Power through Othering: How Conlangs Find Value within Narratives

PARVATHY RAJENDRAN AND ANDREW KORAH

In the *Earthsea* novels, Ursula K. Le Guin uses a worldbuilding device, centered around the idea that all things, living and non-living, have a True name in the Old Speech. The Old Speech is a narrative device that allows its speaker access to "name something for what it is," giving them power over it, and, by extension, the world itself. This specific idea of an ancient, or other, language that provides power to those fluent in it, by drawing out the essence of things, and making a claim to Truth, is a common motif in many popular, and young adult, fantasy stories from the 20th century onwards. We see a similar idea in Christopher Paolini's *Inheritance Cycle*, where magic is performed through the Ancient Language spoken by the Elves. In both these texts, the language possesses a claim to Truth, as an assured source of objectivity, because men cannot lie when they speak in that language. Fluency in these constructed ancient tongues determines the extent of magic and power accessed by the speaker.

The paradox of how fictional languages of power function in the narrative worldbuilding, and narrated hierarchies, lies in the manner of its production, and its reproduction in the reader's imagination. Beyond the confines of the narrated

PARVATHY RAJENDRAN did her MPhil from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India, on the non-anthropocentric rhetoric of popular fantasy in the 20th century. She currently works as an academic editor. Her academic interests center around exploring how each instance of rhetoric shapes and questions the idea of the 'enclosing genre' or 'archive,' by focusing on fictionality. She also moonlights on Instagram as a dog mom (@dog.ma.indisguise), and is a part-time selfie enthusiast who maps cities on foot. Her Instagram adventures, and growing up in Bombay with Strand Book Fairs led her to her research interest (and her ongoing thesis work) on narrative studies, rhetoric, urban identities in India, urban studies, fantasy and fictionality. She can generally be seen hanging out with coffee, and her mixed pack of canines and humans. She can be reached at parvathiy.rajendran@gmail.com.

ANDREW KORAH is a PhD student in Literature at the University of Kansas, Department. He submitted his Master's dissertation on the topic of aesthetics and form in the works of Philip K Dick. His research interests are specifically in Science Fiction but are also situated within the broader categories of speculative fiction and mythmaking. He enjoys analyses of form, prosody, and close reading, and encouraging his students to listen. Outside of academia, he enjoys music, cycling, hiking and hanging out with trees. He can be reached at andrew.korah@ku.edu.

world, the reader's world and understanding is a key factor that ascribes power – and creates hierarchies – within the narrated world through the framework of fictional languages, or languages created within a fictional world. In this paper we argue that in the reader's understanding of these worlds, certain acts within the narrative, which are associated with power, lead the reader to ascribe power to a specific fictional language, making it a symbol of that power. In a way, fictional languages construct power structures within the narrated world by limiting access to it, and othering its speakers from a majority that cannot access it. The minority speakers, therefore, get cast in the role of mystical or wise creatures, who can magically control the nature of the world through this language. We also argue that the power and value ascribed to these fictional languages is not merely within the narrative world, but also in the reader's imagination, where the reading creates a network of subjective and objective positions and related hierarchies in the narrated world.

We explore three different kinds of associations that power has to fictional languages, represented by three works of fantasy fiction: *Eragon* by Christopher Paolini, *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien, and *The Earthsea Cycle* by Ursula K. Le Guin. These texts are important, not just in their diverse approaches to employing fictional languages in the secondary/narrated world of the fantasy text, but also because they can be located in a linear history of a specific kind of high fantasy that is referred to as the "Tolkienesque" (Casey 115) or "Tolkienistas" (Mendlesohn). Fantasy narratives in the 20th century, specifically what is commonly called high or epic fantasy, have largely been retellings of J.R.R. Tolkien's epic-styled *The Lord of the Rings*. The novel, published in three parts, is often referred to as a trilogy, and has (in more ways than one) led to the publishing of subsequent fantasy series following a similar plot layout and trilogy format.

Tolkien's Middle-earth narratives also provided a further, and to us, a more interesting component to this formula of fantasy writing – a multi-racial fantasy world whose primary markers are the maps that the text comes with, and a sprinkling of conlangs to demonstrate the authenticity of the different specie-races and their independent cultures. Fictional languages by themselves cannot be ascribed to 20th century fantasy – a version of it exists in every story involving fairies, or other magical creatures in older, more traditional narratives of the kind. However, Tolkien's particular way of narrating Middle-earth, with the storytellers and memory keepers within Bilbo and Frodo's narratives being the elves, directly influenced several writers of fantasy to derive a power structure where the people

who spoke some languages held more power than those who did not. This will be explored further in the section analyzing Tolkien's construction of the relations between the languages he constructed for Middle-earth.

