. It does not work like some

³⁴ A. Sapkowski, *Krew elfów...*, p. 52. [English version: A. Sapkowski, *Blood of Elves*, Orbit, New York 2009.]

fairy-tale spells. “And whatever it is, it does not react to simple verbal commands like «open sesame.»”³⁵ To magically produce food, it is necessary to

transform something from the surroundings, from plants and animals, but here you need to imagine that whole process at the molecular level. Essentially possible yet terribly hard. You would end up with a toxic semi-raw kielbasa covered in fur.³⁶

Therefore, it is not possible to make childhood dreams a reality and fly on a dragon:

The wyvern rapidly smashes wings, like a swan, thrusting that wilted one in a convulsive sad motion, but even if it was properly developed, it would not be able to carry the dragon. It probably weighs a ton. A ton of flesh and bone. Even if it was filled with pure helium, it would not fly. The wings, if it would be able to stretch them out, would have a span of some fifteen metres. Maybe it would be able to glide for a bit, though I doubt it.³⁷

(Dragons) Are physiologically impossible. That is why they die. Magic brings them to life and maintains that process creating that which a sorcerer wants. But they still die. Because his dragons come from fairy tales. They are fictional, they cannot work. Hence his spell is something artificial and has its limitations. He can order matter to transform a child into a dwarf, but it will not survive. Because its heart has the structure of a human heart and it has human muscles, because human metabolism is too slow to maintain life in a body which weighs two hundred grams, because human lungs are not efficient enough, the blood is too thick and so on. Such a human would have to have the internal organs of a mouse.³⁸

What proves key to uncovering the mystery of magic is to visualise the activities which are to be performed using magic. Magic is mindless; it cannot interpret the wishes of the magician. It can only follow step-by-step instructions – like a computer doing everything exactly as it was programmed to do by a human. Indeed, Drakkainen manages to reach the gods worshipped on the planet, who prove to be beings who belong to a technologically advanced civilisation. The “gods” have long lost their physical form and now float in the atmosphere as information permeating the planet. The “magic” created by them is nothing else than “mnemonically controlled nano-vectors” which, like tiny disposable robots, are able to perform instructions given in one’s mind.

³⁵ J. Grzędowicz, *Pan Lodowego Ogrodu*, vol. III, Fabryka Słów, Lublin 2009, p. 292.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 294. Interestingly enough, there is some resemblance to the *Witcher* series – there, too, magicians cannot conjure up a tasty meal, i.e. create something which any housewife can do (without magic!)

³⁷ J. Grzędowicz, *Pan Lodowego Ogrodu*, vol. II, Fabryka Słów, Lublin 2007, p. 133.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 143–144.

They are not much bigger than particles, but they operate together, like a swarm. And there are billions of them. They are able to lift a mountain if there is enough of them. Any one can cut something, merge something, relocate something or set fire to something. This way it will be easier for you to learn it than by thinking in terms of a fog, mysticism or magic.³⁹

The whole magic turns out to be nothing more than advanced technology. The illusion of its supernatural properties is the result of the ignorance of the natives. A similar situation would have been if a 12th-century blacksmith had been showed a television; he would surely assume that people magically locked in a box were performing a show. The mechanics of this “magic” also explains why Earth scientists became proficient in its inner workings so quickly; they simply had knowledge of physical, chemical, and biological processes which enabled them to control the nano-vectors in a predictable manner.

Therefore, the word ‘magical’ seems adequate in the figurative sense regarding a technology which quickly – and through nano-vectors not visible to the naked eye – can do “miracles”, e.g. heal the unhealable or create something from, seemingly, nothing. Owing to such ‘magic’, a wizard/scientist can cross the barrier (obviously within the limits of the laws of nature) of that which previously seemed impossible. Yet the laws of physics or biology are the only limitations enforced by the “magic”. Unlimited power over matter, it turns out, is detrimental to those who came to yield it. From his conversations with the “gods”, Drakkainen learns that this lack of any barriers had led to the fall of their civilisation. No details were revealed to him, yet one might infer that the holders of the extraordinary technology that was able to do almost anything (including gaining immortality by changing their corporeal form into pure information) destroyed their world⁴⁰ and lost the sense of their existence. They have lost that which constituted the foundation of their humanity.⁴¹

If you can do whatever you want from almost nothing, why would you develop? Why do anything? You can have normal things without any effort, and you can do extraordinary things at such a scale and they can be so wild that they pose a threat. (...)

A logical outcome of the development of the technology. Of continued development. Something from nothing. Anything from anything else. That’s inevitable. Magic? All technology is magic. Everything depends on your point of reference.⁴²

³⁹ J. Grzędowicz, *Pan Lodowego Ogrodu*, vol. III, Fabryka Słów, Lublin 2009, pp. 143–144.

⁴⁰ Unlimited power to create also gives unlimited power to destroy.

⁴¹ It was a civilisation similar to ours, which is why the word “humanity” can be considered appropriate here.

⁴² J. Grzędowicz, *Pan Lodowego Ogrodu*, vol. IV, Fabryka Słów, Lublin 2012, pp. 834–835.

The “gods” lost their own lives because of the development of their technology. Now they live someone else’s lives.

“And who are you? Who are you, Crow Shadow?”

“Me? I’m a fool. Mentally and emotionally underdeveloped. I get bored with everyday affairs of adults. I’m too dumb for that. That’s why I miss the material world where you have a body, where there are only two sexes, where you need to eat to survive, and in order to eat you need to find and prepare food. Where people have simple needs and joys. Physical. Those are matters for imbeciles, but only such things make me happy. So, I descend among people and have some fun. I play.”

(...)

“People there, they hurt, they die, they love...”

