Heroics and humanism: A study of intra-genre divergence within modern French fantasy literature

Kevin Sielaff

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Alexander Dickow
Sharon P. Johnson
Richard Shryock

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the manner in which modern French fantasy novels have diverged from the Tolkienian, high-fantasy precedent established in the late 90s and the very early 2000s. From 2010–2020, authors Jean-Philippe Jaworski, Justine Niogret, Pierre Pevel, and Claire Duvivier have re-imagined the fantasy realm by deliberately working in opposition to the tropes of high-fantasy. The following work is split into two segments–the first of which analyzes how this high-fantasy divergence manifests within the evolved role of the hero, as it pertains to Jaworski, Pevel, and Niogret. The latter tackles the inverse, being the de-heroized, humanist approach of Duvivier that further depicts how the genre continues to evolve. Through a varying theoretical framework, this interdisciplinary work establishes that the following novels mutually support one another in an effort to diverge from the historic, high-fantasy precedent: Jaworski's *Gagner la guerre* (2009), Niogret's *Chien du heaume* (2010), Pevel's *Le Chevalier* (2015), Duvivier's *Un long voyage* (2020).

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

The project follows a continued line of inquiry related to modern French fantasy novels, and questions the place of the hero within the fantasy realm from 2010–2020. What is uncovered is a shifting within the genre–one that favors varying forums of heroism, and rejects the restricted nature of the righteously motivated high-fantasy hero. This is a genre study; many of the literary devices discussed are only marginally innovative, in a greater literary sense. However, this research asserts that their uniqueness within the scope of the genre merits inquiry. This project discusses the modern French fantasy scene and its divergence from the influence of J.R.R. Tolkien.

Dedications:

This project is dedicated to my lovely wife Renee, who lent me her ear for many an hour as I rambled about my favorite novels.

“That’s great, now go do your paper.”

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Introduction

Over the past twenty years, the French fantasy scene has undergone a significant evolution. The genre is steadily beginning to remove itself from the boundaries set into place by J.R.R. Tolkien from the early 1990s–2000s. Although it took a handful of years for Tolkien's work to reach French markets, the English version of *The Lord of the Rings* (1968) was nonetheless available across the Hexagon as early as the 1980s. Tolkien's unmistakable presence was gripping, and consequently encouraged authors to pursue his highly successful, epic fantasy formula. Pierre Grimbert's 1996 publication *Le secret de Ji,* and Henri Lovenbruck's 2001 series *La moira* are both prime examples of Tolkien-like mimicry, as the two works share clear similarities with *The Lord of the Rings*. For example, Grimbert, in an overt homage to Tolkien, dedicates the first four pages of *Le Secret de Ji* to maps and topography, allowing the reader to grapple with the immensity of the world (Grimbert 6). What's more, both works show a commonality in the irrefutable contest between good and evil–another key indication of the Tolkienian influence. As a result, the reader is lulled into a sense of comfort and familiarity. *Le secret de Ji* and *La Moira* follow protagonists from humble beginnings who rise up to confront an awakening, unknown evil–they do so for the good of the realm, and for the good of their people. This idea of the epic,

righteous quest fits well into Tolkien's framework and offers a predictable, yet engaging reading experience. Fantasy critics and enthusiasts have grown accustomed a quest-arc plot. It is what feels right, and normal, and it is within Tolkien's winning formula that Grimbert and Lovenbruck found their niche; however, the two were certainly not alone. Fabrice Colin's *Winterheim* (1999) also used the high-fantasy arc across his trilogy of novels[1]. These examples illustrate how, from the 1990s to the very beginnings of the 2000s, French fantasy seemed to explode from Tolkien's Middle Earth. Anne Besson, leading authority on modern French fantasy literature, describes this occurrence as the following:

> La place de Tolkien comme père fondateur de la *Fantasy* constitue une vérité incontournable pour ce genre qui présente la particularité de sembler jaillir tout entier d'une source unique, cette Terre du Milieu si admirée en ses multiples avatars que chaque auteur voudrait à son tour retrouver quand il écrit l'émerveillement éprouvé lors de la découverte. (Besson 141)

Initially, authors were driven to recreate the Tolkienian sense of wonder that had originally kindled their interest in the genre. This is the evident within the works of Grimbert, Lovenbruck, and Colin. However, the seemingly universal affinity for the Tolkienian fantasy construct has been slowly dwindling. In recent years, modern French fantasy has begun to intentionally divorce itself from Tolkien's influence. This is not to say that the presence of *The Lord of the Rings* is not recognized, but rather, the key tenants of Tolkienian fantasy are being re-imagined. Authors have traded in this tried-and-true formula in exchange for a more deliberate, artisanal approach to the genre. Besson articulates this metamorphosis within her article "Comme une ombre lointain: l'influence Tolkien sur la fantasy française," published in 2011. Besson states that "le grand courant de la *Fantasy* épique à la Tolkien n'est guère illustré en France, sinon dans de rares œuvres produites dans les années d'éclosion du genre en France, [et] celles d'une proximité maximale du jeu…" (145). Apart from role-playing games, such as Dungeons and Dragons, and those select works that rode the coattails of Tolkien's initial explosion, the genre is

in a state of flux. The four authors examined within this thesis have all, in their own distinct way, dramatically influenced the dynamic of the modern French fantasy scene. In presenting the current research on each of those authors, their methodology and divergence from high-fantasy will be analyzed in detail.

Jaworski, Pevel, and Niogret share a common focus in their aim to create an evolved hero that works in opposition to the genre's historical precedent; they create a hero who struggles for their agency in ways previously not employed within the genre. In order to appreciate their novel contributions, this thesis will first examine the roots of the fantasy genre–specifically, its beginnings in the fairy tale. An examination of the fairy tale proves to better situate these questions of heroic agency. While Tolkien dominated the late 20th century fantasy scene, the genre's roots in fairy tales–in mythology and legend–provides a frame of reference in which to qualify the genre's current evolution.

There is a distinct, shared relationship between French fairy texts from the 17th–19th centuries and modern French fantasy works. The two are thoroughly intertwined, as suggested by literary theorist Maria Nikolajeva, with fantasy being derived from the "fully evolved and accomplished" fairy tale genre (2). This study suggests that the commonalities shared between fairy tales and modern French fantasy novels are most notable within the texts' treatment of heroic agency, their aversion to normalcy, and their sinister plots and characters. This emphasis on the sinister is qualified by Dr. Jack Zipes, leading authority on the social function of fairy tales:

> On the contrary, contemporary artists have approached fairy-tale topics from a critical and skeptical perspective, intent on disturbing viewers and reminding them that the world is out of joint and fairy tales offer no alternative to drab reality. Their subversive views of the fairy tale collide with traditional norms and conventional expectations of fairy-tale representations as well as the false, rosy images that the Disney Corporation and other popularizing artists and publishers have disseminated for close to one hundred years.

> Indeed, they *defy* pulp-produced and sanitized images that publishers and media moguls have spread. (*The Irresistible Fairy Tale* 136).

The fairy tale's threatening aura is reflected within the work of Jaworski, Pevel, and Niogret, as these authors work to subvert the traditional imagery of the fantasy genre. Zipes argues that contemporary artists "defy the sanitized image" of their predecessors–they internationally collide with "traditional norms and conventions" in an attempt to polarize their work from the historical precedent (136). The following passages will define the fairy tale more precisely before making a deliberate case for cynicism within the modern works of Jaworski, Pevel, and Niogret.

ROOTS OF THE GENRE

"*Fairy Tale signifies the belief in the supernatural, not the suspension of disbelief. We all believe in the extra-ordinary of Once Upon a Time. We need to believe. We breathe through our tales" (Zipes, The Meaning of Fairy Tale within the Evolution of Culture 221).*

The fairy world is one where strangeness is arrested–where abstraction, intuitive knowledge and wonder collide; a universe where the "irrational becomes the real" in an unquestioned melding of the marvelous (Balaskovits 163). Zipes describes fairy tales as being marked by conflict and entangled in folk-lore–he highlights how the fairy realm illustrates that "we are all misfit for the world" in some way, and defends the complexity of these short stories (*The Irresistible Fairy Tale* 2). The fairy tale is able to bring about allegorical discussion of otherwise avoided topics, such as conflict, "rape," and "rivalry," which promotes healthy societal discourse (9). These topics reveal the fairy tale's folk-origin, which according to Barre Toelken's *The Dynamics of Folklore* (1996), is defined as the codification of regional belief, ethics, and culture within a story. Since "fairy tales are informed by the human disposition to action," they are equally influenced by the human affinity for inaction (Zipes *The Irresistible Fairy Tale* 2). Inaction is

then a driving factor behind the fairy tale's sinister agenda, as these tales often point out the disjointed, cruel nature of a world that consumes its trespassers. Apart from socio-cultural implications, magic is another key element to the fairy tale. The focus has "always been finding magical instruments, extraordinary technologies, or powerful people" that will help facilitate a transformation (Zipes *The Irresistible Fairy Tale* 2). This transformative magic is evident within many traditional fairy tales, such as Perrault's "Le petit chaperon rouge" ("Little Red Riding Hood," 1697) and the Brothers' Grimm "Hansel and Gretel" (1812). This magic, as it is understood from a folk-origin perspective, directly pertains to the customary lore and oral traditions of the surrounding culture; it becomes a fundamental element within story-telling, fairy tales, and fantasy.

As narratives, fairy tales serve to bewitch the audience–they encapsulate and transport the reader to different, strange worlds. The listener is drawn in by an intrinsic bewilderment that holds them captive; the fairy world is one of playful doom, in which one chooses to meander despite knowing that their time is finite. American poet Elizabeth Andrew poignantly describes the fairy realm as such:

> When you enter the woods of a fairy tale, it is night and trees tower on either side of the path. They loom large because everything in the world of fairy tales is blown out of proportion. If the owl shouts, the otherwise deathly silence magnifies its call. The tasks you are given to do (by the witch, by the stepmother, by the wise old woman) are insurmountable – pull a single hair from the crescent moon bear's throat; separate a bowl's worth of poppy seeds from a pile of dirt. The forest seems endless. But when you do reach the daylight, triumphantly carrying the particular hair or having outwitted the wolf; when the owl is once again a shy bird and the trees only a lush canopy filtering the sun, the world is forever changed for your having seen it otherwise. (Andrew 84).