The paper will begin with a brief look at *Eragon*, by Christopher Paolini, which serves as an example of a more contemporary example of the Tolkienesque, albeit with a very simplistic and straightforward interpretation of the role of language in worldbuilding. This will be followed by a section on how Tolkien's worldbuilding creates an intersection between race, language and power that, to a degree, replicates the social assumptions of the reader. Finally, this paper will analyze *The Earthsea Cycle*, by Ursula K. Le Guin, as a series that consciously applies the idea of the fictional language to disrupt historically assumed power structures and value systems.

An important distinction must be made between Le Guin's Old Speech and Paolini's Ancient Language for the sake of clarity of terminology. The Ancient Language was created by Paolini and his team in a way that was quite like Tolkien's constructed languages. The language has a well-developed vocabulary and set of grammatical rules that are made clear in paratextual parts of the books, such as the appendix or the author's website. David J. Peterson explains that this sort of language is the kind that "has been consciously created by one or more individuals in its fullest form [...] so long as either the intent or the result of the creation process is a fully functional linguistic system" (Peterson 18). He refers to this particular type of created language as a "conlang," which is the shortened form of "constructed language" (Peterson 18). In contrast, Le Guin's Old Speech, while being an integral aspect of her fantasy worldbuilding, is never fully explained to the reader. We are not provided with a list of grammar rules or appendices by the author, and we rarely see the language being spoken or used within the narrative. Nevertheless, the Old Speech is central to Le Guin's literary vision. This falls more closely under the category of what Peterson calls a "fictional language," which he defines as one that is simply "supposed to exist in a given fictional context" (Peterson 19). We will therefore refer to Le Guin's Old Speech as a fictional language, to make clear that it is not a fully developed language that can be learnt and used by readers external to the world of Earthsea.

Barnes and van Heerden provide us with a simple understanding of what conlangs mean within fiction worldbuilding practices, "In the case of fictional languages, authors actually 'create' native speakers within the fictional world of the book or film, which makes them 'virtual' natural languages" (103). The idea of

language as natural to the constructed world is an important aspect of the three authors we look at, all of whom go to some lengths to establish a history of the world that produced the language or, in an almost self-reflexive way, suggest that a magical and powerful original language brought the constructed world into being. This second perspective hints at the idea that language is part of nature, but also seems to be nature itself.

In "Created Languages in Science Fiction," Ria Cheyne uses the very helpful story of Babel to identify some of the values that conlangs tend to hold. Cheyne interprets the attempts to rediscover "the original language of God and Man" as "a quest for a universal language and for a philosophical language" that "had not merely been a universal of communication but a language which expressed precisely the nature of things; words mirrored reality" (387). This idea of this seemingly pure, universal language, that is one with nature and could also be considered nature itself, provides us with a helpful way to describe the apparently idealistic vision of language that is used primarily by Paolini and with a bit more critical nuance by Le Guin (but not by Tolkien).

In "Childhood Readings and the Genesis of Names in the Earthsea Novels of Ursula K. Le Guin," Robinson provides some helpful nuance to Le Guin's philosophical concept of an original language:

> The wellspring of Le Guin's fantasy, which is based upon the myth of a magical Ursprache, an original language of names, is found in the recreation and re-creation of names […] the making of names involves not simply the remembrance of a past experience, but more importantly the reconstitution of a childlike frame of mind as a contemporary experience. (Robinson 110)

Here, Robinson identifies that, in Le Guin's fantasy, the original language does not carry the same connotations of the pre-Babel language of purity and union between "God and Man." The pre-Babel language, as a concept, carries with it a patriarchal (in the literal sense of the word) quest for an origin. Le Guin does not locate the original in a long-forgotten historical and mythical past. Instead, Robinson argues, Le Guin positions language within the sensuous and aesthetic realm of sound, much the same way we think of music: "As Le Guin would say, the sound is 'where it all begins and what it all comes back to'" (Robinson 95). The "originary" position that language takes is therefore within a child's first (and intensely pleasurable) experience with the play of sound and the sensation of producing sounds through one's mouth, and of that sound falling upon one's ears. Robinson demonstrates that Le Guin's concept of language is not so rule-based, the way Paolini's is. Instead, it

intentionally opposes the patriarchal tendency to order language into structure and hierarchies of value. This essay will prove particularly useful to opening up the ways in which Le Guin disrupts the relation between the reader's presumptions of the social power structures of Earthsea and its conlangs, in contrast to the way in which Tolkien's *Silmarillion* almost affirms the reader's presumptions that they bring to the text.

