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SUPERNATURAL CREATURES

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Piotr Spyra, Joanna Matyjaszczyk & Maciej Wieczorek

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The dog named King, the central character and narrator of John Berger’s “King” published in 1999, is the offshoot of many apparently incongruent genre conventions as well as the offspring of the ambivalent prejudice and praise of the species encoded in the English idioms. This presentation aims to overview the contributing elements which gave rise to the Bergerian shift in character-narrator shaping and to discuss the function of such perspective for the novelistic format adopted. The discussion points out the central role of the ambiguity of King as a dog, demonstrating the post-fantastic nature of his characterisation rooted in the conventions of magic realism. The patterns used to shape King, the dog, as one of the community and at the same time the Other are discussed. He is a befriended dog who becomes almost a family member for the beggars and, at the same time, he is the other, different species. He is both one of the homeless and at the same time the independent one, the stranger who sees more because of the distance inscribed into his nature of a rambling dog. Such is also the function of the fantastic in his shaping, as it is sometimes not quite clear that he is just a talking dog, derived from the tradition of animal fable. He might as well be taken as a mentally challenged human being who lost his identity. The merging of perspectives on all levels of the novel contributes to the dialogic quality of the narration in the Bakhtinian sense, to which the central ambiguities inscribed in the shaping of the quasi-fantastic dog add the quality of uncertainty and polyvalence.

key words: John Berger, point of view, dog as narrator, genre conventions, English dog idioms, post-fantastic characterisation, magic realism, ambiguity of character

In his multiple experimental writings John Berger (1926- ) is invariably interested in devising novel ways of seeing and ways of telling that distance the cognitive act of perception into noticing the underlying metaphysical fabric of commonly overlooked social phenomena and processes. The fantastic talking dog named King, the central character and first-person narrator of his turn-of-the-millennium novel King: A Street Story published in 1999, is one of many adult fiction postmodern narrators conceived as the non-human voices for storytelling. The convention, traditionally used for children’s bedtime stories and flourishing in the nineteenth-century golden age of English children’s literature, is nowadays undergoing a renaissance on the European literary scene. This includes the popular end of the market, as exemplified by Buster’s Diary by Roy Hattersley (1932-), a politician of British Labour Party and a writer, published in the same year as King. Another example, also published in 1999, is the short novel Timbuktu by the American writer Paul Auster (1947-), which takes up serious existential themes to explore the topos of identity. Using the conventional naïveté of children’s fiction for thoughtful exploration of such topics, Berger’s King is the offshoot of many apparently incongruent genre conventions.

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1 See also discussion of various examples from European literature, Bernaerts et al. 68-69.
Moreover, this dog storyteller is a figure imbued with cultural overtones of legendary and mythical depictions of the dog, as well as the offspring of the ambivalent species prejudice and praise encoded in the English idioms. This essay aims to overview the contributing elements which permeate the Bergerian choice of the character-narrator and to discuss the function of such a dominant animal perspective for the paradigm shift in the adopted novelistic format. In this essay I shall point out the central role of the ambiguity of King as a dog, demonstrating the postmodern dichotomous nature of his voice, and his point of view and characterization rooted in the conventions of naturalist novel, epic, beast fable, magic realism, and some other genres.

The novel is conceived within the scheme of a talking dog’s diary, detailing his routine ramblings linked to the life of a limited group of homeless protagonists, who live in the forgotten area of the dumpsite on the outskirts of an unnamed north European town. What begins as an ordinary morning of a day in life of the homeless community changes into the grand story of heroic feats of survival, which end in the apocalyptic demise of the slum’s inhabitants because of their forced eviction from the place by the town authorities. The subtitle “A Street Story” situates the novel within the tradition of oral storytelling, rooted in the epic tradition. The features it takes over from this ancient genre (such as detailing the process of wasteland colonization, nation-like group formation by foreign settlers, enforcement of laws, expeditions out of the land, and the like) are made to function on a tensional genre plane through being transposed by the overriding naturalist slum novel tradition. The features of the Zolaesque novel are the theme of alienation, exile and solitude played out as human drama on the scene of sordid reality of trying to survive against the abandonment and domination inflicted by the well-to-do society. King deploys the conventional naturalist array of motifs in his portrait of the metropolis as a site of “vice and malady” (Rodríguez-Díaz 379), which are modified by pictures of post-pastoral, apocalyptic and trivial fragments of disintegrating life such as the sweeping of the ever-dirty yard or doing the washing of the rags.

Considerable focus is directed by the talking dog to scarcity and the substitute nature of the people’s material possessions collated as they seek house comforts amidst the steady worsening of their situation. King the narrator is, however, deliberately freed from judging this deterioration, accepting his master and mistress with the love and devotion of a pet dog acting in the capacity of their child. This is a dialogic kind of relationship on the level of systemic patterns which imbues the implied reception with a dual attitude of diminished and increased distance to the story told. Such a double attitude engaging the implied reader into asking questions about his position in relation to the story told is present in the novel from the very beginning to the very end.

The opening words of the story “I am mad to try” (Berger 2) make the opening in medias res disturbing, as the sentence is left without an object, it speaks of madness, the speaker is not defined (except for it being the voice of a first-person character of unknown identity), and the nature of trying is left open to speculation. The very next sentence which follows does not explain who the speaker of the first sentence is. It is by implication the dreaming self of the undefined first-person narrator as he confesses “I hear these words in my sleep and when I hear them I coo like a pigeon somewhere at the back of my throat, where the gullet joins the nose. The part that goes dry when you are frightened” (2). The magic-realism poetics of a dream is thus tentatively introduced, fitting his ruminations and his voice into a kind of hybrid reality of the fictional world strung between consciousness and the oneiric subconscious. The speaker’s identity has not been explained yet, the only indication being the word “King” in the title, while this passage dubiously questions the meta-fictional indication of this title label by introducing a
pigeon in the simile and an undefined animal implied through the anatomic description of the throat. The post-epic use of extended similes which do not inform the descriptions with clarity, but rather disturb the introduced lines of thinking in the postmodern poetics of broken associations is to be something typical of this text.

The third sentence introduces a delicate indication of the apocalyptic genre which will inform the novel’s system of interwoven plot orchestration, although it is only tentatively present here in the emotion of fear and the sensory perception of dryness, while the sentence which completes the first paragraph is a repetition of the opening sentence with the object provocatively provided: “I am mad to try to lead you where we live” (2). The disturbance of this sentence is in the use of the ambiguous second person (singular or plural) as the object which instantly makes the opening dialogic (in the reformulated way, as the initial impression of the opening was that of a somnambulist monologue) and engaging the implied reader in the textual reality on the rights of the character-narrator’s companion on top of his or her role of the addressee. This fits into the complex communicative strategies inscribed into the very convention of non-human narration:

Non-human narrators prompt readers to project human experience onto creatures and objects that are not conventionally expected to have that kind of mental perspective (in other words, readers “empathize” and “naturalize”); at the same time, readers have to acknowledge the otherness of non-human narrators, who may question (defamiliarize) some of readers’ assumptions and expectations about human life and consciousness. (Bernaerts et al. 68-69)

In Berger’s novel all this enters into a kind of dialogic relationship with the epic tradition that is constantly transcended, while it is also constantly revoked, being encoded in the royal grandeur of the dog’s name and the chronicler-type grand scale of the telling. In his descriptions of his everyday paths and patterns of acting, he constantly goes back to the colonisation of Saint Valéry by the motley group of homeless settlers, and engaging in retrospect of their former lives, he gives detailed accounts of their laws, alliances and fights. This is interspersed with the memories of his own childhood and the youthful carefree life of Vico and Vica, a couple and King’s owners. The descriptive plane of the text is dually strung between matter-of-fact topographical and naturalist detail and poetic overtones of the telling, noticeable in reading it aloud, but also perceptible in print.

Such complex genre overtones of an apparently sub-working class tale suggested by the subtitle “A Street Story” make the text itself ambiguous, especially that the conventions of the novel are by definition suited for recounting middle-class arrangements of social comfort and advancement. This is the novel of manners with ramshackle decorations. The dog acts here as a kind of epic squire or tinker figure, whose transgressive movements round the places of the shanty town lead him ultimately to invade the socially restricted space of the town proper.

However, his figure, always presented as moving through space and humbly following his owners, a loving afflicted couple, in their trials of life, is also distantly reminiscent of the dog in the Book of Tobit, the Biblical book composed within the multi-genre influence of fairy-tale, quest narrative and some others. In this Old Testament tale, the dog is portrayed as a wise and faithful companion of man on the route of hardships. Along with archangel Raphael, the animal accompanies Tobias in his mission to get the money back and save his father’s sight, which also means saving Sarah from the power of Asmodeus, the evil spirit (The Bible: Authorized King James Version, Tob. 6.2, 11.4). The quest undertaken by Vico and Vica and the dog is likewise to earn the money through selling radishes and daffodils so that the suddenly and gravely impoverished family could survive the crisis, but the ultimate objective of the dog’s storytelling quest is to heal the sightless eyes of his addressee. These overtones of being blind to reality are,
in *King*, inscribed into the stance of the implied reader, who is assumed to be unaware of the reality which the dog, the guide to dream-vision reality, is bent on showing him or her.

The use of the figure of a dog companion also brings further multiple culturally determined overtones. It is based on Celtic imagery of a dog accompanying hunter deities (‘Hunter-god’ 113). The topos of a friendly guarding dog is also rooted in the Christian figurative depictions of St Roch, associated with the imagery of *memento mori*. He is usually depicted with a dog, distributing wealth to the poor. This tradition is based on the legend of his being saved from an affliction by a dog which brought him bread and licked his wounds. On the other hand, dog actions also represent human weaknesses and failings in *Proverbs* 26.11: “[a]s a dog returneth to his vomit, so a fool returneth to his folly.” In the New Testament, the dog represents those outside the New Jerusalem, the Kingdom of God: “[f]or without are dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie” (Rev. 22.15). The finishing of this sentence suggests deliberate persistence in the choice of evil.

