

Lyonesse In History, Its Hosting Magic

Introduction

In my review notes of *Lyonesse*, “Oddments & Epiphanies” (click link if wished), I remarked that “Without a single doubt Jack was eruditely knowledgeable and did all kinds of due diligence in preparatory research for *Lyonesse* (anyone can see that)”. I view Jack’s erudition of the Late Antiquity period such that consequently I classify *Lyonesse* with a distinct tribute.

<https://www.tapatalk.com/groups/jackvance/lyonesse-oddments-epiphanies-t5014.html>

Of course this is merely my personal assessment about *Lyonesse*, and not every Vance fan (or incidental reader of *Lyonesse*) will come to this same conclusion. That is okay by me, naturally.

In my evaluation of the tale, it all comes down to **how** to host an epic fantasy that features Magic.

Almost all – not just a great majority – of fantasies featuring Magic must posit an overt discontinuity from our day-to-day living experience – viz., our own Reality – the actuality within which the excitement of Magic in any fantasy-at-hand does not, and cannot, exist . . . notwithstanding how we are often dolefully aggrieved by that lack. This disconnection from us sits at the core of the fantasy-world’s dicta for having Magic existent at all. Such a fantasized maxim allowing Magic *REQUIRES* a coherent discontinuity from the very Reality that ‘is’ as we know things.

In the creation of such fantasy literature, I see two general categories that serve as ‘**The Discontinuity Rationale**’. (Positing Alternate Physics subsumes them both. The same with any Alternate Ontology.)

First, Magic occurs in an ‘Alternate Reality’. Said another way, Magic occurs in what is effectively a different Cosmos (hosting Alternate Physics). These are multiplex, and can be (a) in an ‘Otherwhere’ removed from our Cosmos, or (b) in a ‘Parallel Universe’ standing away from us, or (c) in ‘Different Dimensions’ than what our own Cosmos’ Reality retains. These three labels are occasionally synonymic for each other, even though each owns to different nuances. ‘Otherwhere’ is close to ‘Parallel Universe’, and in turn ‘Parallel Universe’ is close to ‘Different Dimensions’.

An example: To my best understanding, Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Earthsea* saga transpires on an archipelago world Earthsea in a ‘Parallel Universe’ where Magic is axiomatically possible, or if you prefer, on a world in an ‘Otherwhere’ wherewith the Magic that exists there does not exist in this Cosmos. Here is its scheme: “*Magic on Earthsea is primarily verbal. Everything has a true name in the Old Speech, the language of the dragons, and the language which Segoy used to create the [Earthsean Cosmos’s] world. [...] Magic works by forcing the universe to conform to the words spoken by the Magician. For example, to say "I am an eagle" in the old language means that the speaker becomes an eagle, so that the statement is no longer false.*” {Cf. Wikipedia: Earthsea (universe)}.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Earthsea_\(universe\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Earthsea_(universe))

I would argue that another ‘Alternate Reality’ is the Discworld of Terry Pratchett’s *The Colour of Magic*. “*Rincewind and Twoflower travel towards the city of Quirm, unaware that their adventures on this*

journey are actually the subject of a boardgame played by the Gods of the Discworld”, Wikipedia: The Colour of Magic.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Colour_of_Magic

Second, Magic can occur in an ‘Alternate Timeline’ from us. (Again, hosting some sort of Alternate Physics, or cause & effect.) Granted, ‘Time’ is part of ‘Reality’, but I mean that this category does not quite assert a different Cosmos, as does what I intend meaning by ‘Alternate Reality’.

‘Alternate Timeline’ includes the well-worn ‘Once Upon a Time’ scenario, where the past is assembled from a mythos, a legend or a fairytale – one which then unfolds unto the present day – and the story is always understood to have been fully within our own Cosmos. Additionally, this ‘Alternate Timeline’ rationale includes all other Alternate Pasts that stress Magic had existed, whether or not such Magic is viable in our present day.