To further demonstrate the ways in which Le Guin disrupts the generic conventions of fantasy fiction and its linguistic concepts, Comoletti and Drout, in "How They Do Things with Words: Language, Power, Gender, and the Priestly Wizards of Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea Books," argue that Le Guin "is undertaking a feminist intervention into her secondary world" (113). The article connects the masculine relation to magic and the language of power to the practice of priesthood and celibacy, which hints at the overturning of this patriarchal power structure, when Le Guin's women characters that perform magic, such as Tenar, do not need to be celibate. Perhaps Le Guin is subtly arguing that there is an alternative relation to the world and power than that of masculine institutions that function on ritualistic (and in our world, moralistic) self-abnegation. This begs us to ask the question: if men need to separate themselves from worldliness to hold power responsibly, and, in contrast, women form deep-rooted connections to the world to draw power from it, is Le Guin critiquing the way social structures of power are ordered to keep masculine drives in check? Is she also questioning the elite position that the wizards of Roke hold as minority speakers of the language of power over the majority populace? This paper explores these questions in order to draw out the nuanced ways in which conlangs can be deployed in constructed worlds to both build up and break down the assumptions of social dynamics that readers bring to the text.

Eragon: Conlang as Unquestionably Ascribed Power

To begin with, we first look at *Eragon* (2003), the first novel in *The Inheritance Cycle*, written by Christopher Paolini. It is a Young Adult fantasy series set in the continent of Alagaesia, a large portion of which is ruled by the tyrant king, Galbatorix. The continent is populated by Urgals (Paolini's version of Tolkien's orcs), humans, dragons, elves, and dwarves, all of whom are considered sentient races or species, set apart from the remaining animal world. Paolini seems to wear his influences on his sleeve, which seem to mostly include *Star Wars*, Tolkien's

The Lord of the Rings, Le Guin's *Earthsea Cycle*, and Anne McCaffrey's *The Dragonriders of Pern*. Paolini's titular character, Eragon (which sounds much like Aragorn), loses his family, and sets off with a gruff but caring mentor, much like Luke Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi. The world has dragons and an originary language of magic, much like that of Earthsea. Paolini even went on to imitate Le Guin's naming convention, by turning his trilogy into a "cycle" once he realized he could no longer finish his story in three books. Finally, his main character rides a dragon. However, we argue that Paolini's concept of worldbuilding and conlangs has important differences from that of both Tolkien and Le Guin, despite almost entirely borrowing their concepts. He borrows Tolkien's vision of language being representative of racial or specieist differences, while also using Le Guin's idea of language being a fundamental and metaphysical aspect of the world's existence itself. The important distinction that we draw is that Paolini does not deploy the conlang to allow for critical insight into the power dynamics of his constructed world. Rather, the conlang of magic is the source of unquestionable and unquestioned power that all sentient beings, no matter what native language they speak, defer to. Those for whom their native tongue is the conlang of magic are clearly identified as both powerfully and aesthetically superior.

In *Eragon* the language of magic, also known as the "ancient language" is a fundamental element of its worldbuilding. Paolini seems to view the ancient language as being the originary force of existence itself, suggesting that the things of his world and the objects in it do not precede language. It almost seems as though the ancient language and the world are one and were formed simultaneously. This seems evocative of the biblical concept where creation is tied to the utterance of the creator: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made" (*ESV Bible,* John 1.1). This lays a metaphysical framework that the spoken *word* is not only a source of meaning and comprehension, but of all creation itself. Paolini's ancient language, similarly, through the exchange of energy, seems to give its speaker the ability to manipulate objects of their world, hold power over those objects, and call things into being through the utterance of the language.

The Rules of Magic. When magic is first introduced in *Eragon*, Paolini suggests that it is not simply learnt, but also emerges out of the Dragon Rider's connection to the Dragon, who are considered magical beings. "Many think the king's magical powers come from the fact that he is a wizard or sorcerer. That's not true, it is because he is a Rider" (Paolini 144). Paolini establishes a set of specific rules

according to which magic functions, almost as if it were a science. The rules are to be followed when invoking magic, which is manifested into the world solely when it is expressed through the ancient language: "if you wish to employ the power, you must utter the word or phrase of the ancient language that describes your intent. For example, if you hadn't said *brisingr* yesterday, nothing would have happened" (Paolini 145).

The magic also seems to loosely follow the logic of sword and sorcery role-playing games, where magic is exercised by exchanging your energy reserves. The first time Eragon uses magic, Paolini describes the energy expended as "a wave of exhaustion" that made him feel "strange and feeble, as if he had not eaten for days" (Paolini 134). Paolini does not lay down a hard set of rules for how much energy is required for how much magic, but he does state that physical fitness and stamina are necessary to use magic continually over periods of time, and that greater feats of magic, such as moving a large rock, require greater amounts of energy than moving a pebble. Through practice, over the course of the narrative, the titular character, Eragon, seems to develop his magical stamina, eventually performing great feats with relative ease.