Andrew suggests that the fairy realm is transformative, rather than disillusioning. She highlights the overarching narrative function of the fairy tale, which is to promote the metamorphosis of those who choose to wander its winding corridors. Within the new reality that is the fairy realm, man is the intruder–an oblivious invader, mesmerized by this confrontation with the

otherworldly. The fairy realm represents a divergence from our current reality, and it is this very divergence that drives the narrative. It is a place of seemingly limitless strangeness–"a parallel reality tangential in time and space to the ordinary world," where there is practice of enchantment or magic, and "an altered mental or psychological state brought about by such practice" (Flieger 85). J. R. R. Tolkien's own definition of the fairy tale is found within his acclaimed essay *On Fairy Stories:*

> The realm of the fairy-story is wide and deep and high and filled with many things; all manner of beasts and birds are found there; shoreless seas and stars unaccounted; beauty that is an enchantment, and an ever-present peril; both joy and sorrow as sharp as swords. In that realm a man may, perhaps, count himself fortunate to have wandered, but its very richness and strangeness tie the tongue of a traveler who would report them. And while he is there it is dangerous to him to ask many questions, lest the gates should be shut and the keys be lost. (Tolkien 27)

Together, both Tolkien and Andrew make the case for the fairy realm as a dreamlike universe wrought by mystery–a place of enchantment, danger, and joy. With fantasy being a direct evolution of the fairy tale, certain key elements have resurfaced over the years; from the 1990s–early 2000s, for example, the fantasy scene was dominated by an infatuation for joyful enchantment. The elevated focus on the "happily ever after" was marked by a Tolkienian resurgence in 2001–2003, with Peter Jackson's cinema adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. During this period, Tolkien's formula had an undeniably tight grip on the genre; at the time of this writing, however, this is no longer the case. What is being seen now is the revival of the fairy tale's darker elements by way of modern French fantasy authors. There is a revival of the perilous realm–one that is empowered to pursue and distort the intruder. Within this distortion, a shift toward the sinister is revealed in fantasy's treatment of heroics, and it is this relationship that this study seeks to qualify. To further analyze the role of the fairy tale and the sinister revival therein, this study will now turn to Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy. Not only is

d'Aulnoy a founder of traditional fairy tales, she is also the author behind "L'Oiseau bleu," a fairy tale that proves to be a highly pertinent point of departure for this study.

MARIE-CATHERINE D'AULNOY – ESTABLISHING *LE CONTE MERVEILLEUX*

Although seemingly simplistic and recognizable, the fairy tale had resisted a concise definition until d'Aulnoy coined the term in 1697. D'Aulnoy's *Les contes des fées* (1697 – 1698), literally "tales about fairies," gave a name to the genre and married mythic tales to "fairy." Her contribution helped to establish a precedent from which future fairy tales and fantasy works would be judged. What's more, a 1993 study by Marie-Agnès Thirard established the long-term literary significance of d'Aulnoy's texts–Thirard submits that, even to the modern reader, d'Aulnoy's tales are easily understandable, which is often not the case with texts from antiquity (Thirard 87). Thirard affirms the legitimacy of d'Aulnoy tales by suggesting that they are not bound by time–they continue to be read and distributed, even in the 21st century. Shortly after the publication of *Les contes des fées*, d'Aulnoy's work appeared in English markets under the name *Tales of Fairies* in 1707. Over the course of the next 50 years, English use of the term "fairy tale" took hold and became fully associated with the genre by 1750 (Zipes, "The Meaning of Fairy Tale within the Evolution of Culture" 222). The definition of this term, then, is intrinsically linked to d'Aulnoy's influence and stems directly from her 1697 contributions.

"L'Oiseau bleu," one of d'Aulnoy's most well-known fairy tales, is especially pertinent to this study due to its treatment of the hero. The story recounts the tale of the princess Florine and *le roi Charmant* (Prince Charming), and reveals a non-traditional dichotomy between masculine and feminine heroism. Florine is the primary source of change throughout the story, and ultimately saves Prince Charming at the end of the tale. The Prince, having been cursed to live as a blue bird for a short time, is powerless to change his fate and must await Florine's intervention.

Through this atypical relationship, d'Aulnoy decenters traditional roles and elevates Florine to fill the hero's position in the narrative. This is unusual, especially for a late 17th century writing. During this time period, *le mariage de raison* reigned supreme–meaning, marriage was often regarded as a tool of political benefit and power over anything else, and it was typically leveraged by the male counterpart. Not only does Florine come to Prince Charming's aid, she also enables the "happily ever after" through a marriage based on reciprocity–on love. D'Aulnoy opposes tradition in "L'Oiseau bleu" in three distinct ways: Florine saves the day, Prince Charming does not fulfil his role or namesake, and Florine intentionally rejects the notion of arranged marriage. This subversive writing style is precisely what is being revived within the works of Jaworski, Pevel, and Niogret; it is not a new practice, but rather one that has been around for hundreds of years, and one that is being re-awakened. D'Aulnoy's work shows that derailing the standard formula within character roles reveals a critique that would be otherwise absent.

In moving beyond the fairy tale, it is important to acknowledge the roadmap put into place by essayist Tvetan Todorov, which differentiates modern fantasy works from neighboring genres. Todorov is a central, and critical, point of inquiry in the modern French fantasy conversation due to his juxtaposition of the marvelous, fantastic, and the strange; he aims to help the reader better negotiate an otherwise complex grouping of narratives, while also providing a framework specific to the analysis of fantastic and marvelous tales. Although there is significant overlap between the original fairy tale and fantastic tales, Todorov underpins certain distinct characteristics of each in an effort to create boundaries. Understanding Todorov brings further clarity to fantasy's origins and influences, and is a necessary point of departure for contemporary critique.

Todorov, throughout his integral text entitled *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (1970), was the first to directly theorize about the beginnings of the fantasy genre with his

dialogue on the fantastic. His unique perspectives on literary analysis quickly gained traction within the critical community, and his book has become a testament to the manner in which he "classifies" the genre. Todorov's classifications of the fantastic became central in French research and teaching at the time of publication, and this remains the case to this day, as evident within Anne Besson's 2015 publication *Poétiques du merveilleux.* Yet, despite their overall success, Todorov's classifications remain contested. This is, in part, due to the fact that all modern theory must first recognize Todorov as a point of origin–in doing so, the critic must qualify Todorov's faults against their own. Ironically, Todorov's perceived imprecision comes from his very restrictive frame of study. His objective is to define the fantastic, and this definition only pertains to a select corpus; it is not all inclusive. Within his definition, he states that the fantastic occupies a place of uncertainty–it is a fragile literary form, and can easily slip into a neighboring genre. The notion of doubt is central to Todorovian theory, and it manifests in the following ways: did these events within the story actually occur, or did they all happen inside the mind of the reader? Was it a hallucination, or did this *hors-là* actually take place? Todorov submits that the fantastic is defined by our hesitation. "*I nearly reached the point of believing:* that is the formula which sums up the spirit of the fantastic. Either total faith or total incredulity would lead us beyond the fantastic: it is hesitation which sustains its life" (Todorov 31).

Although contested, Todorov's classifications allow the literary critic to better distinguish between the fantastic and the marvelous; with this in mind, it is important to note that fantasy is attached to the marvelous. His theory provides a level of discrimination between within the field that did not exist previously. Besson, in a 2017 interview with Artois TV, defends Todorov's theory as fundamental to modern analysis. She briefly summarizes Todorov's main points during this interview, and the following paraphrased citations represent Todorov's theory within Besson's interpretation. This is to show that, even to the genre's leading research authority,

Todorov is still held in high regard. To begin, Todorov describes the fantastic as a genre where the presence of the supernatural becomes an agent of fragmentation. The supernatural is shocking–it erupts within a reality that seems like our own, in which the inhabitants are unfamiliar to supernatural happenings (Besson 5:47). Then, when something out of the ordinary does occur, characters wonder if they are losing their minds; the inhabitants become frightened or troubled. They are not used to these phenomena–it is strange, and unknown. This is the realm of the fantastic, where the supernatural erupts amidst realism. The marvelous, or fantasy realm, does not have this eruption; rather, the supernatural already has its place (Besson 7:15). As the existence of fairies or talking animals is not surprising in fairy tales, fantasy functions much in the same way. The prologue to *The Lord of the Rings* shows us hobbits and presents us with another world, another people; however, there is a lack of stupefaction. This is the key distinction between the fantastic and the marvelous, as far as modern theory is concerned. Todorov's discrimination of the fantastic from the marvelous has contributed to a more reduced, concise definition of the fantasy genre according to Besson (Besson 9:10).

Todorov laid the groundwork for future scholars to better articulate what fantasy actually is, and what it has become in terms of a literary device. Contemporary fantasy, having evolved from its roots in the marvelous and *féerique,* has become a vehicle for ethical, moral, and introspective reflection; more specifically, however, it has become one of the leading genres to bring the human element into question. "La fantasy est toujours plus attachée à des fondamentaux, si vous voulez – c'est-à-dire que, avant tout, sur ce qui nous rend humain. Ce qui fait notre humanité commune" (Besson 48:30). With the genre's interest in *des fondamentaux,* it becomes clear that what is considered "fundamentally human" differs amongst authors and time periods. Some choose to focus on virtues and victories, others on vices–this is ultimately what this study is attempting to highlight, that there has been a shift in interpretation. From the

perspective of this 2010–2020 corpus, people's interaction with the supernatural often reveals a fragility–it exposes the fact that the human element is easy swayed, and that all characters, especially the hero, are not immune to their inherent vices. The genre has also evolved to illustrate a more explicit socio-cultural commentary–one that is unapologetic, and deliberately placed[2]. Having explored the historical roots of fantasy in fairy tales, as well as Todorov's theoretical classifications, this study will now proceed to an analysis of Jaworski's *Gagner la guerre*. Jaworski distorts the fantasy realm by way of the anti-hero; he suggests that lust, violence, and longing are irreparably entangled in the human condition, and constructs his anti-hero accordingly.