“That is why I like that. It is authentic. Passionate. I want that, too.”

Crow Shadow explains the reason for the existence of Midgard⁴³ – it is the entertainment for the “gods”, the only sense of existence, an ersatz of life which has no meaning for the all-powerful. They feast on other people’s lives, human emotions, their desires, failures, and successes. The world of Midgard is for them like a book, a television series or a game; they view it from the safe position of their immaterial form. Only it can let them out of their golden cage and enable them to feel, evoke trepidation in them, cause desire – so much so that from time to time they decide to intervene. That atavistic whimsy is the only thing which maintains the will to continue existing in the all-powerful. They are like the viewers of a television saga, or avid video gamers, for whom the only thing that counts is that which they see on their screens. Just like gamers, they do not really eat, they do not love, they do not hate, and they do not live. And when they die, they can always return to their last saved location and try again. The “gods” have learnt from their failure and they do not allow the world to develop, which is why no complex device works on the planet. And when the world starts to develop too quickly in terms of technology, it is reset like a video game to the starting condition. All that to protect the people living in Midgard from the inevitable catastrophe awaiting at the end of unconstrained development.

Another argument indicating the dangers of magic is the activities of Earth’s scientists in Midgard. Among the four who survived, three proved mad or psychotic, treating the inhabitants of the planet as a means of acquiring absolute power over the world and introducing their own order. They create dystopias in which people are reduced to something less than slaves; they become a faceless mass used for turning the sick visions of their “gods” into reality. Only one scientist uses magic to defend himself from the others, but even he transforms the island subject

⁴³ This was the name given to the planet by the scientists as one of the planet’s peoples resembled Vikings.

to him into a tourist heritage park; yet it must be said that he does not force anyone to become part of his world.

Magic in the novels by Andrzej Sapkowski and Jarosław Grzędowicz have different sources (forces of nature versus technology) and it differs in terms of its application. Yet there are some similarities in terms of the consequences borne by those who use it. Magic cannot give people the most important things – fertility in Yennefer’s case, i.e. that which is supposedly natural for regular women. It destroys the sphere of emotions. The life of a mage becomes shallow and the sense of existence becomes undermined. It contradicts nature and inevitably leads to destruction. Even if the mechanics of magic is subject to the laws of nature, magic still often leads one to losing their humanity. The benefit of yielding magic powers is an illusion – mages in the Witcher’s world gain power, social stature, and wealth, but they often fall into madness, just as Earth scientists on Midgard did. The power of magic is like atomic power; it can satisfy the material needs of humans, but there is a danger that, when in the wrong hands, it might lead to total destruction. Magic is too powerful a tool to be yielded by a person with an unstable mind and questionable morality. Magic is a threat to an entire civilisation. It is noteworthy that in the novel by Grzędowicz there appears the premise for creating a catastrophic vision of a terrestrial society enslaved by magic/technology, and with its efforts leading towards self-annihilation, just like the civilisation of the “gods” on the planet Midgard.⁴⁴ In following this argumentation, is magic a means of breaking barriers, shattering glass ceilings, and rupturing walls? It most certainly is, yet one needs to be careful that fulfilling their dreams should not become a curse.

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⁴⁴ A similar motif also appears in Grzędowicz’ latest sci-fi novel, vide: J. Grzędowicz, *Hel³*, Fabryka Słów, Lublin/Warsaw 2017.

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Mateusz Poradecki

Granice magii – szkic o przełamaniu barier w fantastyce

Streszczenie

Artykuł to próba analizy magii w utworach Andrzeja Sapkowskiego (cykl o *Wiedźminie*) i Jarosława Grzędowicza (*Pan Lodowego Ogrodu*) pod względem jej możliwości, ograniczeń i społecznych konsekwencji jej stosowania. Magia jest gatunkotwórczym elementem literatury fantasy, lecz z większości dzieł np. *Władcy Pierścienia* Tolkiena czy cyklu o Conanie Roberta E. Howarda czytelnik nie

dowiaduje się o niej więcej niż z baśni. Dopiero w znacznie późniejszych utworach Sapkowskiego i Grzędowicza magia zostaje dokładniej opisana. U Sapkowskiego jest naturalną siłą przyrody, którą studiują i rozwijają członkowie akademii. U Grzędowicza to wysoko zaawansowana technologia, mylona z czarami przez pozostających na etapie niskiego rozwoju mieszkańców planety Midgaard. Magia to próba przekroczenia barier, narzuconych przez prawa przyrody, ale także barier społecznych. Niekontrolowany jej rozwój może prowadzić do samozagłady cywilizacji.

Słowa kluczowe: magia, bariery społeczne, fantasy, science-fiction, funkcja magii w literaturze

The limits of magic: A study in breaking through barriers in fantasy fiction

Summary

The article analyses the theme of magic in the works of Andrzej Sapkowski (the *Witcher* series) and Jarosław Grzędowicz (*Pan Lodowego Ogrodu*) in terms of their potential, limitations, and the social consequences of using them. Magic is a genre-forming element of fantasy fiction, yet in most works – e.g. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* or Robert E. Howard's Conan series – readers do not learn about it more than they do from fairy tales. Magic is subject to extensive descriptions much later, i.e. in the works by Sapkowski and Grzędowicz. In Sapkowski's texts, it is a natural force of nature, which is studied and developed by the members of an academy. In Grzędowicz's novel, it is a highly advanced technology, often mistaken for spells by the fairly undeveloped inhabitants of the planet Midgard. Magic is an attempt at breaking through barriers enforced by the laws of nature as well as social barriers. An uncontrolled development may lead to the self-annihilation of an entire civilisation.

Keywords: magic, social barriers, fantasy, science fiction, function of magic in literature

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