The Rules of Grammar. Paolini goes on to suggest that the names of things, or nouns, in the ancient language give you power over them. To manifest or express magic into the world one must know the name of the thing you wish to express. Paolini makes it clear that the relationship to magic and the language that gives access to the magic is what determines power. When Eragon asks his mentor whether the language has its own name, Brom replies, "Yes, but no one knows it. It would be a word of incredible power, something by which you could control the entire language and those who use it" (Paolini 145). This explanation gives us a further idea of how power functions in his narrated world by relating it to truth. He relies on the notion that the ancient language somehow gives access to what seems to be a platonic realm of ideal forms, and by knowing the language, and thus also having knowledge of those forms or "essences," one gains power over the object.

> It is possible to speak the name of an object in the ancient language and summon its true form. It takes years of work and great discipline, but the reward is complete control over the object. That is why one's true name is always kept hidden, for if it were known by any with evil in their hearts they could dominate you utterly. (Paolini 463)

An act of magic is therefore an act of expending energy. However, the magical energy can only be expended when it is mediated through the ancient language.

This is because it is the names of things, the nouns in the ancient language, that seem to precede the object in some essential or idealistic sense. This originary position that language holds in this constructed world is what seems to give power to the language, allowing the speaker to have power over the objects, and subjects, of the constructed world.

Magic is also not granted to all. One must have the "innate" ability to wield it: "To work with magic, you must have a certain innate power, which is very rare among people nowadays" (Paolini 145). The races of Elves and Dragons seem to all be born with the power, because they also seem to naturally speak in the ancient language. Dragons, like in all fantasy, seem somehow magical themselves and can understand the language even when they have not grown up speaking it. The Elves are more attuned to magic because their mother-tongue is the ancient language itself. They live and breathe through it, build their homes with it, and connect to their environment through their ability to judiciously manipulate it.

The societal structure of Alagaesia, based on the access to the ancient language, seems to be organized as follows: Dragons are the most powerful sentient beings, followed by Elves who are superior to individuals with potential for magical power and belonging to other races and species, who, in turn, are more powerful than all remaining non-magical folk. Paolini does not really explain why such a power structure should exist. He doesn't give us a creation myth. But he works with the trope that the elves are considered the more beautiful/long lived/more powerful race. In *The Inheritance Cycle* it is very clear the elves are the most powerful bipedal race or species because their native tongue is also the language of magic/power. This is asserted by the idea that while no one can lie in the ancient language, elves can "twist the truth."

By making the ancient language as essential to the underlying structure of the narrated world, Paolini seems to view it as something fixed in place and ahistorical. Peterson points out that "Writing systems […] are organic systems, just like languages" (164). Pronunciations change and spellings change as society changes over time. Peterson goes on to give three primary reasons for why languages change: ease of articulation, acoustic interference, and innovation (165-6). Paolini's ancient language is quite opposed to this idea. By being the force of creation and magic itself, the ancient language, while being archaic and "ancient" has remained the same. This of course means that, for the lay folk of Alagaesia, the language is practically inaccessible, making magic and power similarly inaccessible. This idea of an ahistorical language shows a preference for permanence over the typically

ephemeral quality of language in time. Its permanence gives it a sense of authority and power, which in turn is associated with those that speak the language. Therefore, the language's fixed grammar, value, and meanings create the hierarchical structure of Paolini's world.

Tolkien, Middle-earth, and the Many Languages of a World

Tolkien's use of conlangs is markedly different from that of both Paolini and Le Guin. The language of the elves is not inherently powerful. While *The Inheritance Cycle* can be considered a derivative (in a sense) re-telling of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, it is important to examine the effects of Tolkien's storytelling on 20th century fantasy that employ both multi-racial worlds and conlangs. Tolkien's Middle-earth is an extensive thought experiment, spreading beyond the confines of *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. First published in 1937, *The Hobbit* re-imagined the fantasy rhetoric of the next century. Specifically, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* were among the first works of fiction to be popular in America as well as Europe, with the 1965 American paperback editions bringing an unprecedented number of readers (Mendlesohn and James 50; James 72).

In the scope of this paper, our focus is primarily on how a large portion of this new readership interpreted, and consequently copied, the power structures between the races. The central premise by which we argue this specific interpretation by the reader is the years and the time gap between the publications of these three texts. *The Hobbit* was published in 1937, *The Lord of the Rings* from 1954 to 1955, and *The Silmarillion* in 1977 with almost ten years between each text, and the oldest Middle-earth story being the last. *The Silmarillion* later publication created an opportunity for readers to arrive at and consolidate the power structures that they perceived in the first two texts as inherent. Our argument, keeping in mind the positionality of the reader, is based on how Tolkien frames the power dynamics between races in Middle-earth's social structures.