WINNING THE WAR THROUGH BLOOD AND BLASPHEMY – REPRESENTATION OF THE ANTI-HERO IN JEAN-PHILIPPE JAWORSKI'S *GAGNER LA GUERRE*

Jean-Philippe Jaworski, fantasy author and role-playing game specialist, has been an active participant in the French fantasy scene since 2000. Beginning with the publication of the role-playing game (RPG) "Tiers Âge," Jaworski spent roughly seven years focusing strictly on RPGs before pursuing his novels. In 2007, Les Moutons Électriques published Jaworski's collection of eight short stories entitled *Janua Vera*, which deal with the thematic of war, and the slums of society. After a successful debut, the collection was later re-issued as a pocket edition by Folio SF. *Janua Vera*'s success was highlighted by a significant level of community engagement, as well as the receipt of the Prix du Cafard Cosmique for excellence in imaginative literature.[3]

Shortly thereafter, Jaworski solidified his reputation as a fantasy writer in 2009 with the publication of *Gagner la guerre*–at nearly 1,000 pages, he doubled the length of *Janua Vera*. *Gagner la guerre* was an immediate success with both the casual fantasy enthusiast and literary critic alike. As such, the novel was quickly put into the spotlight and received the Prix Imaginales

in 2009, as well as the Prix du Premier Roman Région Rhône-Alpes in the same year. The imaginative literary community's recognition of Jaworski's unique world-building bolstered the novel's success across the Hexagon; the novel's atypical approach to fantasy illustrated a darker, more reclusive narrative that was not often seen. This interest has stuck, as nearly a decade after the novel's original publication, Belgian publisher Le Lombard began transforming *Gagner la guerre* into a three part graphic novel. With a 2021 publication date for part three, Jaworski's work continues to be relevant at the time of this writing; in fact, he is expanding the series with another up-coming installment, entitled *Le chevalier aux épines*. In an interview with *Diacritik's* Yann Etienne, Jaworski revealed that the suite to *Gagner la guerre* is in the works: "La composition du *Chevalier aux épines* avance, mais j'ai encore fort à faire car ce sera un gros roman. L'action se déroule environ deux ans après *Gagner la Guerre*, mais dans un tout autre cadre puisqu'il s'agit du duché de Bromael" (Etienne 2).

Gagner la guerre is an imposing work that resists summary; its length and nuance inhibits the ability to capture the whole of it in one paragraph. Bearing that in mind, this summary is meant to situate the analysis that will follow, and is not intended to be all-inclusive. The novel's primary focal point is the debauchery of don Benvenuto, from whom the story's perspective rarely deviates. *Gagner la guerre* both begins, and ends, with murder fueled by Benvenuto's lustful, self-gratifying desires. Benvenuto is tasked by the head of state, Le Podestat, with the elimination of political rival Bucefale Mastiggia; in the eyes of Le Podestat, Bucefale threatens the new, corrupt order that he seeks to establish in the capital, and Benvenuto serves as the regime's personal assassin. Mastiggia is a popular man, however, and has gained political momentum due to a successful military career. During a recent naval engagement with the neighboring kingdom of Ressine, Bucefale became renowned across Ciudalia, the capital, for his winning naval tactics. As a result, he is sent out to continue his pursuit of the enemy, and Le Podestat orders Benvenuto to board his ship prior to his

next expedition. Soon enough, Mastiggia's fleet confronts Ressinian forces, and Benvenuto takes advantage of the chaos of combat to plunge his knife through Bucefale's back. Mastiggia dies on site, and Benvenuto is taken into Ressinian custody after they seize Bucefale's ships. While detained, Benvenuto is beaten into a pitiful state; his face becomes deformed, and his teeth and jaw are mutilated. After a short time in captivity, Benvenuto is liberated and returned to Ciudalia. Believing that he is the sole survivor of the naval confrontation, Benvenuto lies openly about his role in the events, including his relationship to Mastiggia. He claims to have fought alongside the naval captain valiantly until being captured by the enemy; in reality, he was merely waiting for an opportune moment to murder the captain. Surprisingly, a second survivor comes forward during a meeting with the State Senate, and the questioning that follows forces Benvenuto to flee the capital. During this evasion, Benvenuto attracts the attention of powerful mages and seeks spiritual refuge in the distant city of Bourg-Preux. After a year passes, he decides to return to Ciudalia and face an ultimatum from the Podestat–finish the job, massacre the rest of the Mastiggia clan, or perish. Le Podestat wants no opposition to his corrupt political plans, and his authoritarian goals are vindicated by his own twisted worldview. According to the Podestat, unwavering force in the face of opposition is how dynasties define themselves–he is after complete control, and he uses Benvenuto as a tool to fulfill his own self-righteous fantasy. *Gagner la guerre* suggests that winning the war involves wit, a sense of reckless abandon, and an aversion to the traditional moral compass. Violence reigns supreme in this universe known as the "Vieux Royaume," and Benvenuto cannot help but smile with a lopsided, golden grin.

At the time of this writing, there are very few scholarly articles that discuss Jaworski's *Gagner la guerre* in any detail. The grand majority of the novel's criticism comes by way of interviews with the author, book reviews, and blog posts; nevertheless, there are still some notable exceptions. Elisabeth Filz's 2013 Master's thesis entitled "De l'étude des lieux

en *fantasy* à l'introduction du concept de Distorsion: vers une nouvelle délimitation de la *fantasy*?" dialogues heavily with Jaworski's fantasy realm. Filz, by comparing *Gagner la guerre* to its neighboring Anglophone counterparts, argues the following: "En *fantasy* en effet il n'y a pas de contact avec notre monde, la réalité" (30). Filz states that Jaworski's work is one of many that distorts reality and creates a divide between what is actually real, and what is perceived to be real (25). The current study differs from Filz's interpretation by suggesting that Jaworski rejects this escapist tendency of fantasy by way of Benvenuto, the anti-hero. Instead of separating the fantasy realm from the real, Jaworski marries the two; he invites the stark cruelty of real-world suffering to invade the protagonist, and in doing so, marks his novel's divergence from high-fantasy. Apart from Filz's contribution, there has been a host of panel discussions with Jaworski that have been published by web-magazine Les Éditions ActuSF. Most of these discussions have originated from the annual "Les Imaginales" festival in France, which is an annual event that celebrates imaginative literature and its authors. "Les Imaginales," in tandem with ActuSF, has provided this research with a wealth of critical discussion to consider[1]. During these panel discussions at "Les Imaginales," Jaworski argues that the construction of the hero's individual identity is paramount to their function and agency–he states that high-fantasy's affinity for the "clan" is marginalizing, and uses this argument to craft the perfect "enfoiré" ("Indémontables héros" 3:28). The identity of Jaworski's *enfoiré* is rooted in an atypical value system–one that justifies killing, theft, and rape, and completely distorts the traditionally righteous hero archetype.

Jaworski's re-imagined hero shares similarities with the work of Pierre Pevel and Justine Niogret, insofar as all three develop the hero in a manner that opposes the historical precedent. *Gagner la guerre* refuses a redemptive narrative structure and fosters a vicious sense of cynicism, which ultimately manifests in the form of the anti-hero. Not only does Benvenuto invert the high-

fantasy archetype, he chooses not to seek out his own redemption, even when given the opportunity. Jaworski derails the reader's expectations and leaves them wondering why the protagonist never breaks his self-made, cyclic destruction. There is a refusal of the "happy ever after," and a perversion of Tolkien's Eucatastrophe[4]. *Gagner la guerre* infects the hero through a celebration of moral deviancy, and the fantasy realm provokes an uneasy sense of interest as a result. The novel uses the anti-hero archetype, polarizing magic, and a deterministic narrative to oppose the standard high-fantasy precedent; the easily-motivated, righteously fueled hero is not present in this universe. The use of the anti-hero displaces the fantasy realm by allowing wicked forces to prevail; additionally, Benvenuto corrupts the redemptive qualities of magic by skewing its relationship with the divine. Magic condemns the anti-hero, and re-affirms his position as the quintessential antithesis of the epic fantasy hero. Used by wicked sorcerers, magic proves to further bind Benvenuto to his corrupt relationships, and actions. What's more, these damaging elements are all willfully accepted by the anti-hero, and cultivate the sinister overtones that Jaworski is known for.

Jaworski's representation of magic, the environment, and the anti-hero, deprives the reader of their familiarity with the genre. There is no longer an assurance that good will triumph over evil; rather, the anti-hero perpetuates an environment where the wicked confront the wicked. No one is redeemed, and this does not align with what has been previously shown within fantasy works. Generally speaking, from the 1990s–early 2000s, the genre has been conditioned to present a stand-off between a clearly defined good and evil. In this yin-yang opposition, the standard epic fantasy hero is destined to be victorious. For example, it is inevitable that Sauron will be defeated in *The Lord of the Rings*, just as Sadis falls to Aslan in *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950). With the historical, high-fantasy precedent, comes an overt glorification of the righteous–a pre-disposition to optimism, where good can be the sole victor. *Gagner la guerre* twists the fantasy realm's logic

to refuse these expectations; the novel presents the unique scenario where there is no "good guy" to be had. Instead, Jaworski offers a masochistic anti-hero in their place–one who is deeply flawed, and represses the burden of his actions[5]. This re-imagined heroism demands an equally different interpretation of the hero's claim to agency. Typically, the righteous quest is what fuels the high-fantasy hero–they are defined by the people that they save, their moral correctness, and the completion of an often divinely appointed quest. Benvenuto, conversely, is a product of Jaworski's twisted creation; he becomes a puppet, and the development of his identity is subject to the manipulative tendencies of his entourage.

The manner in which *Gagner la guerre* plays with the fantasy realm is indicative of a shift within the genre–a movement away from the perceived glory of high-fantasy, and a celebration of this darker interpretation. Magic is now sinister, domineering, and treacherous–an agent of damnation, rather than salvation. While a handful of traditional fantasy elements persist throughout the story, they do not draw attention to themselves–the described divergence is specific to the hero, and is not a complete shift outside of the scope of the genre. It is still fantasy, but of a different variety, with an altered meaning. As such, *Gagner la guerre*'s sense of wonder is shrouded by a constant subversion of the familiar throughout the novel–the magic is wicked, the people crooked, and the hero himself an antithesis of justice. Jaworski creates a closed, but expansive universe with wild creations that are a cause for consternation. His background in role-playing games plays an important role in explaining this affinity for the macabre; there is a clear parallel between the construction of the anti-hero, and the popular character alignments of RPGs such as Dungeons and Dragons. Players have the choice in D&D to play a traditional hero-type character, or fill a more deviant role, such as a neutral evil. These atypical roles add depth to the gameplay by complicating the classic good versus evil dichotomy–the player is able to choose which side they would like to favor. The neutral evil, within an RPG setting, is selfish; they sees no issue in turning on their

allies-of-the-moment to pursue their own desires. Furthering personal goals and breaking traditionally boundaries is what's most important to a neutral evil character, and this is reflected within don Benvenuto (Blisland 36).