*King* is also based on the idealized dog from the ancient Greek epic the *Odyssey* by Homer. Berger uses the topos of a watchful and perceptive dog that recognizes his master in the beggar, rooted in the story of Argos unfailingly recognizing the disguised Odyssey upon his return home to Penelope. Another literary influence is undoubtedly the *chansons de geste* of Tristram and Isolde, revived by the French medievalist Joseph Bédier (1864-1938), in *Le roman de Tristan et Iseut* (1900). Tristan’s dog is taught not to bark so as not to betray the lovers’ hiding place. There are other overtones of the dog as a trickster figure in *King*. It is rooted in an earlier literary tradition. In the first part of the tragedy *Faust* (1828) by Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832), Mephistopheles is disguised as a poodle. The figure of a dog is associated with treacherous wisdom as the devil later changes himself into a monster and an itinerant scholar.

Such implicit patterns inform the dog’s subversive way of presenting the life on the dumpsite through the eyes of a different species, at once part of this reality and, by force of his different perception, estranged from its dreariness. King is an ambiguous character because he acts as a servant or even a carrier of goods in the donkey-like capacity, but he is also the king of the place as the one who is not concerned with human rules. Such a choice of the speaking I, frequently a poetically lyrical first-person voice, serves to shape a distanced, artistically poignant perspective on the capitalist society which produced the slum area, giving indirect voice to Berger’s post-Marxist philosophy. The constant departure from conventions is attained by displacement of apparently traditional novelistic techniques related to the shaping of the point of view and voice.

The patterns used to shape King, the dog, as one of the community and at the same time the Other, are much more complex. On the level of plot development, he is introduced as a befriended dog who becomes almost a family member, the son-like figure, for the beggars Vico and Vica. At the same time he is the Other, a different species with different needs and reactions. He is unaffected by the grimness of the reality that he talks about, and, moreover, in his vagabond rambling ways he seems to be satisfied with this style of life. He is both one of the homeless and at the same time the independent one, the typified stranger who sees more because of the distance inscribed into his nature of a rambling dog. His cognitive distance reformulates the way the central characters are seen as typical figures of a master, a friend, a wrongdoer, a beloved lady and the like. This is some way of transposing the beast fable convention of impersonal abstracted characters represented by animals (see Chesterton 17).
Such is also the function of the fantastic element in his shaping, as it is sometimes not quite clear that he is just a talking dog, derived from the tradition of animal fable. He might as well be taken as a mentally handicapped human being who lost his identity, another fellow beggar with destabilized perception of the surroundings and oneself. This is clear in the scene where the dog recalls his moment of meeting Vico. His verbal response “[s]hit! I say. What did you make?” (Berger 25) and then the strange unrelated pastoral phonetic associations he has when hearing of the products of Vico’s own clothes factory from the bygone days testifies to his possible loss of sanity and misperception of himself: “[e]very name sounds like a flower and the butterfly’s wings flutter in his voice as he pronounces them” (Berger 25).

The merging of systemic and semiotic perspectives on all levels of the novel is derived from the split between the implied author’s voice and the ambiguous character-narrator’s voice and it contributes to the dialogic quality of narration in the Bakhtinian sense (Bakhtin, “Discourse Typology” 176-78; see also: Dialogic Imagination 275-76, 278), to which the central ambiguities inscribed in the shaping of the quasi-fantastic dog add the quality of uncertainty and polyvalence. The orchestration of the semantic plane of the novel is thus attained, which induces a shift in the paradigm of the naturalist fiction used as the underlying genre structure to that of transposed grand epic adjusted in scale to the slum life.

The choice of an animal perspective offers a deliberately displaced, emotionless and withheld insight into the disintegrating human world. In Berger’s experimental novel, the human voice as well as the human stance are foregrounded just as they are marginalized by the multi-layered strategy of dispossession. Just as the characters are defined as the cast-offs of city life who are about to lose the ramshackle district they inhabit because of the Olympic stadium plans, they are also represented as partly de-voiced by the poetics of embedded narration. Prominent is the voice of their pet, with the prominence ironically reinforced by his name King. He is at the same time a homeless scoundrel vagabond and the animal redeemer of the dignity of the in-human story.

A central issue in the story is the question of the dog’s uncertain status which goes with his indeterminate identity. It is not just his characterization trait. The human characters of the story do not have real names but names given to them or assumed as a temporary resource in the current makeshift life. The narrator of the story is apparently a dog but not conclusively so. He is in lots of ways thoroughly dog-like but he is also in many ways human-like, as he remembers making love to a woman. King is endowed with the gift of human speech and human reactions, which are understandable for his beggar friends, but his perception and expression remain dubious. He talks of people as if he were their equal and at the same time engages in a typically doggish routine of patrolling the off-road trails and unfrequented paths of the neighbourhood, marking the places with his urine. He relies on his sense of smell. This inherently ambiguous dog-man, marked with human-like power of reasoning and dog-like senses, provides a tensional insight into the humans’ affairs. Narration is overridden by his understanding of their routines which are often pointless, like celebrating cooking when there is nothing to eat, but these actions are mystified as a sort of celebration by his explanation. The tone of his voice is marked by lack of shock at their most bizarre idiosyncrasies and foibles dictated by the extremities of poverty. On the other hand, it is featured with the conceptual distance from the world of men and women as such, dictated by his dog ways. He knows of human affairs, participates in them and is affected by them, but also looks upon human affairs without human emotions.

Berger clearly also revives here the rich British literary tradition of using a petdog for a prominent literary character. In the Victorian novel *Three Men in a Boat* (1889) by Jerome K.
Jerome (1859-1927), subtitled in a digressive conversational manner To Say Nothing of the Dog!, the dog named Montmorency is described as one of the boating party, though at the same time distinguished from them by his animal nature. In contrast to Berger’s King, he is also a background character, while the dog of A Street Novel is central although by convention he should not be so. The descriptive detail of fox terrier idiosyncrasies is rendered by Jerome in a tone which foregrounds the discrepancy of unruly behaviour through applying the language proper for gentlemanly behaviour. Berger’s fantastic technique of giving the animal a voice to engage in conversations follows in the footsteps of Jerome’s momentary lapse into an imaginary cultured dialogue between the dog and a cat, which conceals their conflict.

Berger’s background is also the pre-modernist tradition of human-like animals which are used to satirically comment on social foibles in a direct manner. In “Tobermory” from The Chronicles of Clovis (1911), Henry Hugh Munro (1870-1916), alias Saki, uses the typical turn-of-the-century method of providing quasi-scientific verisimilitude of the expanded natural abilities of animals. The experimental potential of the device is undoubtedly influential as it was also used in the little known avant-garde English novel by Stefan Themerson (1910-1988) entitled Critics and My Talking Dog which was written around 1950 and published only in 2001, so it could not have influenced Berger. The animals that acquire an ability to talk or behave like people are invariably used for attaining insight into human ways. The difference is that in Berger there is no quasi-scientific justification for King’s unnatural abilities. These devices serve as a vehicle of ironic insight into the idiosyncrasies of a particular isolated stratum of society. In Saki’s it is the aristocracy, in Jerome the middle class, in Themerson the intellectual elite, and in Berger the degraded homeless who become the object of close scrutiny through the distanced but understanding animal perspective on humanity.

The device in Berger’s text is close to Saki’s as the latter author also uses the point of view of a household pet, the tomcat. Having access to all the areas of the house, the cat can comment on Lady Blemley’s guests with the fatal consequences of indiscreet revelations of the aristocratic private failures in moral and ethical propriety. The blunt revelations of failing social and sexual conduct are the source of horror for Saki’s characters and humour in reception, while some cursory attention is given to the opening plot possibilities of expanding upon the topic of revealed secrets: “[h]e won’t turn up tonight. He's probably in the local newspaper office at the present moment, dictating the first instalment of his reminiscences” (Munro 114). Berger uses first-person reminiscences of a dog belonging to de-classed vagabonds to offer perspective on the secret ignominious side of their eviction from societal functioning. The edge of satire is not so much turned towards the homeless as on the society which creates the defunct norms.

One of the dominant techniques used for the fictional world representation in King: A Street Story is the subversive device of the understatement of facts accompanied by the ennoblement of the described elements of the fictional world. The destitute human scum are characterized by the rhetoric of euphemism which mitigates the pictures of ugliness and decay. The dog invariably speaks well and kindly of the evils of the life of the destitute. This is textually dictated by his empathy but also his doggish lack of full understanding. Such patterns give the effect of the multiple implication of the grandeur of their position, way of life and circumstances. Presented through the emotionless, faithful and kind-hearted point of view of a dog, the characters gain heroic qualities reinforced by the multiple illustration of their perseverance. For all their personal neglect and vicissitudes of homelessness, Vica and Vico act as a heroine and a hero of the romance. By the principle of positive-negative characterization, they are at the same
time heroic and anti-heroic. Vica is rendered as destitute and derelict but at the same time beautiful in the eyes of the dog, the chief narrator of the story, who is in love with her.

The mimetic quality of the text is likewise undermined and maintained at the same time. King’s fantastic speaking ability is placed within the context of a mundane, even naturalistic world. The inhabitants of the shanty-town dumpsite district do not perceive the dog’s ability as extraordinary and engage in free conversations with the local pet. Similarly, there is no textual indication of the supernatural quality of the episode of the dog’s dining with a dead friend or his ability to talk with underwater creatures. Nobody is shocked by these facts. These recognizable, if scarce, supernatural elements placed in the context of otherwise verisimilar detail act as a recognizable, but not determinate, reminder of the tradition of magic realism.

As it has been demonstrated, there are more conventions which are at play in the story, none of them used in a conclusive and finite way. The issues of voices, the shaping of the addressee, and incomplete but identifiable motifs retrieved from the reservoir of artistic techniques of contemporary and ancient literature and culture are central to the making of King. They consist in the choice of Bakhtinian multi-layered dialogic aesthetics in which not only are the narration by the speaking dog and character relations organized by the principle of heteroglossia, but also the work of art engages in a communicative relationship with different genres, literary kinds and various works of art (compare Bakhtin, Dialogic Imagination 75-77).