Within the narrative, the stories of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are written by the two Bagginses. In two separate, consecutive and related adventure quests, the central questing hero is the unlikely hobbit, with the more powerful races playing supporting roles. The hobbits are also the narrators of the story within the world of Middle-earth, whom the readers encounter – Bilbo writes "There and Back Again," and Frodo writes *The Lord of the Rings* as an extension to Bilbo's memoir,

before passing the manuscript on to Sam Gamgee. The narrative that the reader encounters, with the exception of *The Silmarillion*, is thus heavily informed by the hobbits' understanding of the world, their biases, values and affections.

The Hobbits and the Elves. In several instances, across both texts, the Bagginses encounter elves as a kindly, helpful people, who are friends of Gandalf, the medium through which they access the world outside the Shire. To Bilbo, who finds it difficult to find acceptance among the dwarves he travels with, the easy acceptance and polite curiosity that greets him at Rivendell comes as a welcome relief. Later too, despite the sour relation between the elves of Mirkwood and the Dwarves, Bilbo finds comfort and healing among the elves. Bilbo also witnesses Gandalf, the great wizard himself, deferring to the elves, specifically Elrond, as the keeper of Middle-earth's history, almost like it were a personal memory. Frodo also finds healing and acceptance among the Elves, both in Rivendell and Lothlorien. Elrond and Galadriel actively declare their stances on what should happen in the quest of the One Ring and provide aid in a battle far beyond his understanding and the scope of his task as the ring-bearer.

The reader's privileging of the elves happens both from their primary encounter with the elves' (specifically Elrond's) narrative of Middle-earth history. In the elven version of this history, only the elves escaped the influence of Sauron's One Ring. The race of Men easily succumbed, turning the nine kings into Ring-wraiths who were twisted into a dangerous loyalty for Sauron. The Dwarves, on the other hand, were impervious to the influence of Sauron, but chose to excuse themselves from the war to destroy Sauron and the Ring. The races of Men and Dwarves delay the regeneration of Middle-earth: through their inherent weaknesses, as represented by Isildur, Boromir and Denethor's thirst for power; and by shutting themselves in, as represented by Thorin in *The Hobbit*.

The Silmarillion *and the Objective History of Middle Earth*. It is only in the final of the three texts that the specific history of Middle Earth is discussed, vis-à-vis the origins of the races and the history of the Rings of Power. In this history, presumably told from Tolkien's perspective, the only specificity is about the timeline of creation and the "waking" of the races. The narrative ends with mentioning how Aulë, and not Ilúvatar (the creator god), created the Dwarves. However, since Ilúvatar was aware of Aulë's creation, and because Aulë dedicated them to Ilúvatar's will, the Dwarves were accepted as part of the Children of Ilúvatar, unlike the creations of Melkor. However, as we see in later works of fantasy that imitate Tolkien (the Tolkienesque), the Dwarves have been repeatedly

represented as less powerful, less kind – they are at best allies, but are mostly somewhat obscure, uncouth and often angry cave-dwellers.

In contrast to Paolini's representation of language of power as permanent and ahistorical, throughout Tolkien's worldbuilding we see that he intently positions the development of his conlangs within the narrative history of Middle-earth. Being a philologist himself, the idea that language develops over time, and is not a static thing with a unified meaning, is perhaps an easily accepted notion. Tolkien therefore does not suggest that the Elven languages have power in and of themselves. Rather, it is the way the language appeals to the narrator of *The Lord of the Rings*, being Frodo the hobbit, that it becomes aestheticized. Within the narrative the language is meant to reflect the beauty of the elven race. However, in an extension to this rhetoric, where the elves are viewed as aesthetically superior, and its derivation in later tropes of fantasy narrative, such as in *The Inheritance Cycle*, conlangs spoken by the elves become languages of magic and power. Dwarvish tongues, meanwhile, are just another language – which are different from the common tongue of Men (and perhaps the reader), but a separate non-magical language that sounds gruff and as coarse as the stones and ores that dwarves have built their skills around.

The Silent Wizards of Earthsea

> …hearing the Old Speech he felt always that he was on the point of understanding, almost understanding; as if it were a language he had forgotten, not one he had never known. In speaking it the mage's voice was much clearer than when he spoke Hardic, and seemed to make a kind of silence around it, as does the softest touch on a great bell. But the dragon's voice was like a gong, both deep and shrill, or the hissing thrum of cymbals. (Le Guin, *Farthest Shore* 171-2)

> …and the way to the understanding of this speech starts with the Runes; they were written when the islands of the world were first raised up from the sea. (Le Guin, *Wizard* 27)

In *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Ursula Le Guin sets down the rules of magic/power in the world, in the guise of the cryptic instructions and training provided by the Master Namer of Roke (and almost nothing else). Unlike Paolini, and other writers of the

Tolkienesque, and to a certain extent Tolkien himself, Le Guin is conscious of, and in many ways, subverting the role of a conlang in the fantasy tradition. In Earthsea, the ability to use the Old Speech grants a mage his power, but in Le Guin's world building it also clearly marks the extent of the power they may use.