The appeal of *Gagner la guerre* lies within its glorification of darker fantasy elements, which also underpin the novel's divergent qualities. Jaworski anticipates that his plot, shifting structures, and more colorful elements will be seductive and alluring. The neutral evil Benvenuto is coercive, and Jaworski builds his universe from this perspective of moral deviancy. Keen et al., using Freudian psychoanalytic theory, offer an explanation to the attraction of villainous characters:

> Fundamental to Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory is that we have innate sexual and aggressive drives, motivated by our id. Freud's id represents the primitive parts of our personality, largely following the pleasure principle. The id wants what it wants immediately and is not concerned with consequences. Often, an appropriate outlet to satisfy sexual and aggressive drives is not available. We propose, at least according to Freud's approach, that vicariously experiencing aggression and violence in movies, television, and books may serve as an outlet for our aggressive tendencies (i.e., catharsis). (137)

As noted in the aforementioned citation, "humans have an innate tendency for aggression," and there is often no feasible outlet for these primal desires (137). Freud offers an understanding of human drives that reassures readers of not being perverse when desiring to play these neutral evil characters. It can be a legitimate outlet for an otherwise repressed part of our nature. Interestingly, Jaworski appears to play with these motivations in order to better align the reader with don Benvenuto. A psychological reactance underscores a "charm about the forbidden that makes it unspeakably desirable" (Twain qtd. in Keen 140). This citation from Mark Twain is contextualized by Keen in order to help illustrate the role of psychological reactance; the more removed "we are from any given object, the more we desire it" (Keen 141). Readers will continue to pursue Jaworski's narrative out of a perverse identification with the character of Benvenuto. The forth wall is broken on several occasions in an effort to highlight this attraction: "Vous qui êtes en

train de me lire, ne le faites-vous pas pour vous distraire? Et, quoique vous sachiez que je suis une inqualifiable crapule, n'êtes-vous pas un peu mon ami?" (Jaworski 171). Keen situates this sentiment by describing that "if, by societal standards, we are not supposed to root for the bad buy, your freedom to choose whom to root for is constrained by others. Thus, by the definition of psychological reactance, one would find the bad guy more desirable" (141). This same concept can be applied to an infant's interaction with their toys–once a toy is taken away, the child will "then rate that toy as being more desirable" (Wilson qtd. in Keen 140). The anti-hero, while a largely common device in literature, is a rarity in the fantasy genre specifically. Indirectly, Keen's argument correlates the reader's interest in Benvenuto with the perceived absence of the anti-hero construction within the genre.

Psychoanalyst C. Fred Alford offers an additional perspective on the issue of being drawn to a seemingly undesirable "evil" in his 1999 article "A Psychoanalytic Study of Evil." Alford's quantitative study asked participants to define evil, and most of the 68 responses focused on the emotional resonance of the term, rather than the concept–they likened evil to "an experience of dread," rather than an immediate tool of harm (27). Alford draws on both Freud and Ogden to claim that harmful acts are a measure of the self's inability to contain this dread–it eventually manifests, and takes the form of "violence, or more subtle acts of sadism" (29). Heinous acts, then, can be better understood through Alford's frame of criticism–they "evacuate" dread "in an attempt to transform the terrible passivity and helplessness of suffering into activity" (31). Therein lies the appeal of don Benvenuto; he is the vessel from which dread propagates, and he finds relief in acts of debauchery. Alford's psychoanalytic framework suggests that the draw to Benvenuto lies in his ability to displace the dread in which he has accumulated; this occurs through an overt "evil" that the reader cannot action themselves. Jaworski compounds the psychoanalytic influence of his

writing by way of immersive narrative structures–the complexities of Benvenuto's appeal are as rooted in effective language as they are in psychology.

NARRATIVE STYLING – A CRITICAL TALKING POINT

Jaworski's prose is highly stylized; in turn, it cultivates a text that is dynamic, detailed, and colorfully written. The author makes uses of a variety of registers to add to the pervasiveness and complexity of the anti-hero; in addition to filling the role of the crass assassin, Benvenuto is able to hold himself well in formal, diplomatic settings. Outside of the characters, the novel's narrative styling is also underpinned by the scale of the imaginative world, of which the design mimics the grandeur of a classic role-playing game. In the opening pages of chapter one, "Héros de la République," this game-like scaling is put into perspective with Benvenuto's inner monologue:

> Je n'ai jamais aimé la mer; mais je vous accorde que c'est assez singulier pour un citoyen de la République de Ciudalia, la plus grande puissance maritime de Transestrie. Depuis des siècles, l'opulente République a fondé sa richesse sur la piraterie, sur le trafic, sur le commerce au long cours. Les escadres de galères de République écument l'océan Éridien des grèves barbares d'Ouromagne aux fjords brumeux des Cinq Vallées, des ports ensoleillés de l'archipel de Ressine aux anses pluvieuses de Bromael. Les temples aux frontons ombrageux, les hôtels particuliers ornés comme des chapelles, les palais aristocratiques aux tours orgueilleuses, tout ce qui fait la grandeur de Ciudalia a été fondé sur le cabotage, la guerre de course, le négoce au long cours. (Jaworski 12)

Much like a Dungeon Master who sets up a game board, Jaworski scrupulously crafts the Vieux Royaume as a sprawling world; this vastness is equally correlated to what Jaworski describes as his "traumatisme Tolkienien," referring to how overcoming Tolkien's influence is a constant battle within the genre. True to the role, Jaworski sets the stage and leaves his players to their own devices–he "looks on with a grin," as he observes from afar in traditional Dungeon Master fashion (Livingstone 21). Jaworski's affinity for the RPG contributes both to the novel's believability and its ease in implicating the reader; the reader becomes a player "negotiating the referee's world" in this unique space (Livingstone 10)[6]. This relationship, then, fosters a healthy sense of immersion within the novel. It begs for a more interactive experience; "j'ai fait jouer les joueurs," Jaworski

says, in reference to those reading *Gagner la guerre* (Jaworski 1:10). The author's prose rejects passivity, and invites the reader to interact with the pieces he is put into place. It is a manipulation of the traditional fantasy space, by way of familiar rhetorical devices.

By way of his unique background, Jaworski makes an atypical appeal to the reader's reception of the story through a reconceptualization of catharsis[7]. Benvenuto is not an "undeservedly suffering hero" as the definition of catharsis suggests; instead, the misery that pursues him is a product of what he sows (Jauss 288). Jaworski deviates from the standard definition of catharsis, and yet he still enables "the conditions of identification between the spectator and the hero to become operative"–in terms of genre study, this observation helps identify a marked difference between Jaworski's practice, and that of his predecessors (287). Typically, the high-fantasy hero does generate a standard cathartic response; the looming evil that rises up in the high-fantasy world causes undo suffering, and the reader aligns with the hero due to this yin-yang opposition between good and evil. This is not the case in Jaworski's universe, as immersion is still generated despite the fact that Benvenuto does not fully meet the definition. This innovation, albeit modest, is important to highlight in order to better situate Jaworski's divergence within the genre–the primary interest of his character creations is generated as a result of their deviance from the standard.

The emotional identification present between the reader and Benvenuto is also a result of the novel's distinct use of first-person "je"–a perspective from which the story rarely deviates. While this observation is not directly pertinent to the novel's divergent qualities, it explains the efficacy of Benvenuto's character. There is an intimacy associated with the use of "je" that would be otherwise absent in a second, or third-person narrated novel. The text is narrated entirely by the use of Benvenuto's "je," which helps to further implicate the reader. It is direct, and assumes a familiar relationship from the very beginning. Jonathan Auerbach describes the use of "I" as a

signifier and makes the case for an "uneasy alliance" that both completes and opposes a story's relationship with the reader (Auerbach 10). The use of first-person narrative within *Gagner la guerre* is deliberate, as it focuses the story on its one critical player, being Benvenuto and his exploits. From a story-telling perspective, the "je" is direct and forthcoming. In addition, it gives Benvenuto the leeway he needs to be able to express himself on his own terms without an outside narrator serving as an intermediary. Character believability goes hand-in-hand with successful story-telling, and first-person narration helps Jaworski achieve this end. He leaves us with the impression that Benvenuto is sitting just a few meters away, and talking directly to his on-lookers; he is simultaneously the instigator, victim, story-teller, and perpetrator. In contrast to most popular fantasy, we are not privy to an in-depth explanation of the supporting character roles. For example, in the case of *Game of Thrones,* it is not just Jon Snow who is fully revealed to the reader; rather, it becomes a host of characters, from Arya to Daenerys Targaryen. In adding those narrative layers, the author adds depth to the plot at the cost of the intimate exchange between the reader and the protagonist's first-hand account. As for the primary supporting roles present in *Gagner la guerre,* one is only offered an occasional glimpse into their motivations.

The effect that Jaworski's narrative styling has on the fantasy realm is that of a snow-globe; he places his characters into the Vieux Royuame with intention, watches them live, and then invites the viewer to peak into the strange world that he has created. Reading Jaworski, there is the ever-present impression that the characters are cognizant of their existence within the constructed world–much like players making their way across a game board. Don Benvenuto, mockingly so, breaks the fourth wall on numerous occasions; he address himself directly to the reader and states:

> Si vous avez lu ce récit jusqu'à cette page, c'est que vous êtes d'une notable inconscience. Vous devez appartenir au fretin des fouineurs et des indiscrets, à ces étourneaux qui ne résistent pas à un fumet de ragots et de linge sale. Tant pis pour vous. Avec ce que vous avez appris, vous y êtes déjà, dans les draps où je me suis roulé, tout poissé de sang, de mensonge et de trahison. Et votre cas ne s'arrange pas. (530)

In this passage, Jaworski highlights the reader's complicity in reading Benvenuto's story. He embroils the reader by implying there is a twisted, shared guilt present for the crimes that Benvenuto has committed. In making the reader complicit, Jaworski re-asserts his role as Dungeon Master; he creates a perfect scoundrel in don Benvenuto, and then throws him into our ring while saying "here–deal with that.[1]" His narrative distorts high-fantasy through a deliberate opposition of the righteous–a premise beneath which Don Benvenuto is built. Jaworski bends the traditional fantasy landscape into an upside-down Narnia where the cravings of man are glorified instead of arrested. The heinous nature of Benvenuto is a cause for introspection; we cannot see ourselves living his life, but Jaworski plays with our curiosity. He shows us what it would be like to live as Ciudalia's truand, and does it well enough that it fulfil a renewed and twisted a sense of wonder. While Don Benvenuto plays an integral role in the narrative styling of *Gagner la guerre*, his principal function is that of the anti-hero; within this role, Don Benvenuto illustrates the divergent qualities of *Gagner la guerre*.