The epigraph placed at the beginning of the novel expands the interpretative context of the story into a broader European tradition. It is a passage quoted in the original from a Spanish romance “La Casada Infiel” by Federico Garcia Lorca from the collection Romancero Gitano (1928): “un horizonte de perros ladra muy lejos del rio” (qtd. Berger n. p.). It speaks of the background of a romantic albeit incestuous relationship described in the poem. The interpretative horizon of Berger’s dog’s story is thus informed by Lorca’s peripheral dogs barking on the riverside. The poem is written in the genre of folk-style literary ballad, with a prominent narrative element, and it tells of a love-affair with a married woman who is, in the title, associated with lack of fidelity. The gitano ballad of Lorca is focused on recording and ennobling the everyday aspects of human life and scenery, just as is attempted by A Street Novel by Berger. The association with the poetics of romance enriches the devices used in King as this Spanish genre usually tells of some tragic events in the life of heroic figures of folk origin who engage in struggles of various sorts. Both Berger’s and Lorca’s stories are interlaced with mimetic detail as well as oneiric poetics. Their symbolic and mythical character is something which is operational also in the semantic layer of King, by the dialogic relationship they enter through such a choice of the motto, also in the context of evoking the poetics of magic realism. The ballad-like symbolic elements are in Berger’s novel the figures of the Madonna in the Italian retrospective story of Vico’s youth, the figure of a dog, a crab, a cat and anemones, and the officials who come to evict them from the land they occupied.

The concept of this animal character-narrator is not Berger’s innovation in storytelling but it is firmly rooted in the earlier cultural and literary tradition. In a most distant way, it is related to the Celtic myths of shape-shifting human-animal figures (see “Animals,” “Shape-changing”). However, Berger’s figure of the principal character and first-person narrator, the human-like intelligent talking dog, is also taken from the ancient tradition of beast fable encoded in the collections of Aesop’s fables. These texts show dog characters in a conventionalized and ambiguous, both favourable and unfavourable light, which in Berger is the dual constituent of characterizing the human figures. Aesop’s dogs are frequently outwitted, as in “The Dog and the Saw” or “The Dog and the Cook.” They fall prey to their superficial understanding of the world,
as demonstrated by “The Dog and the Shadow,” or they are overpowered by stronger creatures, as in “The Wolves and the Dogs” and “The Hound and the Fox.” However, they also act as companions, guardians and saviours as in “The Traveller and his Dog” or “The Dog, the Cock and the Fox.” In the fables, such as “The Ass and the Lap-Dog” or “The Blacksmith and His Dog,” the dog is shown as privileged in a human household, enjoying the stability of human protection in exchange for mere companionship. The dogs of the fables “The Old Hound” and “The Hare and the Hound” can argue their case against human stance, while the young creature in “The Hound and the Hare” engages in play with another talking animal. All these features are used directly or indirectly in the shaping of some characters in *King*. Berger’s dog himself is on the one hand somewhat worn out by the life of snatching things but he also engages in playful sports with a boy and with a crab, which entail making conversations with them.

Adopting the precepts of beast fable in fiction so as to present human affairs in a satirical mirror of animal disguise has been frequently done in the history of English literature. The tradition behind Berger’s attempts is provided by the ironic focus on social issues present both in George Orwell (1903-1950) in *Animal Farm* (1945) and Kenneth Grahame (1859-1932) in *The Wind in the Willows* (1908). This tradition dates back to the satires of human foibles shown through the affairs of the poultry yard in “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale” from *The Canterbury Tales* (written 1387-1392) of Geoffrey Chaucer. The dog’s indeterminate animal-human featuring is the extension of the beast-fable dominant of satirizing the human society. In the shaping of *King*, Berger follows Chaucer in interspersing consistent rendering of the quasi-human behaviour of the animal with indications of his true nature expressed in his momentary animal bearing. Chaucer’s barn yard fowls act as though they were educated and conventionally mannered humans but occasionally lapse into avian behaviour, and are said to produce a characteristic noise. Likewise, *King* is occasionally shown growling, sniffing around or urinating in a dog-like manner, while in the majority of cases he engages in human-like ruminations on the present and past status of the characters and places. There is an implicit overtone of colonial fiction present in these negotiations of the perception of power and submissiveness through the story told.

The long-forgotten genre of beast fable was revived into the systemic repertoire of Victorian fiction by Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) in his prose set in colonial scenery addressed to children such as *The Jungle Book* (1894), *The Second Jungle Book* (1895) and *Just So Stories* (1902). The first two inter-related collections of short stories, or perhaps episodic novels – as it is difficult to determine the boundary here – use the convention later applied by Berger in reverse. Kipling’s narrator is somebody who knows both the language of animals and of people, which allows him to engage in telling the stories heard from the witnesses or participants of events – of both people and animals (Kokot 136-37). The talking dog character named the Wild Dog and renamed as the First Friend features prominently in Kipling’s penultimate beast-fable short story in the *Just So Stories* collection – “The Cat That Walked by Himself.” Berger’s *King* owes something to the making of this guard dog. While Kipling is focused on the story of the wild animals becoming domesticated in the context of the primitive life of the cave, Berger stresses the role of the dog in the existence of the couple living in the makeshift shelter.

Using a dog as the actualized voice of the evicted community is a literal representation of the implied central metaphor of the text of the homeless as dogs. The shanty town inhabitants are themselves compared to dogs of various pedigrees; for example, Danny has “the pointed face of a fell hound” (Berger 11) and Jack the Baron is also called the Great Dane. Through the shaping of his characters Berger also enters a dialogue with the metaphoric representation of a dog figure encoded in the language, in English idiomatic expressions. *King*, as a character and as a novel of
the same title which gives a portrait of a social group, is rooted in most of them. The Aesop-rooted expression “a dog in the manger” in Berger’s context parallels the selfish attitude of the well-to-do social classes who do not share their wealth – represented by the commodities of Pizza Hut or the butcher shop. Cruelty of fighting as an element of this attitude is represented in English by the fixed expression “meaner than a junkyard dog.” The dog in English is also associated with sickness or physical affliction, the feature of Saint Valery inhabitants, as visible in the phrases “as sick as a dog,” “dog-tired.” Another semantic field attributed to the dog figure is that of badly done work in the phrase “dog’s breakfast.”

Moreover, the dog is associated with trivialized storytelling, as encoded in the expression “a shaggy dog story” as well as with the dangers of discussing or undertaking a difficult topic, as exemplified by “let sleeping dogs lie.” Persistence in the approach to some subject of consideration is associated with the idiomatic simile “like a dog with a bone.” The dog is used in English as a figurative representation of a lowly or disregarded state, the condition represented by all of Berger’s homeless, which is possibly infectious, as in the phrase “dirty dog,” or such expression as “go to the dogs” and “if you lie down with dogs, you will get up with fleas.”

Thus the dog figure as shaped by cultural associations stands for people with whom one should not associate, which is demonstrated by King’s social chasms. Berger also somehow transcribes the meaning of the phrase “like a blind dog in a meat market” through his dog’s unruly behaviour at the butcher’s. The dressing up for the formal occasion, as in the passage when Vica dresses up for a visit to a petrol station to procure drinking water, is also metaphorically encoded in the simile “done up like a dog’s dinner” and “put on the dog.” The dependence of people on chance, most relevant in the context of the scavenging and the vagabond living, is another example as in the phrases “lucky dog,” “every dog has its day” and their negative version “not have a dog’s chance.” The dog is also the figure for hardships of life: “it’s a dog’s life,” “shouldn’t happen to a dog,” or exposure to weather: rain – “raining cats and dogs,” or heat – “the dog days of summer.” It can likewise stand for evil people or criticism: “throw someone to the dogs.” However, the dog in English, and in Berger, stands also for leadership, as in the phrase “the top dog.” The idea of the control of the weak element is also depreciated in the “tail wagging the dog.” There are also a few phrases with positive connotations, as in “there’s life in the old dog yet” which in the context of King parallels the remaining energy and hopefulness in the homeless despite their age and life-worn circumstances. There is a phrase denoting persistence: “to work like a dog.” All these phrases as a cultural body of semantic associations constitute a background to the shaping of the dog character of King.

King’s mongrelized identity, attained by cross-breeding literary, cultural and linguistic influences and codes, makes the narrative perspective ambiguous. What is prominent is the dog’s idiosyncrasy as a narrator, which justifies his inconsistency as a guide to the unknown land. The way he tells the story through a rambling quality of narration mirrors his roving movement through space. This is obviously the process of figurative reinvigoration of the primary epic conventions of a repetitive, digressive and dialogic mode of telling the central story (compare the features of primary epic in “Epic” 226). His narration alternates between long speeches and half-imaginary dialogues with a whole array of characters from the human to the animal world, such as the sea creatures whom he meets (or dreams of meeting) in his diving routines.

Just as he returns to the same places in the physical area of the district, he repeats and renounces in mid-way the same stories, returns to the same ideas or fragments of thoughts, applies reiterating concepts or words in new surprising contexts. The central and non-central motifs of the story comprise a constantly recycled body of ideas which are applied endlessly in
new roles in the story. The story of the gloves made by Vico’s factory revokes and contrasts the image of the worn-out hands of the character.

In his creative method of writing fiction, Berger admits searching for an appropriate voice to be able to narrate a story, which often results in being able to present some myths of humanity from the reversed point of view (Papastergiadis 9, 11). In *King*, these are the myths of the Fall of Man, as well as the Scandinavian myths of the dog king which are woven into the semantic layer of the text. The first two myths seem to be Berger’s leitmotif, appearing also in “Boris is Buying Horses,” a short story from *Once in Europa* (1987), a hybrid, experimental text between a short story collection and a fragmented novel. As in the *Into Their Labours* trilogy of which this collection is the third part, *King* is focused on the lives of a marginalized and evicted group of people, who are losing their position in the tradition-defined life. The difference is that while in *Into Their Labours* the movement of peasants is from the Alpine countryside to the city, in *King* it is from the city to its dumpsite and then further to nowhere in the ultimate expulsion. In *King* also shares the theme of the demise of the individual through malady with *To the Wedding* (1995), although in *A Street Story* it is more of a social malady of indifference which results in the physical affliction of the homeless. In *King*, the tragic fate of the impoverished characters is presented as the story of the downfall of a gallery of modern capitalist protagonists, told in the archetypal surroundings of a capitalist town. The generalization, typifying and abstraction of the storytelling are the features attained by such a polyvalent, semantically, semiotically and systemically loaded shaping of the first-person narrator.