Earthsea mirrors several of the tropes that are characteristic of the 20th century fantasy following Tolkien – the young, unlikely hero, the existence of a people that are memory keepers of the past, and by extension the holders of all knowledge/power, and most people who are unable to access that power/knowledge because of their lack of knowledge of a language by which to call it. The mages of Roke, who are all men, and the few hedge witches (like Sparrowhawk's aunt) are the only wielders of this power. In the political complications that are part of this world, some of the users of magic, like the Lady of O, who speak one of the Hardic languages of Earthsea might have greater possibility of commanding that power. However, as the Master Namer reminds Sparrowhawk: "That which gives us power to work magic, sets the limit of that power" (Le Guin, *Wizard* 52).

Sparrowhawk. In *The Earthsea Cycle*, Le Guin constructs a world where the conlang is central to its existence, creation and cognizance. However, it also clearly emerges after the creation of the world. We are only given two specifications of this relation between the knowledge of Old Speech and the power of magic. First, Erreth-Akbe is a key figure in the creation myth of this world, and specifically the archipelago and its current socio-political and geographical structure. Second, Sparrowhawk, by the time we (the readers) hear the stories, has already left behind his powers and renounced his position as the Archmage, and is considered the most powerful wizard in history, with the possible exception of Erreth-Akbe himself.

However, as readers, we also only hear of these stories almost like rumors – we are never actually shown either of these mages' feats of power. Erreth-Akbe is a legend as old as the land in which Sparrowhawk's stories are set, and we only find trace references of him – the amulet the Sparrowhawk attempts to recover in *Tombs of Atuan*, and the allusions to his own power as comparable to the man in the legends. We always meet Sparrowhawk in different avatars, and rarely as the powerful, wise mage he is rumored to be. We first meet the child in Gont who is born with the power, and an impatient thirst for more, turning into an impetuous teenager who unwittingly unleashes the Shadowbeast into the world. In *Tombs of Atuan*, the older Ged is a more tempered mage, not yet Archmage, and unfortunately lost in the labyrinth of the temple of the Nameless One. He is rescued by, and simultaneously rescues the young priestess: Arha, later Tenar, to whom the

success of the quest belongs. In *The Farthest Shore*, he is the Archmage, but mostly a mentor to the young prince Arren, recognizing the boy's role in the quest to save and unite the world, and ultimately sacrificing his own powers to aid in the larger scheme of things. Finally, in *Tehanu*, Sparrowhawk is a broken man, devoid of both his power and responsibilities, looking to rebuild himself in this new role of being "ordinary," while Arren's and the girl Tehanu's strange powers herald a new making of the world.

To Le Guin's narrator, Sparrowhawk's grand feats of magic seem almost inconsequential, when compared to how parts of his story can serve as a lesson to understanding the Old Speech and how it lends and limits a magic user's powers. The best example of this is in the resolution of *A Wizard of Earthsea*. The young, and as yet untested, Sparrowhawk spends a majority of his confrontation with the Shadowbeast running from it – his fear stems from the unknowability of its nature. The Archmage Gensher reaffirms this fear, when Sparrowhawk confesses that he does not know the creature's name:

> Nor do I know. It has no name. you have great power inborn in you, and you used that power wrongly, to work a spell over which you had no control, not knowing how that spell affects the balance of light and dark. Life and death, good and evil… you summoned a spirit from the dead, but with it came one of the Powers of unlife. Uncalled it came from a place where there are no names. Evil, it wills to work evil through you. The power you had to call it gives it power over you: you are connected. It is the shadow of your arrogance, the shadow of your ignorance, the shadow you cast. Has a shadow a name?" (Le Guin, *Wizard* 46)

Delivered as a chastising of Sparrowhawk's arrogance and impetuousness, this response also allows for a foreshadowing of the ultimate defeat of the Shadowbeast, and even further, of the crux of Sparrowhawk's abilities and powers as a mage. When Sparrowhawk defeats the creature, he does so by calling the creature by his own true name – Ged: "and in the same moment the shadow spoke without lips or tongue, saying the same word: 'Ged.' And the two voices were one voice" (Le Guin, *Wizard* 121). In one act, Sparrowhawk names, and by the naming, limits the power of the unknowable, unnamed shadow to his own. Once it has been known, its power to harm him, or the world itself, is ended. Therefore, to Le Guin, it seems that the act of naming is also an act of knowing or coming to understand. Le Guin privileges the act of self-discovery and self-understanding over that of the grand,

heroic narrative of typical fantasy stories. And the language of power seems primarily in service of that process.