THE ANTI-HERO

Je me suis fait avoir. Je suis devenu un héros. (890)

Benvenuto is paradoxical in the sense that he is charming, yet highly xenophobic, violent, and misogynistic. He is pre-disposed to come out on top, despite these repellent attributes. His character epitomizes Jaworski's manipulation of our expectations, and this manipulation manifests by way of distorting the traditional depiction of the hero. In opposition to the high-fantasy hero, Benvenuto is radicalized by the surrounding world in lieu of being empowered by it. What the reader is accustomed to within the genre is a hero who derives their identity from the righteous quest–an epic, easily motivated journey where good unequivocally triumphs over evil. The fantasy greats

remind us of just how prevalent this dichotomy has become. Bilbo Baggins, in Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937), is fueled by a shared compassion for all races that had been passed down through his adventurous bloodline; this illustrates the typical beginnings of the high fantasy hero, being motivated by the standard quest arc. There is a simple foregrounding at play, and we can easily envision where this journey is going from the start. In his near future, Bilbo will endure a handful of near cataclysmic trials, but inevitably he will prevail in the end. It is a story focused on the conquering of evil, and one that tells us that evil's influence is finite. This, however, is absent in Jaworski's interpretation; instead, it becomes a confrontation of two evils, with one of which inverting the role of the hero and transforming the inherently good qualities therein. By way of the anti-hero, Jaworski creates a new type of heroic discourse that's rooted in cynicism, and fosters a meticulous opposition to the high-fantasy hero. Benvenuto is an intentionally wicked creation, designed to oppose the righteous qualities of the high-fantasy hero by filling the role of the anti-hero. By constructing Benvenuto is such a way, Jaworski refuses the classically redemptive narrative found within the genre, and instead offers a twisted determinism that relies heavily on the static nature of the anti-hero. It is important to note that the anti-hero, in itself, is by no means a new literary device–it has circulated popular literature for centuries, reaching as far back as classical Greek literature. Within the modern French fantasy genre, however, it is a rare find, and the anti-hero underpins a divergence from Jaworski's high-fantasy predecessors.

Many of the traditional expectations associated with high-fantasy lie within the genre's escapist nature; violence may exist in the high-fantasy world, but it is often overshadowed by the standard "happy ever after" ending. The familiarity of the genre is irreparably linked to its function as an escape–one escapes from the bitterness of reality to wade through the unfamiliar, yet welcoming waters of the high-fantasy world. A whimsical place, where one can confidently claim that good will vanquish evil. Brian Horne, theologian and former lecturer at the University of

London, argues that this is a misrepresentation of reality, as high-fantasy does not adequately capture the grim realities of the real world. Horne states that the fantasy created by Tolkien, Ursula Le Guin, and J.K. Rowling tends to avoid the "messiness, disappointment, dullness, meanness, and cruelty" of real life (33). This is an intentional misrepresentation, however, and is meant to build upon high-fantasy's function as escapist literature; incorporating the cruelty of real life would inhibit this function. According to Horne, people are coded to perceive a stark contrast between good and evil, and this juxtaposition is most often due to religious influence. These influences translate into fantasy, and what is left is a clear and equal divide between two distinctly opposed dueling forces. *Gagner la guerre* advances Horne's argument by equally suggesting that this is not an accurate representation of reality; the novel asserts that man is inherently corrupt, a concept of which the anti-hero is a direct illustration. Generally, in high-fantasy, the evil elements are "naïve, superficial, and rely heavily on a dualistic interpretation of reality. The universe is presented in basically Manichean terms: Darkness and Light; good and evil powers oppose each other in almost equal strength" (Horne 34). Jaworski rejects this Manichean dualism by placing disproportionate power in the hands of the wicked.

Jaworski makes the fantasy realm strange again by way of the anti-hero. There is a cynical re-enchantment at work–a displacement of tradition in favor of a more realistic take on the genre. If, in a traditional fantasy arc, the hero is destined to conquer with a righteous intent, what then would the opposite become? This is the question that the anti-hero poses. Returning to the Jaworski's game-sense, the anti-hero is a way of gluing the game board to the ceiling and making the players negotiate the board upside down–in lieu of good conquering evil, evil has the upper hand. The reader is suspended, and left to hope for a positive outcome; Jaworski's approach is that of a cyclic loop, in which the righteous intents of his high-fantasy predecessors disappear. Even

before arriving at a discussion of magic within the novel, the anti-hero figure derails the fantasy realm.

THE ANTI-HERO AND THE ARTS

Beyond the scope of the high-fantasy comparison, Jaworski's anti-hero is further defined by his rejection of the arts. Fantasy's sense of wonder is intrinsically linked to art; according to Guillermo Marini, the human has a primordial affinity for the unknown–for the wondrous (Marini 58). Marini states that art is a unification of various elements under "the same activity," and that it is a vehicle of constant, emergent meaning (58). Benvenuto taints the arts by refusing to acknowledge their positive effect on him, and rejecting his talents as an artist. Not only does this foreground the anti-hero's impending lack of redemption, it also serves as a direct commentary on the state of the genre. At one time, Benvenuto was absorbed by the arts before embracing the life of a scoundrel. As an art pupil under the direction of the successful artist Le Macromupo, Benvenuto led a seemingly normal life. Yet, the quest for artistic success quickly became illusory. Abandoned by his father, Benvenuto's escape into the arts led him to discover a relationship between his mother and Le Macromupo–a relationship which he blamed on his mentor. The arts, then, become synonymous with a sensation of betrayal, and this degradation bled into Benvenuto's identity. The once thriving young artist quickly become corrupted upon confronting the brutality of the surrounding world; his assimilation into Ciudalia's twisted morals became the root of his debauchery. Benvenuto creates a void by devaluing Le Macromupo–or, rather, by devaluing art itself. As a result, when Le Macromupo appears throughout the novel, his presence is jarring, desorienting. Benvenuto recounts that his relationship with the artist leaves him feeling vulnerable, and de-masked: "Je me sentis démasqué, vulnérable, bêtement réduit à l'impuissance par le protocole qui me clouait ainsi, juché sur cet échafaud cérémoniel" (Jaworski 309). This sense of isolation solidifies the anti-hero's role as a combatant of traditional values, and also serves as a point of inquiry for future research.

Jaworski dialogues with the concept of the "artist," and suggests that it is this very relationship that laid the foundation for Benvenuto's corrupt development.

Jaworski's use of the anti-hero is deliberate, and intentionally breaks the boundaries set into place by the traditional high-fantasy hero. Benvenuto serves as both the agent of absolute otherness, as well as the decisive victor–he is the traditional hero's evil twin, or better yet, the manifestation of the traditional hero's hidden desires. Consequently, Benvenuto's character becomes an integral element to Jaworski's greater dialogue by serving as an invitation for malevolence and cynicism. In Benvenuto's mind, art is a corrupted construct and we should rid ourselves of it; trust and honesty do not exist, and for these reasons, the protagonist should behave however they see fit. Benvenuto reconstructs his personal code of ethics to align with his distorted view of reality, and in turn dismisses his own salvation. He never allows himself to be redeemed, even though there are numerous occasions to do so at the end of the novel; he constantly pursues a path of self-righteous destruction, and thoroughly embeds himself in the web of corruption that is Ciudalia. During the 2016 Imaginales conference for the Festival of Imaginary Worlds, Jaworski spoke briefly on the rationale behind the anti-hero:

> [Benvenuto] dort sur les deux oreilles, et les atrocités qu'il a commises, ça le fait rire. Il trouve ça drôle. D'où, d'ailleurs, ma partie prise, de mettre énormément d'humour dans le roman – c'est un système de défense du truand. Face à ces cas de conscience – y a des cas de conscience chez Benvenuto, qu'il refoule, et qu'il traite par la déraison, et j'ai trouvé intéressant d'essayer de restituer, de façon purement fictif [sic], ces types de personnalités qui sont des salopards et qui assument complètement. (Jaworski 3:10)

Jaworski creates an abstraction of the hero–one that is born from the author's intent to create a self-assuming scoundrel. This is a clear divergence from Tolkienian high-fantasy, as Jaworski aims to create a protagonist that represses his own conscience. Benvenuto feeds on atrocity, and gleans a laugh from his own debauchery. In addition to solidifying a new trend in modern French fantasy, Jaworski is working in direct opposition to the audience's expectations by perfecting a villainous

protagonist. *Gagner la guerre* shows us that not all quests are righteous, and evil can not always be conquered. Benvenuto shows us the futility of the traditional epic fantasy quest, as it is corrupted by our own desires.

Upon examining Benvenuto's interactions with other characters, there is a clear divergence between his journey and the journey of a typical hero. On the same token, however, Benvenuto embodies several elements of the traditional hero's journey. This further illustrates the muddled territory that his character occupies; he exists in a purgatory between heroism and anti-heroism. Dr. Shadi Neimneh juxtaposes the hero's journey with that of the anti-hero by calling on Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*:

> While the archetypal / mythical hero of universe myths undergoes a process of departure, initiation, and return through which he faces trials and has adventures and then returns triumphant, the modern anti-hero can undergo the same pattern internally or without the grandeur associated with myth. The journey becomes a journey within the mind or within mundane surroundings; the initiation becomes a lesson he learns about his limitations and weaknesses, and the return journey can be a survival in a chaotic world reinvigorated by the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. (Neimneh 79)

The anti-hero displays dissociative qualities as they shape their concept of justice to conform to they are on their own personal ethic; they are true to both time, and their authors' conceptions of them (Neimneh 79). Additionally, the anti-hero is both the "converse of progress and the quintessence of stasis" –they have no desire to change their ways, and they hardly stray from what is familiar (Neimneh 87). This being said, one's attachment to Benvenuto grows out of the desire for him to become something more, and overcome his diabolic tendencies. He is a product of his environment, and is consequently flawed and damaged–Jaworski then exploits these vulnerabilities to reject the reader's longing for a traditional righteous hero. Instead of offering the anti-hero a redemption, Jaworski compounds the grievances against Benvenuto until the very end.

Self-satisfaction is one of Benvenuto's most notable flaws that he is unable to escape. He pursues his carnal desires purposefully, and represses the thoughts of future consequences. As long

as he reaches his end state, the cost does not matter–in fact, he welcomes the associated suffering. Benvenuto thrives on bets, playing with his life like a game of Russian roulette. He rejects the causality of his actions, and likens his decisions to a game of bets: "Des jours que je languissais après une partie de cartes ou un cornet de dès… Il m'offrait l'occasion de parier sur un autre jeu. Pourquoi pas, après tout?" (Jaworski 571) His impulsivity is a character element that Jaworski refuses to correct; as a result, it further demonstrates how *Gagner la guerre* differentiates itself from surrounding novels within the genre. One of the most prominent and disturbing instances of Benvenuto's impulsivity comes at the end of chapter six, "L'homme au sourire d'or." In an ultimate divergence from traditionally heroic fantasy, Jaworski depicts Benvenuto's brutal rape of the head-of-state's daughter, Clarissima. The scene is shocking, and disjointed memories of the event linger throughout the remaining 700 pages of the novel. There is a conscious acceptance of the act, as Benvenuto proclaims to himself: "…il fallait que je prenne cette fille effrayée, triomphante, ouverte…" (Jaworski 341). Benvenuto's rape of Clarisima illustrates hegemonic masculinity at its worst; he uses his physical superiority as a tool of sexual violence, and does so to intentionally traumatize the woman. What's more, the adjective "triomphante" marks a twisted projection of male power. Clarisima, although described as "ouverte," resists the act and does not consent; the notion of "triomphante," then, symbolizes Benvenuto's unbridled craving to fulfill his own desires. He lacks the fundamental morality that is intrinsic to the high-fantasy hero.