The choice of a canine perspective on human affairs helps Berger to attain in yet another way his staple distancing effect that in this particular case acts as “a double dialectic of empathy and defamiliarization, human and non-human experientiality” (Bernaerts et al. 69). It is nothing surprising in the author, who like his literary masters, Samuel Beckett and James Joyce, chose emigration to different European countries, a life choice shared by Stefan Themerson, for whom the new land was England. In *King*, the emotionally detached and spatially mobile perspective of a roving petdog is used to tell an anti-capitalist story of the dispossessed array of human losers who try to pick up the pieces of their lives together again in a forsaken area in the outskirts of a town. This acts as “a literalized metaphor that emphasizes the degradation that humans endure” (Simmons 179). The choice of the central voice of the story determines not only the way of telling it but also the semantic effect. The ambiguous dog’s dialogic voice, infused with genre, cultural and linguistic overtones, interacts with his ambiguity as the crucial perspective and distance-defining constituent of textual narrative relations, the ambiguity which is constructed through his uncertain identity strung between a dog and a deranged poor pauper who is treated like a dog.

Works Cited


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2 For more detailed discussion of these traits in the Alpine peasant trilogy, see Messmer 199-210.


This paper examines the status of the Loch Ness Monster within a diverse body of literature relating to Scotland. Within cryptozoology this creature is considered as a source of investigation, something to be taken seriously as a scientific or quasi-scientific object to be studied and known, particularly in light of its elusive nature. In terms of mythology the creature is bound up with Scottish cultural identifications through references to a rugged wilderness landscape and to iconic, if stereotypical, images of tartanry, bygone castles, and folklore. Both sets of ideas have been used with great effect to generate a diversity of literature: from books and scientific papers that chronicle the sightings and “hunt” for the creature as well the possible case for it being a line of long-surviving plesiosaurs, through to children's literature that deals with the mythic element that is so often used to appeal to childhood imagination, and on to a plethora of tourist marketing booklets and brochures.

key words: Loch Ness, monster, Scotland, myth, marketing

It has been suggested that creatures such as the Loch Ness Monster provide a liminal space for folkloric beliefs to maintain their presence in the world in a way that is empowering, and that can provide a sense of culture and community. Moreover, it is argued that the presence of such creatures speaks contrary to a modern world that leaves little space for engagement with nature and wonder and that has become over-explored and explained. This resistance is said to go some way to explain the appeal of these cryptid creatures, a way of recapturing wonder and mysticism in the world, and of rallying against culturally accepted bounds and beliefs in rational scientific discourse. This also extends to a globalised world where cultural boundaries are being eroded and where stereotypical and mythic icons serve as a means of preserving notions of heritage, and of exploiting it in the production of literature and tourism. These elements are explored over the course of the paper in arguing that the Loch Ness Monster serves as a paradoxical means of both suspending belief and well as engaging in belief.

Introduction

The press are always interested in a Loch Ness monster story and these seem to pop up every now and again even in the absence of current claimed sightings. These newspaper stories range from more serious pieces on the latest scientific evidence gathering to truly bizarre speculations or instances of “Nessie hunting.” For example, the UK Daily Mail on 24 April 2014 reported that Charlie Sheen, the sometimes notorious American actor, was visiting Loch Ness to engage in trying to find the elusive creature, while the UK Independent on 12 August 2014 reported that a high level university-led business seminar was being set up on how to exploit the
marketing potential of the monster for the region. Furthermore, the latter story reported that Nessie is worth around £30 million pounds to the local economy and that this figure is constantly rising due to increasing tourist numbers. There is also a burgeoning literature in the area with over sixty titles covering every aspect of the search for the creature, what it might be, speculations about, and deconstructions of photographic evidence, and historical accounts of the sightings as part of mythology and folklore. If we add to this a host of websites dedicated to the monster specifically, as well as such mythical creatures generally, then it would be fair to claim that the Loch Ness monster has attracted, and still continues to attract considerable interest that does not look like it is going to be on the wane any time soon.

Cryptozoology, the pursuit of hidden creatures often regarded as monsters by virtue of their mythical and unnatural hideous or menacing form, has been largely ignored or discounted by mainstream zoology (Newton xvi). The field emerged in 1955 with the publication of Bernard Heuvalmans’ book *On the Track of Unknown Animals*. Although he formed the International Society of Cryptozoology in 1982, which indeed for a period between 1982 and 1996 had its own journal (*Cryptozoology*), the field is commonly regarded as something of a pseudoscience. The hunt for Nessie is part of the enterprise and involves a spectrum of serious, semi-serious and perhaps charlatan investigators engaged in seeking evidence for the existence of the creature. These cryptid creatures have long played a central part in folklore and mythology with tales of lake monsters common to many cultures (Nickell and Radford 1). However, the search for Nessie has taken on a pseudoscientific quality through a mixture of mythic, marketing and scientific materialist discourses. By exploring from a sociological perspective the interplay of these discourses, the appeal of the search for Nessie will become apparent.

For a starting point for a discussion of the mythology surrounding the Loch Ness monster, one can turn to Barthes (1957) as an analytical framework for understanding the ways in which the discourses surrounding the creature are weaved together to create and solidify an ideology that conceals its own historical and political antecedents as it circulates within society. In the case of the monster, the mythological elements come together to construct “Scottishness” through the notion of a desolate, wild and remote landscape being associated with a wild mythic creature. Indeed, this parallels the mythological notion of the Scottish people being defined by the rugged and wild terrain of their land – something in turn that binds together people, culture, animals and land. However, while this is an appealing reading, I am less inclined to accept the position that this represents a solidified discourse that, much like the monster, is concealed from view. The mythological quality of the monster is not something that is static but rather is in a dynamic relationship with other discourses that ebb and flow together and, at times, are opened up for examination, or may fade or yield to other discourses. The juxtaposition of a hidden mythic creature with open scientific rationalism is also perhaps overplayed but, as will be argued in the next section, one that also creates a dynamic for raising to the fore, and engaging with, issues of belief.

**The mythic discourse**

Loch Ness is the largest freshwater lake within Britain: twenty four miles long and, at one point, one and a half miles wide. It has an average depth of one hundred and thirty seven meters and there are places where it plunges over three hundred and four meters. It is also known for being cold and murky with dangerous currents in places. It is surrounded by mountains and therefore its topography provides a wilderness that can easily be associated with mythic
creatures. Indeed, there are many bodies of water in northern Scotland that have ancient legends about monsters. One of these is a legend that supposedly occurred in 565 A.D. that tells of Saint Columba who saved a swimmer from a hungry monster in the river. This tale was recorded in the book *The Life of Saint Columba* sometime in the late 7th Century and is often connected with later sightings in the nearby lake.

These folklore tales of a supernatural creature in the loch have not declined and indeed the mythic discourse persists to this day. As Walsham (498) has pointed out, the German sociologist Max Weber’s (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*) historical view of the rise of Capitalism as one of progressive disenchantment with the world is far from straightforward. This can be seen in the rise of reports of sightings of the creature after a new road was built along the edge of the loch in 1933. These sightings have, in some instances, been supported by grainy photographic evidence which, like such evidence associated with UFOs, has become the subject of claim and counter-claim regarding hoaxes and fakes. There seems to be persistence in the willingness to believe in the mythic nature of a being that takes us back to an enchanted world of creatures that cannot be explained from the modern perspective.

Part of this mythology is associated with the geography of the land and the sense of wilderness that it evokes. This is in turn associated with a discursive construction of the Highlands of Scotland as desolate, of nature in the raw. This mythology taps into the idea of a place where it is easy for a creature to remain hidden from the modern world; a world now almost thoroughly explored and yet containing pockets of the unknown and mysterious. It is in this space that cryptozoology gains a foothold and straddles the mythic and the scientific; it is, in effect, a pseudoscience. From a rationalist scientific perspective such a pseudoscientific approach is harmful in the sense that it undermines the logic of science by tainting it with an engagement with the mythical. In other words, it undermines the credibility of science through ‘guilt by association’. However, from the point of view of people who engage with this approach it is in a sense a re-enchantment of the world; a quest to engage with the mysterious. The Loch Ness monster fits the bill here perfectly: a long tradition of mythic folklore, a rise in reported sightings, the ability to use sonar or other scientific equipment to seek out the creature, and an eager public willing also to apply a sense of re-enchantment with the world, or at least to keep abreast of the latest hunt for the creature through engaging with the media.

**The scientific discourse**

Given the pseudoscientific status of cryptozoology the main focus for the production of scientific evidence has been attempts to produce compelling physical evidence. This has commonly been through a combination of surface and underwater images, as well as sonar mappings of the Loch over protracted periods of time. Much of this work has been written up in articles but also in book format, typically as an unfolding story of the investigative process and its outcomes. And yet for the most part, the cumulative outcome of this process has yielded tantalising fragments of evidence that are at one and the same time suggestive and deeply ambiguous. However, this only adds to the mystery in a world where science has produced a plethora of modern wonders, but where wonder is reduced to technical scientific accounts of phenomena. In the case of cryptozoology it is evident that what is being sought is not simply a scientific account of a new or lost species – it is the monstrous and the mysterious, and in this sense cryptozoology connects the scientific rational world with the world of folklore and mythology.
Dendle has explored the nature of such interest in these mythical cryptozoological creatures from a historical and modern world perspective. As he points out: “The belief structures of the ancient world were not different in kind from our own, such that the study of ancient monsters is folklore/mythology while that of contemporary cryptids is methodical science, mainstream or otherwise” (193). He goes on to note that sensationalism and scepticism were in tension with one another in the pre-modern world just as much as they are a feature of modern science. The scientific approach to the confirmation of species and their taxonomical place is the foundation for modern zoology but this leaves open a space for the unconfirmed. It is in this space that cryptozoology finds itself in trying to align what is out there, so to speak, within the modern taxonomy of the natural world.