In *Tombs of Atuan*, the central conflict is not in Sparrowhawk himself. He is searching for one object, but only gains it by accident, when he gives Arha her birth name. Tenar is not the Priestess' true name, it is merely the name she had before she became Arha, or The Eaten One, in the service of the Nameless One. Sparrowhawk is trapped in the labyrinth that is part of the temple dedicated to this nameless entity. But more than that, he is trapped in his ignorance of the labyrinth's nature itself. Thus, it falls on Arha – a girl, whose self, whose true name and knowability has been taken from her – to rescue him. She alone possesses the knowledge of the labyrinth, knowing its paths and doors and safe spaces. She alone can navigate to the heart of it and redeem the treasure – the Ring of Erreth Akbe. And it is Tenar who arguably brings the temple down with her knowledge – a power Sparrowhawk could not have possessed, even if he held the full Ring with the Runes rumored to be the original runes of the world's making itself. Sparrowhawk's powers, and abilities, is in how he can return to Arha her identity as Tenar, one that was hidden, but not erased, from her. In *The Farthest Shore*, it is only when the dragon Orm Embar reveals the knowledge of the Ring that Sparrowhawk is able to learn its power, and of the truth that it is Arren who must wield its true strength.

The Name of the Thing. The primary theme in the Earthsea stories is how the ability to know the name of a thing, in its general sense, and its specific, individual context is where true power of the world lies (Le Guin, *Wizard* 50-52). If the unnamed shadow was the obvious nemesis in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the other three novels repeat this theme of power of knowledge. The Old Speech – or the language of Making – itself is never spoken, except a few words or the true names of people or dragons. Le Guin's rhetoric is to suggest and imply the existence and power of this language, and not demonstrate it as such. This is possibly why the great feats of Ged's magic are not directly given to us in the narrative.

In Earthsea, true power is in the ability to know the limit of one's knowledge, not in being keepers of it – in an almost opposite power structure to how conlangs of magic/power have been presented in the texts examined in the previous section. Cob's pursuit of immortality is likewise doomed by his not knowing the extent of his, and the spell's power – much like the young Sparrowhawk's mistake. Where knowing more of the conlang of power increases the speaker's control of the language, and by extension their magic/power, in *The Earthsea Cycle* this knowledge only makes the speaker more aware of the limits of their power, thus

silencing them. The most memorable example of this is in Ogion, who drives Sparrowhawk desperate by his long silences, but as each novel progresses, the reader also becomes aware of how little Sparrowhawk speaks or acts, even within the quest fantasy format. While Sparrowhawk is presented as the obvious protagonist, there is more done and said by the other characters. Sparrowhawk's actions are little, and usually limited to making a particular knowledge available.

The dragons are the only exception to this, as they are native speakers of this language. They are born in the knowledge of the language and speak it as their common tongue. This gives them a tremendous amount of power, allowing them to manipulate the language, and the limited human speakers of it to their will. However, as the language of Making, they are also limited by it – they can twist it to mean something else to a less knowledgeable speaker but cannot speak something untrue. Le Guin's worldbuilding is clear – the knowledge of a thing does not mean infinite power, instead it is a marker of the finiteness of this power.

Conclusion

In our reading of Tolkien we showed that the perspective held by the diegetic narrative voice in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, that of the hobbits themselves, held the elves in awe. That narrative's subjective hierarchy was made more objective in *The Silmarillion*, when we see that the elves were among the first inhabitants of Middle-earth to awaken. Their relative proximity to the origin of Middle-earth, their immortality and their gathered knowledge of the history of the world gives them a great deal of power. The languages of the elves do not, in themselves, have power, being simply products of the separation of the elves into two groups. However, its delicate lettering and its association with this rich history seem to hold an aura and a sense of beauty. Readers of Tolkien seem to similarly hold "elvish" in higher regard, having their own significant scholarly attention (The Elvish Linguistic Fellowship, a subsidiary organization of the Mythopoeic Society, is one such example). The other languages were both less developed by Tolkien and also paid less attention to by the larger public.

In contrast to Tolkien's languages, the ancient languages of Le Guin and Paolini are not simply products of history and culture. Rather, they are a force of creation that brings reality into being. The ancient language perfectly represents the real because it is the real. In the constructed worlds of Earthsea and Alagaesia, language is bound to the reality of those constructed worlds as the source of their truth.