Clarisima's rape is equally a means of indirectly harming Le Podestat. Even to Benvenuto, the head-of-state is untouchable; his daughter, however, is not. The anti-hero exploits this perceived weakness and reduces Clarrissima to a vessel meant to perpetuate his influence; Benvenuto uses her as a means of establishing his power in a politically tumultuous realm. The head-of-state planned to further his political power by marrying his daughter to an adjacent nation–this venture would be quickly snuffed, however, upon the realization that Clarisima had lost her virginity. It is

a manipulative power play on behalf of don Benvenuto–a heinous act that festers as the story progresses. By way of Clarisima's rape, Jaworski affirms the stark difference that exists between Benvenuto and the standard fantasy hero. It epitomizes Jaworski's affinity for the sinister, as the reader bears witness to Benvenuto's fragmentation–the moment of no-return that foregrounds his fall from salvation. The reader may root for his transformation, for him to become something greater, but these moments show how he is forever flawed–forever damned. Jaworski, in compete rejection of escapist fantasy creates a moment of irreparable trauma for Clarissima at the hands of Benvenuto. The on-looker is made a stranger to the fantasy realm through Benvenuto's persistent villainy.

In sum, Jaworski's deliberate use of the anti-hero advances his dialogue through a direct divergence from the high-fantasy precedent. Benvenuto is a product of a society founded on moral deviancy and corruption; accordingly so, this relationship empowers him to pursue his own life of reckless abandon. It is a world built *for* the anti-hero, as opposed to one that openly fights the inverted values that the anti-hero represents. The anti-hero, then, serves as a catalyst for the distortion of magic within the story, as the magical elements present agree with Benvenuto's flaws and internal fragmentation. This feeds into a twisted interpretation of magic–one that glorifies and legitimizes the occult, rather than uplifting the righteous.

MAGIC, AN AGENT OF DIVISION

Naître est une épreuve. Figurez-vous renaître ! (Jaworski 921)

In the Vieux Royaume, the use of magic incites violence. Nearly all of the magical elements presented have harmful or deceitful intentions, divorcing magic from what is "good." It perpetuates animosity by being an agent of conflict that it used for self-fulfillment and gratification. Jaworski combats the traditional, positive association between the fantasy realm and

magic, as there are no righteous uses of the mystical throughout the novel. Instead, what is shown are gruesome sacrifices and dark magic–sorcerers, who have the freedom to condemn the tormented souls of the dying for personal gain. A glorification of the lust for vengeance that distorts the magic user. Jaworski manipulates the reader's sense of wonder and praises the necromancer; he offers us an image of magic that aligns with the corrupt nature of the anti-hero.

Magic has an explicit connection to the divine within the novel, as well as within the genre as a whole, and this connection is subverted throughout the story. As a result, within the novel we see it placed into three distinct categories, each one having its own unique way of dialoguing with the divine. The three categories are as follows: la Magie Vive, la Magie Haute, and la Magie Basse. Of these three systems, la Magie Vive is the most archaic, while also being the most complete and powerful; la Magie Haute relies primarily on religious rituals and prayers, and la Magie Basse directly exploits the divine to serve immediate needs. These three types of magic will be referred to as the Magic of Light, Higher Magic, and Lower Magic. According to Sassanos, the head-of-state's personal mage, magic and divinity are intertwined: "qu'elle soit Basse, Haute, ou Vive, la magie est toujours de la théurgie. Elle procède toujours de la divinité" (Jaworski 618). Jaworski uses this correlation to mock the righteous, suggesting that a call to the divine is never without ulterior motives. This is further illustrated by Lusinga, the Mastiggia's sorceress, as she serves to demonstrate that even the highest form of magic–the Magic of Light–is ultimately self-serving. She fraudulently accessed the astral plane, known as *l'Entre-Monde*, by way of the Magic of Light and uses it to track Don Benvenuto. This is a manipulation of even the most "pure" form of magic; Lusinga exploits her connection to pursue a personal end state.

The above reference to Theurgy aligns with the overall structure of the magical system present in *Gagner la guerre*. Dr. Radcliff Edmonds, specialist of mythology and Platonic philosophy, describes Theurgy as the following:

> Whereas normative religious action in the Greco-Roman world tends to involve just the human worshipper and the divine god in a sequence of reciprocal responses, Theurgy, as it appears in the ancient evidence, attempts to bring the divine and mortal together, uniting the divine power with the human worshipper. This process of unification involves connecting elements of the cosmos at the entry level of being, from the lowest dregs of inanimate matter through the animal and human living creatures and up to the various kinds of divinities, including the very highest. Ultimately, Theurgy appears as magic, labeled as an 'extraordinary ritual practice,' whether in a positive or negative sense. (321)

The manner in which *Gagner la guerre* depicts theurgy recalls Edmonds's definition of that phenomenon. It enables us to appreciate how Jaworski orients the magical system in his novel. To begin, Edmonds outlines magic as non-normative in regards to traditional religious practices; this is reflective of Lower Magic, as Lower Magic "deviates markedly" from that of the more normative Magic of Light[4]. Across all three tiers of magic, however, the ritual replaces the reciprocity of Greco-Roman religious actions[5]. The purpose of the ritual in *Gagner la guerre* is to expedite the dialogue between the requester and the divine power that's providing intervention; theurgy unites the two entities. The negative metamorphosis associated with the use of magic is a result of the immediacy provided by the theurgic exchange. The great strengths of sorcerers within the Vieux Royaume is their unbridled willingness to submit themselves to a process which slowly chips away at their being.

Sassanos' rituals are what the reader encounters most frequently throughout the story. They demonstrate both the theurgic exchange, as well as Jaworski's representations the schemata of divine intervention. Sassanos practices both *captromancie,* the magic of mirrors, and necromancy, the magic of post-mortem reanimation. Necromancy is what the reader is most often exposed to within the novel–a practice in which Benvenuto is always implicated. During a scuffle with raiders on the road to a distant town, Benvenuto and company realize that the enemy force possesses superior strength; at the first opportunity, Sassanos takes advantage of a dying combatant and uses his body as a ritualistic slate:

> Le moricaud saisit son petit couteau cérémoniel et déchira de haut en bas le justaucorps et la chainse du ruffian… Sassanos se mit à couper. Il hissa un pied du coupe-jarret hors de l'eau, le cala contre son épaule, et entreprit de taillader le gras de la fesse à moitié soulevée. Le client lança un gargarisme étranglé, essaya de se débattre, et je dus m'arc-bouter pour le garder sous contrôle. Le sorcier lâcha la jambe du truand, se mit à entailler sa poitrine. Le sang noyait les plaies, mais Sassanos imprimait à son couteau des gestes complexes et précis, et je compris qu'il inscrivait quelque chose dans la chair. (Jaworski 607).

These symbols that Sassanos engraves into the bodies of his victims enable him to practice Lower Magic, which is underpinned by self-mutilation and sacrifice within the novel. Sacrifices enable Sassanos to steal power from the dead and dying, and he exploits this ability to keep his party members alive. He revitalizes Benvenuto by stealing the life force of his victims, and breathing it into him. The sharing of this stolen breath is described as a feverish exhale charged with corrupted perfumes–a breath from the embalmed (609). Sassanos's powers offer an unparalleled acuity in combat, and serve as a twisted saving grace. Ultimately, what Jaworski is trying to show through the Vieux Royaume's magical system is a bastardization of the divine. This directly destabilizes the readers' expectations, and proves to be a misappropriation of theurgy. Lower Magic is a clear abuse of power, but this abuse is no stranger to the higher forms, as seen in the case of Lusinga. Jaworski's dialogue on magic extends beyond a non-normative classification, exposing that magic itself is a polluted vehicle. Each tier is an agent of change–Higher, Lower, Light–yet all of which divorce the user from salvation. The use of theurgy presents a paradoxical relationship; as the magical user closes the gap between themselves and the divine, they equally misemploy the power on which they are calling.

This distortion explains why the second plane of existence, *l'Entre-Monde,* is pejorative in the eyes of Sassanos. L'Entre-Monde is a non-tangible distraction from the real, a constructed landscape where the physical and ethereal realms intersect. It is suggested that l'Entre-Monde is reserved primarily for users of the Magic of Light, which implies that this *arrière monde* is directly correlated with the divine. Lusinga, by exploiting this relationship, successfully tracked Don

Benvenuto through l'Entre-Monde by way of animal familiars, specifically the Mastiggia's pet dog:

> Je n'en suis pas certain, mais l'un des chien était différent. Son aboiement était perceptible dans l'entre-monde : c'était un psychopompe, il se déplaçait sur deux plans d'existence. De nombreux maîtres ciudaliens savent soumettre des esprits humains, drogués ou morts ; mais convoquer un esprit animal relève de la Magie Vive, et sur le territoire de la République, c'est un art rarissime. C'est pourquoi je pense qu'il s'agit toujours de l'œuvre de la même personne, cette magicienne qui vous recherche depuis votre évasion. (567)

L'Entre-Monde is a non-permanent space; it is an obscured reality only visible to those who can move on both planes of existence. Instead of serving the pure desires of the Magic of Light, l'Entre-Monde facilitates a personal pursuit with lethal intent. The highest form of magic, then, becomes a catalyst of division, fostering an environment of destabilization. This metaphor is illustrated within the political climate of the Vieux Royaume, where each state holds a sorcerer in its governing body–Sassanos in la République, and Psammétique in Ressine. These positions are designed to cultivate conflict. Even though the story presents different classifications of magic, from highest to lowest, all three are doomed to become treacherous.