Tolkien’s famed Middle Earth is in the ‘Once Upon a Time’ scheme. It imports pagan mythos of Norse & English peoples (with Finnish Mythological influences) to comprise a putative Past. Middle Earth happens to be loosely correlated to Western Europe geography, and when the tale is also layered timewise with Tolkien’s Forth Age of ‘the Coming of Men’, it elegiacally presents a notion, albeit naïvely, *AS IF* all of this ‘*could have been*’ our own historical background ... particularly given that we manifestly do live in such an ‘Age of Humankind’.

Comment: Unresolved by the epic itself is we don’t quite know what happens to Tolkienian Magic; an implication might be that it left with the Last Exodus of High Elves from Middle Earth; or that it remains untapped as a forgotten lore in the Age of Men; or – could it simply have dissipated?

J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series presents an ‘Alternate Timeline’ where Magic always existed and is (for breeds of humans) congenital, such that it became a Magic-infused culturally separate reality (but still in this Cosmos) which for centuries existed side-by-side – yet covertly & disjointedly – from the mundane (‘Muggle’) reality, or better to say, within their purview of common knowledge. Under this scheme all Magical involvement is ordained to remain secret even until today. This ‘Alternate Timeline’ is NOT inconsistent with our own Reality. It is just a matter of who knows what.

As a twist on that schema, Susanna Clarke’s fantasy world-building (click on link for a review) is likewise an ‘Alternate Timeline’. Culture & history of the early Nineteenth Century and the Napoleonic Wars are realistically wrought as we know them, the only exception being that Magic exists and was put into play in minor ways. Under her ‘Alternate Timeline’, Magic is not a secret, and we even today would be aware of it. That makes this an ‘Alternate Timeline’ inconsistent with our own.

<https://www.tapatalk.com/groups/jackvance/john-strange-alee-johnathan-vance-t4985.html>

As a result of it being incongruous with Reality today, it converts (or let’s say pervolves, hehe) into an ‘Alternate History’, a subgenre of Historical Fiction (and also a subgenre under both Literary Fiction and Science Fiction). A good example of ‘Alternate History’ is George Orwell’s *Nineteen-Eighty Four*.

For this article, I count ‘Alternate History’ (as the subgenre of under Historical Fiction) and soon below ‘Pseudohistory’ as both falling under my bi-phylum ‘Alternate Timeline’ that is respective to ‘The Discontinuity Rationale’ for the hosting of Magic.

What about *Lyonesse*?

At first blush, many might deem *Lyonesse* falls snugly under the 'Once Upon a Time' scenario. I offer that this is perhaps principally because it is filled with fairytale creatures as fairies, trolls, ogres, dryads, goblins, unicorns, witches, etc. I aver, however, it is more accurate to consider it less like Middle Earth (it also having elves, dwarves, hobbits, wizards), and quite more like a **legitimate Historical Fiction**!

What-What?! Hoy! Forsooth! And I know exactly what you're thinking: "Och! Ba goom!"
{The expostulation 'ba goom' comes from P.G. Wodehouse.}

Might this sound overly legitimatizing? My averment is that it is not illegitimate to contend this. As will be upheld by this article, it is accurate. And furthermore, it's not dissimilar when condoning that the fantasy stories of J.K. Rowling's and Susanna Clarke's *ARE* comfortably already under the Historical Fiction category themselves, once we fathom what that appellative requires in being applied.

Historical Fiction is an established genre that has very highly robust relatedness to a historical past, always while remaining fiction. (Note: Rowling's saga is in an outer orbit of this, being set in a Recent Past (the 1990s-2000s), though it gushes with Real but arcane historical nuggets, helping validate its being an Historical Fiction). *"Historical fiction as a contemporary Western literary genre has its foundations in the early-19th-century works of Sir Walter Scott and his contemporaries in other national literatures such as the Frenchman Honoré de Balzac, the American James Fenimore Cooper, and later the Russian Leo Tolstoy."* *"An essential element of historical fiction is that it is set in the past and pays attention to the manners, social conditions and other details of the depicted period. Authors also frequently choose to explore notable historical figures in these settings, allowing readers to better understand how these individuals might have responded to their environments."* [UL added] Cf. Wikipedia: Historical fiction.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical_fiction

Lyonesse meets this "essential" provision in its paying absolute "*attention to the manners, social conditions and other details of the depicted period.*" Obviously there are no "*notable historical figures*" that Vance proffers (nor need he necessarily), but proxies can be reflected to apply to Avalon and The Round Table if one wished, though only Avalon is viable to take the 'part' of a "*notable historical figure*".