However, a further distinction can be made between Le Guin and Paolini who associate power to that language. Paolini employs his ancient language as an unquestionable source of power that is permanent and unchanging. The closeness to that language, as shown by the elves and dragons, are reflected in how his society's hierarchies are formed. Similarly to Tolkien's elves, Paolini's elves are aesthetically pristine, long lived and physically superior. Their appearance and strength are drawn directly from their fluency in the ancient language, which they use as their mother tongue.

Le Guin disrupts these assumptions of ancient languages by intentionally subverting several tropes of fantasy fiction. *A Wizard of Earthsea*'s plot of good versus evil is retold as a story of self-discovery: Ged matures from a boy into a man by learning to be careful and considerate about his immense power. In *Tombs of Atuan*, Arha (later Tenar) saves Ged just as much as he saves her. We also see that Ged generally refuses to use magic unless absolutely necessary, and instead partakes in the labor of living like a normal person. It seems that his connection to the language and its power has taught him a value for the everyday rather than great feats of magic. Through the character of Tenar, Le Guin also breaks open the masculine institution of Roke, the guardians of magic and the Old Speech. The institution maintains celibacy and monkhood as the way men connect to magic. To take part in the power of the Old Speech they are asked to withdraw from the social world. Ged himself acknowledges that Tenar seems to have far greater power than even him. However, Tenar rejects the need to give up her life to seek out power and control and remains connected to that Old Speech without having to be celibate. Le Guin's values therefore clearly differ from that of Paolini's. For her knowledge of the Old Speech does not grant power, but rather a sensitivity towards the needs of the earth and a feeling of interconnectedness with nature and human nature and its social structures. Le Guin makes explicit her conceptualizing of the Old Speech as an originary force of nature in the following quote:

> The sound of the language is where it all begins and what it all comes back to. The basic elements of language are physical: the noise words make and the rhythm of their relationships. This is just as true of written prose as it is of poetry, though the sound effects of prose are usually subtle and always irregular. Most children enjoy the sound of language for its own sake. They wallow in repetitions and luscious word-sounds and the crunch and slither of onomatopoeia; they fall in love with musical or impressive words and use them in all the wrong places. (Le Guin, *Steering*, 19)

Here, it is evident that Le Guin's idea of the Old Speech is not held by a patriarchal order or masculine force of creation. The fundamental underlying metaphysics of Le Guin's secondary world represents a moment of childlike joy at the pleasure of the experience of sound and a force of creative energy. That creative energy Le Guin associates with femininity is embodied by Tenar, whose everyday life is itself a creative force. While the social structure of Roke ensures that primarily men retain power as the minority speakers of the Old Speech, Le Guin dismantles that structure by placing "the sound of language" in the center, as opposed to power. In doing so, she suggests that a feminine connection to nature, that recognizes its physicality and materiality and is adaptive, malleable and accepting of the ephemeral, is her source of values, as opposed to an abstracted philosophico-religious (and often patriarchal and masculine) conception of permanent and unquestionable truth.

Le Guin's narrative and her world-building reflect this position. She intentionally de-emphasizes Ged's grand feats of magic and focuses on the more important tale of the relationships between characters, their journeys of growth and the values they pass on to the next generation. Tolkien's conlangs were masterful acts of speculative labor that imagined entire socio-cultural histories behind languages. Paolini's Ancient Language was simply a placeholder for power itself and his society's structure seemed to flow out from it such that those closer to it were more privileged. Le Guin, however, makes it clear that for her it is not sufficient to simply have access to power, but to use it responsibly and carefully. While the social institutions of Earthsea do reflect some hints of a typical patriarchal structure, such as that of Roke, Le Guin allows her story to flow beyond the confines of a typical fantasy power struggle between good and evil, making it a more unique and subtle exploration of social structures in fantasy worldbuilding.

Among the now vast catalog of popular fantasy fiction, Le Guin's *Earthsea Cycle* stands out by intentionally disrupting the tropes of fantasy fiction. Instead, it is a fantastical vision of Le Guin's idea of everyday life and politics, infused with her feminist values and ethical concern towards ecology. This ambiguity of meaning in language and the recognition of power as a fleeting thing that Le Guin explores allows for more artistic depth and encourages a deeper engagement with the imagination than something that is fixed in its meaning and its use. Perhaps this perspective was fundamental to Le Guin's approach to worldly matters and politics, i.e. accepting that while we often feel the need for fixed meanings or easy resolutions (which fantasy often caters to) sometimes harder, but more rewarding,

work is needed to explore the ambiguities of everyday life, be it gender relations or the publishing industry in capitalism. While the conlangs of Tolkien and Paolini yield to the desire for fixed meanings, Le Guin's fictional language welcomes and celebrates ambiguity and disruptions of societal norms.

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