Moreover, the necromancy of Lower Magic fleeces the divine by keeping Benvenuto alive and allowing him to carry out his massacre of the Mastiggia clan. Don Benvenuto's relationship with death defies justice–because of corrupt magic, he is damned to return even after knocking on death's front door. In the case of Benvenuto's quasi resurrection, magic is an agent of condemnation. Jaworski presents a bleak commentary on the beginnings of life, alluding to the mucus-laden, freshly circumcised screams of childbirth, suggesting that Benvenuto's re-birth is one and the same. "La naissance, c'est une expulsion obscène, pleine de cris, de sang et de mucus…" (Jaworski 920). At the beck and call of the necromancer, Benvenuto lives up to Jaworski's description of birth in the most sinister of ways. Sassanos intervenes to save his life, and to do so he steals the soul of Falci, a rival who Benvenuto had left to die in the Mastiggia

manor. Benvenuto's life force is invaded by the demonic wales of Falci as Sassanos' Lower Magic binds the two dying souls in this deceptive moment of finality:

> Naître est une épreuve. Figurez-vous renaître ! Je peux vous dire que c'est un authentique cauchemar, surtout quand l'accoucheuse est un nécromant qui vous berce dans ses grands bras d'obscurité, qui vous redéploie les poumons en vous roulant des patins hantés, qui souffle dans vos bronches les mânes suppliciés des types que vous venez de saigner... quand il m'eut gavé avec Falci, faisant de moi une marionnette déchirée et pantelante, raccrochée à la vie par un esprit hurlant de démence haineuse et qui ne rêvait que de m'étriper, Sassanos estima que j'avais recouvré assez de forces pour supporter une petite séance de remise en forme (921).

The perverse petition of the necromancer epitomizes the manner in which magic betrays the natural in support of the wicked. Benvenuto's resurrection paints a demonic scene – one where Falci's fleeting soul is condemned to fuel the massacre of his own family. Sassanos's intervention allows Benvenuto to complete his mission, and further rejects divine providence. This sequence of events, beginning with Sassanos bursting through a clouded glass mirror and ending with Benvenuto's revival, is the climax of the previous 600 pages. Benvenuto sees his treachery through to the end and he successfully eludes death, twisted as it may be. This is the "joyful" pivot, in a Tolkienian sense, within *Gagner la guerre* that proves to be the sudden moment of ecstasy[6].

Tolkien argues that a fairy-story is not complete without the presence of Eucatastrophe, or more correctly the good catastrophe, the "sudden joyous turn" (Tolkien, *On Fairy Stories* 75). The Eucatastrophe does not deny sorrow and failure, but rather "it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief" (Tolkien 75). Jaworski, while not explicitly evoking Tolkien's Eucatastrophe, echoes the concept by ensuring Benvenuto's continuance. Sassanos' mirror magic and use of teleportion to save Benvenuto alludes to a perverted sense of Eucatastrophe–a distortion of what is, traditionally, the moment of joy that we associate with a positive outcome. For example, the sharing of the elixir of life in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, or the

fall of Gollum into Mount Doom within *Lord of the Rings*. The dark nature of Benvenuto's resurrection prevents it from receiving a direct Eucatastrophe classification; however, it is nonetheless reminiscent of this Tolkienian concept.

The perversion of the Eucatastrophe is further crystallized by Benvenuto's savior, Sassanos, as he explains his motivations for intervening in the Mastiggia manor. Sassanos references Benvenuto's rape of Clarissima and tells him that he felt "great satisfaction" after learning of the event. This is yet another dismissal of the true Eucatastrophe, as the happy ending cannot be fueled by such dark motivations:

> Aussi, quand vous avez violenté dònna Clarissima dans le jardin – vous imaginez bien que je l'ai su la nuit même – eh bien, j'en ai éprouvé la plus vive satisfaction. L'avilissement de la petite intrigante me consolait de ma propre humiliation. C'est à cet écart un peu leste que vous devez mon indulgence… voilà donc pourquoi je vous ai sauvé, don Benvenuto. (924).

In tainting the motivation of the savior, the Eucatastrophe is made devilish–it is turned on its head and becomes disturbing. If following the traditional structure of high-fantasy, the readers expect a culminating moment of joy after having lived alongside Benvenuto for so many pages; yet, Jaworski does not provide the pleasure of this happy ending. Instead, he presents the stark reality that, for some, especially Clarissima, there will never be a happy ending.

A SHARED DIVERGENCE

On the whole, *Gagner la guerre* reveals Jaworski's intent to diverge from tradition within modern French fantasy; the story is a displacement of the fantasy realm, where wicked forces prevail and magic becomes a tool of desire and fragmentation. Within this re-invented universe, the hero undergoes a change that distorts the virtuous, well-intentioned archetype established within high-fantasy. As a result, magic quickly becomes an agent of discord; instead of symbolizing hope and salvation, it perpetuates conflict. Jaworski's anti-hero taints the righteous

quest, and the novel is an explicit rejection of the Tolkienian precedent within early genre works. *Gagner la guerre* overcomes the Tolkienian influence by deliberately working against it; Jaworski invites the reader to live vicariously through don Benvenuto, and experience the darker side of imagination.

Jaworski's work, however, does not stand alone in its efforts to push back against the standard fantasy formula. The Hexagon's digression from the historic, high-fantasy influence continued to be supported by authors Justine Niogret and Pierre Pevel in both 2010 and 2013, with the publication of *Chien du heaume* (2010) and *Le chevalier* (2013). Niogret, by way of her main female protagonist Chien, fosters a gritty, hyper-violent fantasy that questions the notions of identity within heroism. Niogret, in elevating a female protagonist who fulfills the duties of both man and woman, makes the case for a heroism rooted in gender fluidity. Pevel, in a similar vein to Jaworski, supports heroic deviance by allowing the protagonist to dispute the validity of the quest with which he has been tasked.

The three aforementioned novels support a divergence from tradition within modern French fantasy by way of the hero's agency. While each hero in all three novels is distinct, they each deal with the twisting pre-established archetypes to create character tendencies not previously seen within the genre. Don Benvenuto, Chien, and Lorn Askarian all mirror each other in the sense that they are the vehicle through which the genre's divergence manifests.

AMBIVALENT HEROISM WITHIN PIERRE PEVEL'S *LE CHEVALIER* AND THE CATALYZING NATURE OF L'OBSCURE

Le monde était un cauchemar. Un royaume hanté et hurlant.
Le prisonnier fuyait. (37)

In 2013, Pierre Pevel published *Le chevalier*, the first installment in his on-going series entitled *Haut Royaume.* Much like neighboring works in the genre, *Le chevalier* sets the stage for a medieval tale with dark overtones. The text represents the fantasy realm as haunting, and malicious, which is further illustrated by the protagonist's interactions with magic. *Le chevalier* artfully and symbolically merges the characters to their environments; in Pevel's universe, the hero is heavily influenced by malevolent forces, and what develops as a result is an ambivalent, deviant heroism that distorts the historical precedent.

Ambivalence, as defined by Merriam-Webster, is a "simultaneous and contradictory attitude," or feeling, directed toward "an object, person, or action," and is often synonymous with the RPG alignment of a true neutral character who is not swayed in any given direction (46). *Le chevalier* offers the reader the unique experience of following the journey of a hero who is thoroughly ambivalent toward the pursuit of his destiny–one that he subsequently rejects. Pevel's crafting of the heroic narrative depicts a hero who questions his circumstances, and ultimately pursues his own justice when faced with the righteous quest. Graham Seal describes the transformative qualities of the ambivalent hero, and argues that ambivalence within the heroic narrative is "underpinned by three key tenants: failure, contradiction, and deviance," which all serve to support a hero that is "innately disruptive" of traditionally boundaries (Seal 249). The deviant hero, then, is a derivative of ambivalent discourse according to Seal. The notions of ambivalence and heroic deviancy are directly applicable to Pierre Pevel's *Le chevalier* through the actions of the main hero, Lorn Askarian.

Pevel's distortion of heroics is rooted in the traditional epic-fantasy hero who is at the beck and call of the righteous quest; they question nothing, and accept their fate immediately with no reservations. The author's intent is to derail the reader's expectations through an ostensibly corrupted heroism; in doing so, Pevel echoes the work of Jaworski. During the 2016

Imaginales conference in the city of Epinal, Pevel discusses his juxtaposition of the epic-fantasy hero with his own construction:

> Le gars, [Lorn], il était accusé de haute trahison, jeté dans une prison où il aurait dû mourir après être devenu fou… et on lui a dit oup, on s'est peut-être trompé, vous étiez sans doute innocent, et second ordre, vous seriez gentil de sauver le monde parce que c'est vous qui êtes censé le faire… en principe, dans la fantasy, je pense honnêtement que je jetais la pierre à mes illustres prédécesseurs, mais il y a 25 années le mec il aurait dit 'oui, on y va quoi…' Là, maintenant, il s'est passé des tas de choses et le genre a un peu évolué (Pevel 0:03 – 0:35).

Moments after Pevel's comments at the Imaginales conference, fellow author Jean-Louis Fetjaine added the following: "c'est vrai que le principe du héros, qui accepte d'être un héros, et qui va au baston, c'est un truc complètement absurde" (Fetjaine 0:45 – 0:56). Fetjaine argues that there must be "une raison puissante" that underpins the hero's decision to pursue their destiny; the lack of this motivation de-legitimizes the novel (Fetjaine 1:42). Together, the two authors highlight the shared inclination to diverge from fantasy that idealizes heroes "qui sont juste profession héros" (Fetjaine 2:46). *Le chevalier* asserts that the reflex of a believable hero is to deny the quest, or ask why; this cultivates a better grounded, more relatable hero.

This denial is then perpetuated by *l'Obscure,* an oppressive, wraithlike entity that dwells within zones of exclusion, such as Dalroth or *les terres mortes* (Pevel 31), to create the ambivalent, deviant heroism that serves as the basis for Pevel's constructions. Pevel situates his hero within the pits of the prison Dalroth, where Lorn is consumed this wicked force. *L'Obscure* manifests itself in the form of a thick, brumous apparition–a specter, tinted in red, infecting those who remain too long within its shadow. Pevel evokes this imagery during Lorn's evasion:

> Lorn rencontra l'Obscure la troisième nuit. Il s'en étonna d'abord, mais c'était bien une brume d'Obscure qui s'était levée et s'étendait sur la lande. Prudent, il gagna un surplomb rocheux et se dressa sur ses étriers pour observer. La brume formait une mer vaporeuse et rouge devant lui. Elle semblait s'élever des entrailles du monde et se répandait, progressait de part et d'autre vers la vielle route pavée qu'il empruntait. (Pevel 159)

Les terres mortes is an aptly named region due to the persistent presence of *l'Obscure*–it latches on to specific locations, and specific people, in order to perpetuate wickedness. It expands the area within its control slowly, but surely, as "une mer vapoureuse et rouge" (159). It is a parasitic entity that consumes its environment, as well as its host. After spending three years in the depths of Dalroth, Lorn falls victim to the influence of *l'Obscure* and is unable to fully heal. This thief of joy–of life –manifests in a variety of ways, dependent on its form. From the perspective of Lorn, an infected host, *l'Obscure* reveals itself by way of destructive fits of rage, deprivation of sleep, and a general mistrust of others. This mistrust evolves into an inability to maintain relationships, which isolates Lorn even further. All in all, *l'Obscure* degrades Lorn's identity by corrupting his sense of self. Paradoxically, however, *l'Obscure* is also a twisted force of empowerment for those who know how to properly shoulder the burden. While this sickness can neither be remedied, nor resisted, it has the potential to become a crooked gift–one that grants access to otherworldly power, at the price of the self. If the host accepts the authority of *l'Obscure*, they may continue to live while also benefiting from the wicked force that it provides. This function of *l'Obscure* is similar to that of Balzac's *La peau de chagrin* (1831), insofar as both novels deal with the irreparable entanglement of the host and the parasite–one cannot survive without the other. This parallel does not suggest that Balzac influenced Pevel's writing, as the author has not spoken on the subject; rather, it is intended to situate the function of *l'Obscure* in a larger literary sense, while also highlighting its key tenants.