Dendle draws attention to the monstrous as bound up with various allegorical tropes in the medieval world. Mythical creatures were associated with moral tales, particularly with regard to the maintenance and policing of boundaries between animality and humanity, between the sacred and the profane or evil. Today, allegory is still a major rhetorical feature of cryptozoology in its alignment with the scientific basis of environmental concerns about the destruction of habitats and the extinction or near-extinction of species. As Dendle so aptly puts it: “One important function of cryptozoology, then, is to repopulate liminal space with potentially undiscovered creatures that have resisted human devastation” (198). Indeed, it is interesting to note, as in the case of the Loch Ness Monster, that the search for evidence is related to extinct species, a plesiosaur-like creature that is an aquatic, reptilian survivor or mutation from the age of dinosaurs. This can be considered as an attempt to seek evidence that nature can still “win out”; that the world is still a place where species from eons ago can still survive. Moreover, the sense of wonder that such hidden creatures evoke is not unlike the early history of zoology where there was a sense of adventure in seeking out beings from far off lands. There are examples where fantastic creatures were once pursued only by cryptozoologists and have been found to be in fact in existence, as the case of the giant squid testifies. This gives those in the field a spur to keep pursuing other cryptids that may occupy the space between fantasy and scientific recognition, waiting to be discovered by cryptozoologists and formally recognized by the scientific community.

However, this is now connected to a sense of urgency to find such creatures before it is too late, before environmental degradation destroys their habitat, kills them off, and denies us the chance to confirm their existence. Thus the seeking of scientific evidence combined with a resistance towards orthodox structures within contemporary science is a curious hallmark of cryptozoology. It is locked into scientific methodology but prides itself on keeping its distance from the institutionalized scientific academy. It is little wonder then that most of its proponents present themselves in keeping with the early modern scientific scholars: mavericks that operate on the margins or beyond the confines of the academy but who nonetheless adhere to the canons of the scientific method.

Other scientists have been drawn into controversies surrounding the sighting of cryptids through proposing alternative “rational” explanations. These scientists are less likely to be involved in any direct way in searching for these creatures and tend to offer up alternatives based on either existing animal or non-animal phenomena. For example, in the case of the Loch Ness Monster, it has been proposed that the sightings may be due to underwater currents in long deep lakes which results in standing waves known as seiche. The wind direction can lead to a layer of warm water at one end of the loch that forces the underlying cold layer to the opposite end. This is not visible on the surface but moves underwater with the interaction of the layers and may lead
to debris being brought to the surface. Another explanation argues that decaying Scots pine logs in the loch may have pockets of gas in them that expand and propel the logs through the water. The point is not so much that these explanations are credible as that they are part of the scientific sceptical dismissal of the sighting of these creatures, much in the same way as other scientists propose alternative explanations for sightings of UFOs. In effect, there is a sceptical scientific discourse that engages with cryptozoology and in so doing seeks to maintain the authority of science by either implicitly or explicitly contributing to its characterization as a pseudo-science.

The marketing discourse

The world of cryptids and monsters is bound up with marketing: from tourist brochures and websites on the geographical locations where there have been reported sightings; to the production of books, films, and animations; and also through to the publicity surrounding the individuals themselves who seek out these creatures.

In the case of the Loch Ness Monster the creature has for many years been used to promote the Highlands of Scotland as a tourist destination, and there is a visitor’s centre devoted to the story of the monster and the various sonar and other searches that have taken place over the years to detect it. However, more than this, the monster has become symbolically associated with Scotland and Scottishness; a national symbol and treasure. Tourist brochures and websites heavily market the Highlands of Scotland as a semi-wilderness, a place of beauty as well as mystery. This wild land is historically associated with the Scottish clans, with people who lived in this harsh environment and in doing so this is presented as what came to define them and their struggles. Now desolate in parts, with only the ruins of dwellings and castles, there is a romanticism that pervades the marketing literature of this landscape; a human world lost and a natural world that remains. Within this remaining natural world a new symbol of Scottishness has replaced the old one in the form of the mysterious monster. However, while this is, in part at least, used to promote the area there is also the added boost to this marketing that trades on the pseudo-scientific nature of the cryptozoological search for Nessie as itself a hopeless romantic endeavour.

The interplay of these two forms of romantic discourse makes for a highly marketable “product,” so much so that it attracts around hundreds of thousands of visitors to the area. This kind of business does not go unnoticed and has attracted the attention of those who argue that the monster should be further capitalized upon for the benefit of the local and national economy, as well as those who argue that it is cashing in at best, or a cynical stunt at worst. Others still adopt the view, in spite of what they consider to be the weight of the marketing machine, that ordinary people’s experience and what they see and report has lent authenticity to the story of the monster. Nevertheless there is a range of views with newsprint, magazine and broadcast media last year reporting various stories: “Loch Ness Monster: Nessie’s back, just in time for Scotland’s big year” (The Independent, 12th August, 2014); “Business seminar on cashing in on the Loch Ness Monster” (BBC 23rd April, 2014); “Has the Loch Ness Monster been spotted on Apple Maps?” (Fox News 21st April, 2014); “The Loch Ness Monster brand is ‘as big as Coca Cola’” (Management Today, 23rd April, 2014). These kinds of headlines tap into a common dilemma surrounding tourist attractions, that is, the extent to which an attraction is promoted through artificial inauthentic marketing hype where, as the French sociologist Baudrillard would have it, symbolization has outpaced and taken over reality, versus the view that tourism benefits from an authentic and unique marketable product.
While the marketing of the Highlands as a tourist destination through promoting Nessie is big business there is also a longstanding and considerable popular culture associated with the monster that has ensured that symbolically it is recognized around the world. This has taken the form of books, both fact and fiction, and films and animations. There are over sixty books or booklets that deal with the issue in a serious way as well as numerous fictional works and children’s books. In looking over the more serious works these tend in some way or other to contribute to the amassed data through presenting and analyzing new sightings, film and video footage, sonar traces, and photographs. These books also make a contribution to speculating or theorizing about the nature of the phenomena, many offering accounts that can be taken as being biased one way or the other. In addition, a number of books add a cultural dimension to the story through dealing with issues of folklore and the stories of those who have reported sightings or are involved in the hunt for the creature. Most books are aimed at a general rather than specialist audience and perhaps this is again linked to the cryptozoological tendency to bypass a more scientific and sceptical audience.

Although such books go back as far as 1823 with the publication of Grant Stewart’s *The Popular Superstitions and Festive Amusements of the Highlanders of Scotland* that recounts tales of the Loch Ness Kelpie, the landmark date of publication can be taken as 1934. Four books were published on the creature in that year that show the range of interest and genres associated with it. The first theorized that the creature was a giant salamander (Lane, W. H. *The Home of The Loch Ness Monster*), the second was a tourist booklet on the best sightings up to that point (Hamilton, W. D and Hughes, J. *The Mysterious Monster of Loch Ness*), the third – a serious attempt to present interviews and conversations with witnesses, including sketches of “X” as it was referred to (Gould, Rupert T. *The Loch Ness Monster and Others*) and the final one that year speculated that the creature was a stray sea serpent (Oudemans, A. C. *The Loch Ness Animal*). These four books set out the different paths that other publications would follow and by 1961 the era of the Nessie hunter had arrived with publication of Tim Dinsdale’s “Loch Ness Monster” based on his research in the area and footage in which he “captured” what he claimed was the creature on film. However, also in the same year a book was published that offered a sceptical view that ranges over sightings being potentially other animals or simply hoaxes (Burton, M. *The Elusive Monster*). Perhaps the most serious, if not the longest treatise on the monster was published by Roy Mackal in 1976 (*The Monsters of Loch Ness*) and by this point attention was turning to the plesiosaur theory. Also during the 1970s books are published by teams involved in the hunt, detailing their equipment and findings (e.g., Meredith, Dennis L. *Search at Loch Ness 1977*). By the 1980s books were being printed that offered a more sceptical turn, the first appearing in 1983 (Binns, R. *The Loch Ness Mystery: Solved*). This trend has continued with more and more sceptics giving their analyses of photographs and speculating on what the sightings may be, including the recent 2013 publication by Daniel Loxton and Donald Prothero entitled *Abominable Science!* which takes a wider swipe at cryptozoology. What this brief run through these publications evidences is the ebb and flow of proponents and sceptics as they battle to establish claim and counter-claim. However, what is also striking about this is that these books bring to the public the debate itself about the evidence and counter-evidence and claim and counter-claim. It is very much this dialectic that has caught the public’s attention and imagination thereby adding to the sense of the unsolved and mysterious.

This motif has been carried over in children’s book films and animations. Some employ a humorous tone while maintaining historical accuracy in explaining the nature of the mystery and are aimed at older children (e.g., Richard Brassey’s 2010 book *Nessie The Loch Ness Monster*),
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others tell the tale through the notion of its elusive nature and disbelief in its existence and are aimed at younger children and come complete with a soft illustration of the monster wearing a tartan bonnet (e.g., the 2013 book by Chani McBain and Kirteen Harris-Jones, No Such Thing as Nessie! which is aimed at pre-school and early school year children). Other literary works, such as children’s poetry also continue the theme of disbelief and its effects, with Ted Hughes’ 1992 Nessie the Mannerless Monster telling the story of how the Loch Ness monster becomes tired of having her existence denied and sets off to London for an audience with the Queen. Still other books use the tale of the monster to teach moral lessons commonly associated with children. For example, in a picture book published in 2007 by Alice W. Flaherty (author) and Scott Magoon (illustrator) entitled Luck of the Loch Ness Monster: A Tale of Picky Eating a girl from sometime in the past on board an ocean liner bound for Scotland from America, tosses her oatmeal overboard several times over because she is a picky eater. The story goes on to show how a small worm swimming alongside the liner ate bowl after bowl of the oatmeal tossed overboard because it liked it so much only to grow in size to become the monster.

