

# Fantasy (Christian)

Judith Wolfe

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## Fantasy (Christian)

A genre of fiction in which settings, plots and/or characters deliberately depart from what is assumed to be real or possible. While the expressly imaginary character of fantasy stands in formal contrast to historical and metaphysical Christian truth claims, its capacity for imaginative dilation and narrative elevation may be seen as resonant with a Christian sensibility that the manifest is not the ultimate.

Early elements of fantasy are found in classical literature (e.g. Aristophanes' *The Birds*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Apuleius's *Golden Ass*, and Lucian's *True History*), mediaeval tales (e.g. *Beowulf*, the Prose Edda, the *Nibelungenlied*, *One Thousand and One Nights*, the legends of King Arthur), and early modern romance (e.g. Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). The emergence of fantasy as a distinct genre dates to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, as a variant of Romanticism's appeal for re-enchantment. Literary and theoretical contributions linking fantasy and Christianity were made from its inception by seminal writers including George MacDonald (e.g. *The Princess and the Goblin*, *Phantastes*, *Lilith*), \*C.S. Lewis, and above all \*J.R.R. Tolkien, who regarded the ability to create secondary worlds as an essential aspect of humanity's own creation in God's image. Other fantasy writers drawing on Christian thought include Charles Williams (e.g. *The Place of the Lion*, *Descent into Hell*, *All Hallows' Eve*), Madeleine L'Engle (e.g. *A Wrinkle in Time*), Robert Jordan (*The Wheel of Time*), and J.K. Rowling (*Harry Potter*).

Defining accounts of the association of fantasy with Christianity are MacDonald's 'The Fantastic Imagination' (1890), Chesterton's 'The Ethics of Elfland' (1908), and Tolkien's 'On Fairy-stories' (1939). MacDonald emphasises the role of the imagination in apprehending what reason cannot comprehend; Chesterton the 'enchanted' quality of creation realized by fantasy; and Tolkien fantasy's characteristic ability to heal the imagination and thereby restore a humane and Christian inhabitation of this world.

The literary tendency, since c. the 1970s, to develop genres by subversion rather than affirmation of central tropes increasingly seen as clichés, is manifest in the prominence of counter-Christian sensibilities in leading works of fantasy since that time, including those of Philip Pullman (*His Dark Materials*) and George R.R. Martin (*A Song of Ice and Fire*).

1. G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London, 1908)
2. N. Frye, *The Secular Scripture* (Boston, 1978)
3. G. MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts* (London, 1893)
4. R. Sturch, *Four Christian Fantasists* (Zurich, 2001)
5. J.R.R. Tolkien, *On Fairy-stories*, ed. V. Flieger and D.A. Anderson (London, 2014)