To suggest that it is best applicable to view *Lyonesse* as a Historical Fiction is to mean its mode is simply **solider** to our very own Reality, exactly as are the worlds of J.K. Rowling and Susanna Clarke, in contrast to all the 'make-believe' that's inherent to and obligatory for Middle Earth. It is not the fantasy creatures of the demesne that affect this classifying. Clarke's Historical Fiction (**as** an 'Alternate History') features a *sidhe*-type elf, a possible naiad, and is open to realms that would feature demons & angels; Rowling's Historical Fiction (a **non**-'Alternate History) abounds with elves, gnomes, giants, centaurs, and a lexicon-worth more (literally).

What makes *Lyonesse* best assessed as a case for being Historical Fiction is its coequal embeddedness within our Factual History! Note that this cannot be said about the bi-phylum mode (first covered above) of 'Alternate Reality'. Our factual history plays zero aspect in the stories of *Earthsea*. Note also the categorical difference of Historical Fiction to another genre called Fictionalized History; Magic

would never exist in any Fictionalized History simply because it does not exist in History. I am a fan of James Michener, who has written tome upon tome of Fictionalized History.

Neither can *Lyonesse* fit well with the extravagant framework of Middle Earth, for *Lyonesse* does not propound poetical origins for the Sun & Moon, nor luminous jewels carried on flying ships for stars, as quick examples. The 'Once Upon a Time' gambit represents a defined genre called 'Pseudohistory', given it treats "*myths, legends, sagas and similar literature as literal truth*", and ignores "*empirical or logical evidence contrary to the claims of the ancients*", (Wikipedia: Pseudohistory). It is self-subsisting, and it is in-dwelling. All such things of Middle Earth are much too remote from genuine Reality. To me, *Lyonesse* in NO fashion arises upon any 'Once Upon a Time' scaffolding!
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pseudohistory>

Attention All Youthful Fantasy Enthusiasts:

**It is a serious error to ever think that *Lyonesse* was a 'Once Upon a Time' story!
And Unlawful.**

Rather, element after element featured in *Lyonesse* are derived out of the precisely faithful and factual Reality of our own History:

- Peoples – historical tribes of Celts (even if along with Jack's fictitious Ska);
- Geography – a fictional setting (really?: see later section on Hybras) amidst our Real Western World of Ireland, Britain, Armorica, Aquitaine, and Galicia, not to mention the Atlantic Ocean;
- Cultural Traditions (perhaps most important of all) of our European period in Late Antiquity – its authentic customs, its society & social divisions, its technologies.

The Real History in Historical Fiction

Let's look at some specific attachments to Reality and Real History, the aspects which qualify *Lyonesse* as a Fictional History. Well I'm glad to remark they are tendered to readers upon a silver platter! Book One, Page One (Preliminary):

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Gildas and Nennius both make references to Hybras, though Bede is silent. Geoffrey of Monmouth alludes both the *Lyonesse* and Avallon [...]. Chrétien of Troyes rhapsodizes upon Ys and its pleasures; and Ys is also the frequent locale of early Armorican folk-tales.

Immediately laying parameters for the criteria on how to view the saga, and thereby ascribing the tone for Vance's long tale to follow, are these firm & most fulsome underpinnings that come out of Real History! All these named individuals derive from real-world history, and all of them have varying connections with regard to King Arthur, wherewith it is apt to recall that the story of *Lyonesse* is set two generations prior to King Arthur's time. It is with the benefit of histories from Gildas, Bede and Nennius that we can even puzzle out that there indeed was a 'time' of King Arthur. So we are dealing with framing *Lyonesse* inside Real History.

What-What?! Hoy! Forsooth! And I know exactly what you're thinking: "Och! Ba goom!"

Isn't King Arthur just a legend?! **NO!** And I must ask that you settle down.