What this children’s literature evidences is the way in which the image of the monster is wedded to the world of the child. The monster that cannot be found or can only be seen by locals mimics the discourse of the child’s magical world that is populated by imagined creatures and talking animals that sometimes develop a friendship with the child as a believer. In effect, it sets the child’s magical world as apart from the sceptical world of the adult. This literature also shows how the monster is marketed as a means of delivering moral tales that children can relate to through a sense of the humorous or magical.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion points to the ways in which the Loch Ness monster serves as a totem for a world that stands apart from environmental degradation and technological exploitation. It also serves as a means of maintaining a sense of the mysterious and the belief that it is still possible that natural phenomena can evade scientific rationalism. Indeed, it is possible that people wish to maintain both views, that neither wins out and that there is a humour derived from doubt. This kind of knowing doubt is something of a contradiction in terms, where we want to leave a space for the seemingly impossible as a way of maintaining an imaginative toehold on the world. As for the status of cryptozoology, this too is the subject of contradictory discourses, on the one hand being seen as the work of at times overenthusiastic mavericks, and on the other hand – genuine amateur investigators who are considered in a romantic way as battling against the odds. In recent years the sceptics seem to have had the upper hand but the burgeoning literature debunking the sightings of the monster has not led to any mass public scepticism. Finally, it was noted that children’s literature has also drawn upon the monster as a way of tapping into a shared world of a belief in the magical in the face of a disbelieving adult world. This kind of literature sides with the monster in an imaginative leap into the world of the child where doubt and disbelief have no place. In this world the mythic becomes the real and perhaps necessarily so, as children have little else to rely on but what they learn through an unquestioning acceptance as part of their socialization. Doubt would not serve children well given the knowledge and social practices they are faced with acquiring as they develop. However, in the adult world doubt serves very alongside belief as a means of keeping the mystery of the monster alive.
Works Cited

Many postcolonial readings of fantasy fiction focus on exploring complicated relationships between different fantastic races that inhabit a certain secondary world. However, such studies often overlook interactions of these races with the supernatural animals and beasts that live alongside them. Fantasy narratives like Andrzej Sapkowski’s *The Witcher Saga* and George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* depict fantastic settings where the relationship between the inhabitants of the world and the supernatural creatures is just as important as the interracial relations because it is based on similar principles of interaction between the Familiar and the Other and can be used to characterize them. Therefore, this article will address the following issues: how the supernatural creatures are perceived in their respective secondary worlds; what attitude prevails in this perception; and why it prevails above other reactions.

**key words:** supernatural creatures, the Other, fantasy, Martin, Sapkowski

In the introduction to her study *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction*, Jessica Langer makes an interesting observation: that science fiction and the postcolonial studies are interested in examining similar themes and concepts. She argues that the two most common signifiers of the genre – the Stranger (“the figure of the alien [who is] extraterrestrial, technological, human-hybrid or otherwise . . .”) and the Strange Land (“the figure of the far-away planet ripe for the taking”) – are identical to the two myths of colonialism, the Other and the exotic land of the Others respectively (Langer 3). Bold as it may seem, this statement appears to be correct as Langer proves later in her book. Although she primarily focuses on examples from the realm of science fiction, I think that her assertion works for fantasy fiction as well.  

1 Numerous texts belonging to this genre closely examine the differences between the Familiar and the Other, try to understand the nature of the Other, and depict various scenarios of relationships between the two. I want to analyze how these issues are addressed in George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* and Andrzej Sapkowski’s *The Witcher Saga*.

2 In his essay “A Different Kind of Other,” Brent Hartinger explores how social Others, specifically people with physical disabilities, are treated in George R. R. Martin’s novels. Likewise, Polish researcher Magdalena Roszczynialska makes a detailed analysis of national and racial Otherness in the works by the Polish author in her book *Sztuka fantasy Andrzeja Sapkowskiego* (see Chapter 3).
interested in examining the depiction of supernatural creatures and the peculiarities of their relationship with the other inhabitants of the secondary worlds of *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *The Witcher Saga*.

Despite the fact that the secondary worlds portrayed in the fantasy works by Andrzej Sapkowski and George R. R. Martin are not entirely alien to magic, the latter is not part of common knowledge. A selected few may learn the arcane arts under the guidance of other sorcerers and warlocks in places such as Aretuza or Ban Ard and the Citadel or Asshai; however, the public practice of magic in other places is often met with suspicion, even though it may be officially tolerated. On the other hand, when the inhabitants of these secondary worlds witness various manifestations of uncontrollable wild magic, including different supernatural creatures that appear because of it, they find themselves endangered and in fear.

Such a reaction is very similar to the one explored by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman in his book *Thinking Sociologically* when a representative of a group with one set of values encounters a member of a group with different values. As Bauman explains in his study, this difference always leads to a social division into “us” and “them.” The markers associated with the group to which one chooses to belong, or “us,” are generally positive. They include, among others, notions of affection, trust, safety, and the ability to communicate. In contrast, the group which is called “them” by “us” is perceived through markers bearing the opposite meaning: antipathy, suspicion, fear, and communication failure (Bauman 46). As Bauman stresses, such a drastic change in perception is a result of “us” not understanding or refusing to understand the processes that happen in the “them”-group; therefore, everything that is done by “them” seems unpredictable and scares “us” (46-47).

Identically, due to general ignorance concerning magic the creatures known or suspected to have any connection to magic are seen by many as a threat in the narratives by Sapkowski and Martin.

I will begin with *The Witcher Saga*. The stories and novels which constitute this fantasy series introduce many supernatural creatures that have entered the “Witcher-world” in the aftermath of the magical cataclysm called the Conjunction of the Spheres when different dimensions temporarily merged. Many of these creatures are violent monsters – ghouls, basilisks, wyverns, manticores, and bruxas – that threaten the safety of other living beings. However, there also exist benevolent, relatively peaceful creatures which are mostly indifferent to the affairs of others. Nevertheless, the universal reaction toward all creatures is the same: humans and non-humans alike – those who consider themselves the native inhabitants of this secondary world – distrust and fear the intruders from beyond, and see them as a danger that has to be dealt with.

Still, while Sapkowski’s books justify the extermination of the more violent and dangerous creatures that are, from the point of view of monster slayers called the witchers, “alien to our sphere, and there is no place for them here” (*Krew Elfów* 93), the stories and novels often depict other creatures as victims of general prejudice. Some of the earlier entries in *The Witcher Saga* examine the fallacy of such biased perception very closely. One of the stories that is particularly successful in showcasing the victimized supernatural Other is called “Eternal Flame,” and it focuses on the shapeshifting creature called the doppler. The main character, a witcher called Geralt arrives at Novigrad, a major city in the Northern Kingdoms and the so-called

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3 Aretuza and Ban Ard are the two schools of magic in *The Witcher Saga*; the Citadel in *A Song of Ice and Fire* is an academy for the maesters which offers magical training; and Asshai, a faraway country from the same fantasy narrative, is rumoured to allow open practice of the arcane arts.

4 Reverse misperception is also possible because from the viewpoint of “them” it is “us” who represent unknown incomprehensible values and evoke a sense of fear and danger.

5 Citations from Sapkowski’s books are given in my translation.
“capital of the [human-centric] world.” Having accepted an invitation from his friend Dandelion the bard, the witcher goes to the inn where he meets a halfling merchant Dainty Biberveldt. However, their conversation is suddenly interrupted when another halfling appears, claiming to be the real Dainty and accusing the other of impersonating him. Geralt quickly restrains the accused who shifts into his real form as his deception is uncovered. The innkeeper who arrives to check on the noise recognizes the creature as a vexling. According to him, these monsters have been a bane for the good people of Novigrad for years, and they have to be exterminated in a way which the real Dainty Biberveldt calls “a barbarian custom, and typical for humans” (“Wieczny Ogień” 129), even though the halfling considers it an appropriate punishment for the impostor. The innkeeper insists that the vexling (or the doppler, according to the creature itself) is the most dangerous among all existing monsters because it is hard to discover when it shapeshifts. He says:

in the name of the Eternal Fire, I’d prefer a dragon or a devil that is always a dragon or a devil, and one knows how to deal with them. But werewolfery, this entire shapeshifting thing, it is a disgusting demonic doing; this is trickery and treachery that those foul things made up to harm humans. (“Wieczny Ogień” 132)

These remarks do not convince Geralt of the creature’s hostility, but rather let him see the other man’s incompetence. The witcher realizes that shapeshifting is a self-defence mechanism, and the creature in front of him is not a monster, but “a representative of a sentient race” (“Wieczny Ogień” 133). However, everyone in the room is sceptical about this statement. For them, as the representatives of the dominant human race (or persons acknowledged by it, in Dainty Biberveldt’s case), creatures like the doppler named Tellico Lunngrivink Letorte (or Dudu) cannot be sentient because this fact breaks their paradigm of worldview. In this paradigm, as Magdalena Roszczyńska validly points out, sentience is regarded as a trait available exclusively to humans and the non-humans who accept their culture (119), and “the doll made from mud and meal that was staring pleadingly at the witcher with its dull yellow eyes” (“Wieczny Ogień” 133) hardly resembles a sentient being, from the dominant race’s perspective.6 As a result, this race takes offense when Dudu demonstrates his intellect: at first, by fluently speaking common (human) language; and later, by showing impressive merchant skills which exceed Dainty’s. In doing so, the doppler proves that he can become a part of the society and even make a contribution by providing skills that are highly regarded by it.

Later in the story, when Geralt finds the doppler after his escape, Tellico explains to him the reasoning behind his actions. As it turns out, he and other shapeshifters like him have been the victims of humans who deliberately destroyed them, unwilling to communicate; even the settlements of these creatures have been targeted when the dominant race has sought to expand its cities. Therefore, regarding it as retribution for the harm inflicted on his people (“Wieczny Ogień” 162), Tellico decides to live on within the human society as one of its own:

You gave . . . the dwarves, halflings, gnomes, and even the elves a small chance to assimilate. Why am I worse than them? Why do you refuse me this right? What should I do to be able to live in this city? Should I turn into a she-elf who has the eyes of a doe, silky hair, and long legs? Tell me. Why is the she-elf better than me? Because when you look at her, you begin to stumble, and when you look at me you want to vomit? . . . As the citizen of Novigrad, I’ll be

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6 A similar dismissal of the Other’s abilities by the seemingly advanced Familiar was advocated during the Western colonization of the Oriental countries. See Said 43-44.
trading, making willow baskets, begging, or stealing; as one of you, I’ll be doing what one of you is usually doing. Who knows, maybe I’ll even marry? (“Wieczny Ogień” 162-63)

The witcher, being the Other as well, sees the doppler’s determination and lets him go, and Dainty Biberveldt makes him his trading companion and takes him (disguised as a halfling) into his family. This story is one of Sapkowski’s few that leaves the aftertaste of hope: not only because Dudu receives what he has aspired to, or because it is revealed that more dopplers actually live in Novigrad (one of them even impersonates the high priest) (“Wieczny Ogień” 166), but due to the story’s utopian stance that the Other can be incorporated into society as an equal.

The story also dismisses the idea that ugly, scary, or non-human looks signify someone’s dangerousness or hostile intent. The other characters from Sapkowski’s books that undermine the validity of this idea similarly to the doppler are the golden dragon Villentretenmerth (“The Bounds of Reason”), Nivellen, a man under the beast curse (“A Grain of Truth”), and high vampire named Emiel Regis (the novels). Throughout the books, these characters (basically monsters) show more reason, intelligence, compassion, and overall humanity than most human and/or fair-looking characters. In fact, one of the best examples of the dichotomy between a sympathetic monster and callous human can be found in Baptism of Fire, the third novel of The Witcher Saga. As Geralt and his team wander through a war-torn land, they encounter some peasants who prepare to burn a local girl for witchcraft at the command of a mad priest. However, it becomes obvious fast enough that the priest has no evidence to support his charges; he is led only by his hatred toward everyone who represents or is believed to represent Otherness (“Chrzest Ognia” 158). Afraid of the priest’s wrath, the peasants do nothing to help the convicted girl, and only Regis (although not yet identified as a vampire by Geralt) steps in and passes the Trial of God by holding a scorching horseshoe, thus proving the girl’s innocence (“Chrzest Ognia” 160-61) and reinforcing the point that the supernatural creatures in Sapkowski’s secondary world are not as malevolent as some representatives of the human society, even though the former are always blamed.

Similarly to The Witcher Saga, George R. R. Martin’s A Song of Ice and Fire introduces several creatures whose supernatural origin becomes the basis for biased perception by the inhabitants of the secondary world. The researchers of this text note that it depicts a setting which is almost free from magic or any other supernatural influence (“A Sword without a Hilt” 124). In fact, in comparison with the Polish fantasy narrative where magic has become part of everyday life, Martin’s series seems almost sterile in this respect. Therefore, when magic starts to manifest itself throughout the continents of Westeros and Essos, people are afraid of it. The supernatural creatures which appear simultaneously with the sudden emergence of magic in the ordinary world are met with strong suspicion and opposition as well.

7 According to the lore of the series, the witchers are mutants whose abilities are enhanced through magic and alchemy. As a result, many people see the monster hunters as unholy abominations and discriminate against them. As for Geralt of Rivia, Andrzej Sapkowski’s narrative presents him as a hybrid figure because he possesses traits of the dominant human culture and the racial Others. However, neither the former nor the latter acknowledge him as their own.

8 In fact, a bruxa (a female vampire) which Geralt has to fight at the end of the story “A Grain of Truth” impersonates a beautiful girl (66-67).

9 In the story called “The Edge of the World” Geralt tells Dandelion that humans like to blame supernatural creatures, real and invented alike, for their own misfortunes and abusive behaviour so that they can feel less guilty about their actions in comparison (174).
The episode in the beginning of *A Game of Thrones* which introduces the direwolves, the fantastic counterparts of the more familiar animals, demonstrates this attitude quite well. When Lord Eddard Stark’s party comes across a dead direwolf near his household Winterfell, everybody agrees it is an omen because the creature is a sigil of House Stark. However, the interpretations of this omen differ. The household guards consider it a morbid sign because the animals do not live to the south of the Wall but to the north of it, in the sinister magical realm; therefore, their presence in the south cannot signify anything good. Additionally, the fact that the beast is dead is considered a harbinger of bad luck for the House. At the same time, Lord Stark’s illegitimate son Jon Snow notices a different sign: although it has died, the direwolf has given birth to five cubs whose genders reflect those of the lord’s trueborn children. As Jon puts it: “Your children were meant to have these pups, my lord” (*A Game of Thrones* 19). The significance of Snow’s observation is almost instantly proved further as he finds a sixth, albino cub for himself.

This episode also demonstrates the different ways in which the society perceives the supernatural Other, and it provides a preliminary overview of characters that have different reactions toward these creatures. Firstly, there are the common people who are afraid of any manifestations of the magical and supernatural. For them, it is better to stay away from any magic and harm that it may cause. This is why Lord Eddard’s household guards ask him to leave the direwolf’s body alone and kill its pups (*A Game of Thrones* 18). Then, there are people like Jon Snow and his brothers and sisters who choose to claim the creatures they are connected with. And finally, there are persons like Lord Eddard’s ward Theon Greyjoy who shows disgust with the direwolf, calling it a freak (17), and is willing to kill its cubs (19). Interestingly, in the following volumes Theon will betray the Starks. It has to be noted that all the characters who intend to harm them, not just Theon alone, show a disgraceful attitude toward the supernatural creatures that represent their House. For instance, Queen Cersei demands to kill Sansa Stark’s harmless direwolf after Arya Stark’s animal has bitten the Queen’s son (to protect her owner from him) and fled (157). Likewise, when the Freys of the Crossing plan to murder Robb Stark, they first take away his “wild beast [that] has a taste for human flesh” (*A Storm of Swords* 696). These examples show an interesting pattern: even though some people, especially the superstitious common folk, may be suspicious toward the supernatural Other, they are regarded as a threat and become victimized only by the negative characters of the series, contrary to *The Witcher Saga* where such a distinction is not present.

It has to be mentioned that not only the direwolves, but also their owners – the Stark children and Jon Snow – are looked at with suspicion and distrust, especially after they manifest their ability to transfer their consciousness into their animals, or to wargs. For example, when Jon is considered for the Lord Commander’s position in the Night’s Watch, his opponents refer to the character’s skinchanging skill as an argument against his election (*A Storm of Swords* 1093). Such attitude toward the wargs is based on the preconception that they use their magical powers, once attributed only to the supernatural children of the forest who inhabited Westeros before the humans’ arrival, to harm, forcefully possess human beings, and commit other evil deeds.10 Informed about these beliefs, Jojen Reed, who discovers Bran Stark’s warging ability, warns the boy against telling others about it because “[s]ome will hate you if they know what you are. Some will even try to kill you” (*A Clash of Kings* 523). The wildling warg Haggon shares

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10 In the prologue to *A Dance with Dragons*, it is stated that the wildling skinchangers follow a very strict ethical code which forbids any of the mentioned actions; violators of this code (e.g. Varamyr Sixskins) are despised and called abominations (4).
Jojen’s concerns, but also notes the difference in the perception of the skinchangers in the two lands divided by the Wall: “The world beyond the Wall is not for our kind . . . The free folk fear skinchangers, but they honor us as well. South of the Wall, the kneelers hunt us down and butcher us like pigs” (A Dance with Dragons 11). In my opinion, the opposite view on the wargs among the wildlings is primarily based on the fact that their community lives in the land where magic and the supernatural are considered normality, and the free folk are accustomed to these phenomena, unlike the southern inhabitants of the Seven Kingdoms.

I will not delve any further into the topic of wargs because I believe that it is rich enough for a separate article. Instead, I would like to return to the issue of the representation and perception of supernatural creatures in this fantasy series. While the direwolves simply emerge on the southern side of the Wall, the birth of the dragons at the very end of A Game of Thrones is a result of the ritual attempted by Daenerys Targaryen. Nevertheless, the reaction to their presence is very similar to the attitude toward the direwolves. Common Dothraki nomads who have witnessed their hatching in the flames of their former leader’s funeral pyre regard their new ruler, Daenerys, and her so-called “children” in awe and fear (A Game of Thrones 806). For others like the mystics and merchants of Qarth, the only three living dragons in the world are a wonder (A Clash of Kings 202). As for Daenerys herself, she regards them as her only children and source of self-identification as a member of the royal dynasty. As the story progresses, it is also implied that as long as she remembers her true identity and allegiance to her House, the dragons cannot harm her.

However, as the dragons grow throughout the series, the fascination with them begins to dwindle. Instead, they become terrifying and threatening to every living being just like the otherworldly monsters from The Witcher Saga and unlike the direwolves that obey their masters. Unable to control them, especially after a tragic incident when the fiercest of the dragons killed a child (A Dance with Dragons 45), Daenerys decides that they have to be contained. Interestingly, though, she imprisons only the two relatively peaceful dragons while their violent brother evades containment. It has to be noted, however, that despite not being as bloodthirsty as Drogon, Rhaegal and Viserion also pose a significant threat to people as A Dance with Dragons proves. Near the end of the novel Prince Quentyn Martell, who has arrived to Meereen with a marriage proposal for Daenerys, dies from dragonfire in an attempt to steal one of the imprisoned beasts (A Dance with Dragons 898) while the dragons break loose and ravage the city (A Dance with Dragons 914).

Still, even the dragons, no matter how fierce, are not the most fearful and dangerous supernatural creatures that inhabit the secondary world of A Song of Ice and Fire. In my opinion, the analysis of the supernatural forces in this fantasy narrative cannot be considered complete without a mention of the Others. These creatures are depicted as the quintessence of the unknown otherworldly danger that brings fear to all living beings. Even their name signifies their difference from the status quo of the fictional normality of Westeros and Essos.

I think such a representation of the creatures works in the novels because George R. R. Martin successfully employs the rhetorical techniques of the intrusion fantasy in their depiction. As Farah Mendelsohn writes in her Rhetorics of Fantasy, the rhetoric of the intrusion heavily depends on “the naiveté of the protagonist and [their] awareness of the permeability of the world – a distrust of what is known in favor of what is sensed” (115). The characters in the prologue to A Game of Thrones, the rangers of the Night’s Watch scouting the wildling sightings to the north of the Wall, are constructed to reflect this distrust. Seasoned rangers Gared and Will sense an unexplainable wrongness and dread in the air that they haven’t felt ever before (A Game of Thrones 6). Their commander, Ser Weymar Royce, who has joined the Watch recently disregards
their fears because he still carries the knowledge that magic and supernatural creatures do not exist. Guided by this knowledge, he is not terrified when the group arrives at the abandoned wildling site although Gared has reported that the criminals are dead and cannot move: Ser Weymar only concludes that the other ranger must have misinformed him, and the wildlings have moved on. After that, the Others appear, finally shattering Royce’s rational knowledge-based worldview. And as Mendlesohn points out (115), he no longer denies the intrusion of magic and the supernatural, but rather accepts it and fights it (A Game of Thrones 9).