Earliest is Sixth Century British monk Gildas (click link), born circa 450-500, died 570 (traditionally). He is best known for writing *On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain* (*De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*) (click link) which recounts the history of the Britons before and during the coming of the Saxons. It is one of the most important sources for the history of Britain in the 400s and 500s, and the only significant source for the period written by a near contemporary of the people and events described. For example, with that archive's writing, the nephew of King Arthur, King Maglocunus (in his own right) is middle aged.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gildas>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/De_Excidio_et_Conquestu_Britanniae

Next is Eighth Century English monk Bede, The Venerable (click link), born 672/3, died 735. Bede was an author, teacher and scholar. His most famous work, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (*Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*) (click link) gained him the title "The Father of English History". Bede was one of the greatest teachers and writers of the Early Middle Ages and is considered by many historians to be the most important scholar of antiquity for the period between the death of Pope Gregory I in 604 and the coronation of Charlemagne in 800. Apropos to the Age of Lyonesse, which is to say two generations before King Arthur, Bede's 'Book 1' covers the Late Roman Republic out to AD 603; as to the 'Late Roman Republic', for contextual time-mark the Romans left England in 410.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bede>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecclesiastical_History_of_the_English_People

Third is the Ninth Century Welsh monk Nennius (click link), born 769, died 809. He traditionally has been attributed authorship of The History of the Britons, (*Historia Brittonum*) (click link). *Historia Brittonum* was highly influential, becoming a major contributor to the Arthurian legend, in particular for its **inclusion of events relevant to debate about the historicity of King Arthur**. It also includes the legendary origins of the Picts, Scots, and a king/warlord named Vortigern (figuring into this chronology), and it documents events associated with Anglo-Saxon invasions.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nennius>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historia_Brittonum

Twelfth Century Geoffrey of Monmouth (click link), born c. 1095, died c. 1155, was a British cleric from Wales and one of the major figures in the development of British historiography and the popularity of tales of King Arthur. He is best known for his chronicle *The History of the Kings of Britain*, which today however is considered historically unreliable; it is termed to be a pseudohistory. "*Geoffrey's structuring and shaping of the Merlin and Arthur myths engendered their vast popularity which continues today, and he is generally viewed by scholars as the major establisher of the Arthurian canon.*"

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geoffrey_of_Monmouth

Because of that, we may dispense with Geoffrey of Monmouth. **We are NOT interested in the Legend of King Arthur!**

Finally, Chrétien of Troyes (click link), lifespan c. 1160-1191, was a French poet and troubadour known for his writing on Arthurian subjects, and for being the first in writing of Lancelot, Percival and the Holy Grail. It was around 1181 that he introduced the medieval notions of chivalry and courtly romance, and

was the first writer to call King Arthur's court Camelot. Chrétien's works represent some of the best-regarded of medieval literature and has been seen as a step towards the modern novel. [paraphrased] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chr%C3%A9tien_de_Troyes

Because of that, we may dispense with Chrétien of Troyes. **We are NOT interested in the Legend of King Arthur!**

So although Gregory of Monmouth and Chrétien of Troyes **are** from actual history, they do not contribute to the Real History that underlies the Historical Fiction of *Lyonesse*. Other contributors to Arthurian Legend were a Jersey poet, Wace, who in 1155 introduced the Round Table to the tale; and also a late 12th & early 13th centuries Burgundian poet, Robert de Boron, who added what became a very popular theme as to the Holy Grail chalice in the Legend.

It is true that Jack, in following the Legend of King Arthur, adopted aspects weighing on the Fiction part of Historical Fiction, such as the Holy Grail, and that it is King Arthur *of Cornwall*, and especially the Round Table, with which Jack makes grand use in citing his Cairbra an Meadhan, belonging to his fictional King Olam III whose era, as we shall see, can be estimated to be circa 400 AD. The earliest actual Round Table is The Winchester Round Table, a large tabletop hanging in Winchester Castle and bearing the names of various knights of Arthur's court; it was probably created for a Round Table tournament. Dendrochronology calculates the date of construction to 1250–1280, during the reign of Edward I of England. Nevertheless, embracing facets from legend in no way diminishes the other signal aspects descending from History. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Round_Table

Next for **Lyonesse In History** will be the section entitled:
“Its Chronology”