However, as the Others kill the witnesses of their emergence, and Gared is “dead of fear” (A Game of Thrones 15) to tell about them before being executed for desertion, the world remains in the dark regarding the upcoming threat. Martin also detracts the readers’ attention from it by immersing them into the world of courtly intrigues and feuds, where magic belongs only in the old tales and those claiming to witness it are laughed at. The sense of unrest is sustained only by cryptic reports that the number of deserters and lost rangers of the Night’s Watch has increased. As a result, when the animated dead commanded by the Others start to kill the unsuspecting members of the Night’s Watch in their castle (A Game of Thrones 565), the readers are caught by surprise. Such a writing style reflects the rhythm of the intrusion fantasy: “suspension and release, latency and escalation, hesitation and remorselessness” (Mendlesohn 115).

Additionally, each stage of escalation is more intense than the former as the Others emerge from hiding and march against the living. George R. R. Martin shows this intensification using another rhetorical mechanism that Mendlesohn describes: sounds (153). Every appearance of the Others and their minions is accompanied by more noise. In the prologue to A Game of Thrones, it is noted that “[t]he Others made no sound” (A Game of Thrones 8). When the undead ranger attacks the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, his steward Jon Snow hears it due to the sudden shriek of his master’s raven (A Game of Thrones 565). In later books, the arrival of the Others is heralded by the three long horn blows (A Storm of Swords 17). Samwell Tarly’s fight with the wight is also very loud as he constantly screams at the undead (A Storm of Swords 645). Finally, the last of the depicted encounters with the Others’ minions is also accompanied by the loud cries of the fighters (A Dance with Dragons 173).

However, although Martin’s novels depict frequent interactions with the Others, these creatures’ intentions and goals as of now remain an enigma for both the characters and the readers. By the end of A Dance with Dragons, characters such as Jon Snow or Samwell Tarly do not know more about the Others than what was known in A Game of Thrones (A Feast for Crows 114-15): neither about their agenda and their society (if they have one11), nor about effective ways to stop their massive forces. This lack of knowledge makes the Others difficult to comprehend, and therefore, they evoke an even greater sense of fear and danger.

As I have shown above, in both Polish and American fantasy narratives discussed here, there exists a similar pattern in the perception of supernatural creatures. The dominant human culture (and the racial Others, to some extent) interacts with them based on the fixed preconceptions that these creatures are significantly different from them and, therefore, represent danger. The same presumptions are applied to all the creatures despite their behaviour, intentions, actions, and intelligence. Such preconceptions derive from the lack of understanding of this type of Other. As the examples from the fantasy texts demonstrate, there is a definite link between the amount of knowledge about a specific supernatural creature and its supposed dangerousness. By

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11 In season 4 of HBO’s adaptation of A Song of Ice and Fire, the Others are shown to have a society of sorts. However, as it has not yet been confirmed by the books, I regard this episode as a piece of artistic imagination of the show’s creators.
showing that the humans and non-humans both often perceive the supernatural Others without distinguishing the benevolent and the malign among them, George R. R. Martin and Andrzej Sapkowski’s novels stress an important point: the relationship between the dominant culture and the supernatural Other will remain antagonistic and tense so long as the former judges the Other stereotypically instead of seeking knowledge about them.

More importantly, this point is accurate not only in terms of *The Witcher Saga* and *A Song of Ice and Fire*, but also the real world. Events from our history (e.g. the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Holocaust along with other national genocides) can attest that persecutions that have transpired in the past or are happening now on the basis of racial, religious, cultural, or other differences take place because the persecutors fear the persecuted for their Otherness, but are reluctant to understand and recognize it as something normal and not threatening. Driven by stereotypical (and often offensive) knowledge regarding the Other, these persecutors decide to subdue and impose their own “right” rules upon them, or destroy them if the former fails. The fantasy novels show us in their own imaginative way that such an approach leads only to mutual decline and suggest that we should be willing to learn about the Others who live beside us, accept them, and cooperate with them rather than constantly succumb to fear of the unknown. As Sapkowski and Martin prove, only then can humanity have a bright and peaceful future.

**Works Cited**


Approaching a book that deals with a single witchcraft case in more than six hundred pages, one may wonder whether poring over such an opus magnum devoted to a single individual’s life and testimony will in the end pay off. That the book in question deals with none other than Isobel Gowdie and her sensationaly vivid, viscerally sexual and altogether mind-boggling narrative featuring a host of fairy characters, an imposing Devil figure and an astounding plethora of various malefic acts is invitation enough, but one may still feel a certain anxiety as to whether the author’s effort will succeed in the illumination of a single fascinating case only or rather bring to light important insights that might eventually lead to far-reaching general conclusions.

Emma Wilby’s book The Visions of Isobel Gowdie: Magic, Witchcraft and Dark Shamanism in Seventeenth-Century Scotland certainly delivers on both these levels. Above all, it is an excellent walkthrough of the four confessions recorded in Auldearn in 1662 in order to secure a trial commission for Gowdie. Wilby, who discovered the original documents, provides us here with a reliable edition of the text, her whole book serving as a thorough and informed commentary on the countless questions raised by the dozen-or-so pages of Gowdie’s tale. These questions range from the general to the minutely specific. Did Isobel actually believe she could work the magic she described? Did she really think she witnessed toads ploughing a field? Would the notary have interfered with her words in preparing the official documents? Why would she have mentioned fairy animals and described how they made her feel? Wilby unravels the enigma, and finishing the book, one has a sense of clarity and order, seeing how all the pieces of the puzzle fit together and how the meshing of folklore, demonology and personal experience may have produced the story of Isobel’s encounters with the Devil as we have it.

In almost 250 pages, Part One outlines the story behind the documents, managing both to explore the mechanics of false confession and to produce suggestive evidence for one of the chief interrogators having an extramarital affair and to probe his psychology in the context of his role in the Gowdie case accordingly. Character portrayals that Wilby offers succeed in leaving a lasting impression in the reader’s mind, and one may easily appreciate the possible tensions between Isobel and her minister, Harry Forbes, or her landlord, the Laird of Park. At the same time, this part of the book gives the readers a grasp of the methodologies useful in approaching witchcraft confessions in general. The role of the notary, expectations of the interrogators, and the motivations of the accused to produce or to refuse to give a voluntary confession are all addressed, and a rule-of-thumb method for establishing the extent of Isobel’s personal contribution to various passages in the documents is proffered that may be far from a sure-fire method of analysis but certainly facilitates the understanding of the creation of the confessions.
All in all, this section of the book could easily function as a stand-alone volume of substantial academic worth, and one may wonder what else there is to say about Isobel after the exhaustive analysis finally comes to an end.

Part Two introduces the notion of shamanism, which allows Wilby to return to the text of the confessions and reread them in a new light. The argument is that Isobel may have experienced visionary trances in which she would have participated in malefic activities, involuntarily or otherwise. A whole new vocabulary is introduced in order to elucidate Gowdie’s mode of engagement with the spiritual plane of reality, and referring to notions such as subtle bodies or stock bodies and to shamanism at large definitely drives the message of the book home, allowing the readers to make sense of some of the most obscure passages in the confessions and to see order in the confusing patchwork of cultural references that constitute them. This is undoubtedly the greatest strength of the book. The final section of the volume then turns to the Devil figure and attempts to establish whether Isobel may have willingly signed away to him her soul. Part Three includes an informative section about spiritual covenanting, a major influence on Gowdie’s imagining of the demonic pact, thought-provoking reflections on the place of the Devil and his relationship with God in the popular imagination, as well as an exploration of mutual dreaming, where Wilby delves into areas more readily associated with parapsychology than historical research.

The chapter on meshing or meeting dreams and dream-cults is where the reader may experience a sense of unease. Emma Wilby explains that she realises very well the idea of individuals having the same dreams and meeting in them lies beyond the ken of contemporary science and may be seen as bordering on telepathy, but she is quick to add that this is only so due to misconceptions arising out of limited funding, which in turn only perpetuates the notion that there is something academically suspect about the matter, thus driving the vicious circle of the lack of funding for what is considered parapsychology on and on. One may excuse the author for this infelicitous justification and play along, for the argument she makes is compelling, but it is worth bearing in mind that by this point, for more than 500 pages the book has been proffering more and more controversial theses about Gowdie, always backing up the claims with several strong arguments for each point made. Rhetorically powerful, Wilby’s writing style has the potential to enthuse and sway away readers, and the final chapter is no exception. And when one comes to agree with Wilby’s suggestion that a dream-cult was at work in seventeenth-century Auldearn and that Isobel and her accomplices met in their dreams to work maleficium upon their victims of choice and that they interacted in these visions with a being they knew to be the Devil himself, one gets dangerously close to the paranoid end of the spectrum where Isobel emerges as, from her own epistemological perspective at least, a proper witch guilty of the charges laid against her. The rhetoric of the book is so convincing that one may easily come to accept Wilby’s claim that the interrogatorial documents were not so much a result of false confession as a genuine admission of self-proclaimed devil-worship and ill-intentioned visionary activity. Nevertheless, reaching this conclusion entails taking mutual dreaming seriously, and once the readers realize the concessions to scientific rigour they have made, they may just as well look back and reflect on the equally convincing arguments in the previous chapters and question these as well. The author citing dreams of herself and her husband as an example of meshing dreams certainly does not help in this respect.

Whatever the validity of the book’s ultimate thesis, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie* is still a significant study for a number of reasons. It is certainly important for folklore studies, for it suggests that fairy encounters may have a visionary element at their core in at least some cases. It
also brings together a number of topics of interest for the literary scholar: the intersection of the demonic and the folkloric in popular ballads, the characterisation of fairies in popular belief and literature, and the methodological aspects of using “the huge wealth of oral literature collected in the nineteenth century . . . as a guide to the sixteenth and seventeenth-century popular worldview” (469). Those interested in theology will also appreciate the breadth of speculation on the possible approach to, and understanding of, the Devil figure and on some of the finer aspects of Protestant doctrine in this particular corner of Scotland and the way they might have shaped Gowdie’s beliefs. The book’s interdisciplinary potential can easily electrify both scholars and general readers, and Wilby’s excellent edition and explication of the idiosyncrasies of the confessions may help to elevate them to the rank of a canonical text, not just within folklore studies but also in the history of British literature. If Emma Wilby’s contention that Isobel was an oral performer is right and the confessions were, partly at least, the product of (however subconscious it may have been) poetic creation, then one may actually wonder whether the extraordinary scope of cultural references and the sheer wildness of the narrative does not merit for them a place in anthologies of British literature.
Notes on Contributors

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