L'Obscure consumes and corrupts Lorn's vitality in the same, parasitic way as *La peau de chagrin.* The 2013 novel *Le chevalier* the historically righteous intervention of magic and uses it as a means of transforming the hero's power dynamic. As such, the vengeful quest is able to control the hero, and ultimately ends up consuming him. Lorn is fueled by the desire to condemn those who wrongfully imprisoned him for high treason. Although it is later revealed that Lorn

did, in fact, share state secrets regarding defense, he firmly believes that he has been wronged. *L'Obscure* exploits Lorn's vengeful pursuits, and uses these desires as a point of persuasion to further drive his decision making; it capitalizes on Lorn's heroic ambivalence by becoming the driving force behind his mission. He makes use of the quest that he has been given–his "destiny" to save the kingdom–in order to pursue his own perceptions of injustice. Lorn is not classically motivated; rather, he takes advantage of his status as the "chosen one" to satisfy his own desires and fulfill his personal quest. The false empowerment of Jaworski's anti-hero is reflected in Pevel's creation, as Lorn is continually supported by the corruption of *l'Obscure*; the hero, then, is driven by self-preservation and self-gratification, which contradicts the traditional definition presented within the high-fantasy precedent. Pevel, during a panel interview at Les Imaginales, describes this change as the following: "Le héros détourne les pouvoirs qu'on lui donne, courant les responsabilités qu'on lui confie, dans une ambition qui est personelle, voilà" (Pevel 4:03 – 4:15). Ultimately, what Lorn rejects is the unpersuaded fulfillment of his destiny, which is to save the kingdom from invaders. Pevel's hero uses his destiny as a means of achieving a personal end-state, which in this case, is the eradication of those who condemned him to the Dalroth prison. In more than one case, Lorn overtly refuses his call to adventure: "Je me fous du Destin, en général et du mien en particulier. Trouvez quelqu'un d'autre pour l'accomplir, Émissaire" (Pevel 169). He shrugs off rules and tradition in pursuit of his own freedom, and *l'Obscure* projects the hero into a position of authority and catalyzes his divergence from standard, high fantasy tropes.

The presence and function of *l'Obscure* supports the notion of heroic ambivalence by using the hero as a vehicle through which the wicked may manifest. In refusing his destiny, Lorn enables *l'Obscure*. The encrusted *sceau* on the palm of the hero, indicating that *l'Obscure* has taken permanent residence within him, serves as a tangible means of symbolizing his departure from the standard hero archetype. Pevel's rejects the prophetic tendencies of heroism in high

fantasy and replaces them with a bias toward self-fulfillment. Lorn's ambivalent nature toward the pursuit of his destiny allows for *l'Obscure* to capitalize on this vulnerability–it empowers him to claim vengeance for his wrongful imprisonment. In a similar fashion to Jaworski's approach on magic, Pevel twists the novel's marvel and skews the hero's vital force. *L'Obscure* may exert its influence upon Lorn at any given moment and use the hero as a vessel for the sinister. *Le chevalier* presents a unique take on fantasy in the sense that it plays with the standard notion of heroism. As a result, Pevel's imaginative universe is not synonymous with that of his early predecessors within the genre. He crafts an ambivalent hero who shows little interest in his alleged destiny, and who subsequently rejects it. The hero figure, fueled by *l'Obscure,* questions the legitimacy of the epic quest and chooses to fulfill a personal end state.

Chien du heaume

In 2010, Justine Niogret was quick to receive critical recognition with the publication of her novel *Chien du heaume*. This first installment in Niogret's on-going series was awarded the Prix Imaginales, as well as the Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire in 2010 and immediately captured the attention of the community. *Chien du heaume* gives the reader a front row seat to a bleak, late 15th century ambiance that hones in on the life of the mercenary; Niogret's universe is one riddled with strife, and one where the sword reigns supreme. Within this fantasy realm, a usefully discriminate violence abounds that both defines the heroine, and serves to distort the traditional heroic archetype within the genre[6]. *Chien du heaume* deliberately confronts the genre's tropes by combatting deterministic tendencies within the identity of the heroine, and making destiny a product of volition. This is a shared tendency between Niogret and Pevel, as Lorn's destiny was equally subject to his own volition; examined together, these novels support the present study's

assertion that there has been a change within the genre, especially given the proximity of their publication dates.

Chien du heaume follows the adventures of a female mercenary named Chien, as she attempts to lift the veil that shrouds her past. Her true name is unknown to her, and this mystery leads her to travel far and wide in an attempt to piece together her origins. "Chien" is merely a label applied to her by others, as she is known for her animalistic ferocity on the battlefield; she wields a mighty axe, and lays waste to those that stand in her path. Her life as a mercenary leads her to meet her mentor, Le Chevalier Sanglier, who is impressed by her warrior talents; he offers to help uncover her true name, and invites her to stay at his reclusive keep for the winter. Over time, this relationship flourishes, and Chien spends several seasons within walls of the Boar Knight's manor. There is one critical issue, however, and that is the knight's underaged wife Noalle. Although Chien initially met Noalle when she was quite young, as the seasons pass, hostilities develop between the two characters; this friction is not due to romantic qualms over the Boar Knight, but rather a difference in how the two carry themselves. Noalle asserts her status as the knight's wife with authority, and allows her guards to indiscriminately kill those who oppose her. She uses her femininity as a weapon, and punishes those who reject her sexual advances. This is one of the principal confrontations within the novel, and the interaction between the two characters will be examined below. It is a collision of fixed versus fluid identity, with Noalle being fixed and Chien being fluid.

Introspective identity and gender within Justine Niogret's *Chien du heaume*

Moi, je ne sais que la voix du fer, de la tempête et des cris des hommes (50).

One of the most distinguishing qualities of *Chien du heaume* is Niogret's focus on empowering the female protagonist; she is able to function autonomously despite the peril of the surrounding

world. She thrives amidst the calamity that is 15th century feudalism, and fills a classically male role as the mercenary; all the while, pursuing her quest to uncover her true name. This quest is personal in nature–it is not divinely appointed, or willed into being by the fantasy realm, but rather an independent endeavor. Niogret's heroism is underpinned by the perceived necessity of one's namesake, as many of the key players fulfill the roles that their name suggests. Le Chevalier Sanglier, for example, is true to his namesake by living as a vicious warrior who protects his keep; La Salamandre is poisonous, and leaves death in his wake. This sort of literary onomastics, or normative determinism, has been seen previously within the genre–most notably in the works of Le Guin or Rothfuss, but Niogret combats this preconception by way of Chien. She confronts the mysticism associated with naming by suggesting that one's namesake can be forged by their own volition; this opposes the high-fantasy precedent, which argues that one's destiny must agree with their name. Moreover, Chien establishes agency despite the absence of a true name; she constructs her identity according to her own set of values, and opposes the traditionally deterministic qualities of naming within the fantasy genre.

There is a correlation between Niogret's resistance to high-fantasy naming, and what she is attempting to do within the gendered space she constructs. Niogret is suggesting that one's destiny can be inscribed, just as one's gender can, which is reminiscent of Judith Butler's theorizations on the link between the power of naming and gender. Butler outlines this approach in her 1988 article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," arguing that gender is an "act" that "constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority" (528). It is performative, and cannot be reflected solely within the label man or woman (528). This is to say that gender is achieved through the repetition of gendered acts. Within the novel, Chien displays repetitious qualities of the masculine by way of her physical superiority, warrior instincts, and quest for wisdom. Equally, Chien demonstrates the

feminine by providing consensus in times of decision, and expressing sensitivity for those close to her. By repeating acts of both the masculine and the feminine, Chien agrees with Butler's theorizations by constructing a fluid sense of gender; she exists in a state of intermediacy by not favoring one side significantly heavier than the other. *Chien du heaume* asserts that a hero's agency is equally legitimate when the identity of the hero is fluid, which is also supported by the notions of fluidity presented by the 20th century constructionist feminism movement. Anne Marie Smith, in a critical review of Diana Fuss' book entitled *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference*, describes constructionist discourse as an insistence of the "plurality of women's experiences," which emphasizes that there are femininities, and not just one single "essence" that defines all women (111). According to Fuss, masculinity and femininity are the "effects of complicated discursive practices" (Fuss 2). Culture and society both inform and construct gender, and the name "Chien" illustrates how this manifests. She is given this name as a result of her ferocity on the battlefield; she is willing to fight alongside men like a "dog," and her namesake is synonymous with her societal classification. This classification of "dog" informs her affinity for the traits of the masculine warrior. This is balanced out, however, by Chien's long conversations with the forge master's wife, Bréhyr–despite being a warrior herself, Bréhyr encourages Chien to dialogue with those she meets on her journey. Chien's relationship with Bréhyr greatly informs her feminine traits, as their conversations foster diplomatic relationships and consensus. Due to this merging between the masculine and the feminine, Niogret's heroine does not fit the confines of the traditional high-fantasy hero archetype; Chien supports the intra-genre shifting of modern French fantasy through an evolved heroism that presents a female hero with fluid gender identity.

Chien distorts the archetype of the nurturing female presence within the first few pages of the novel. The prologue introduces Chien as prey being hunted by an experienced mercenary. During this sequence, she is described as a simple "domestique" of no value, and is seen by the

poaching mercenary as a wet-nurse to a young child: “Manfred les regardait toutes deux; la nourrice, grasse, des cheveaux bruns lui tombant devant les yeux, et la gamine, lisse comme une châtaigne, sa robe tachée du pollen des fleurs et les joues rougies par ses galipettes” (Niogret 6). The mercenary, Manfred, sets the stage for Chien’s inconspicuous execution–yet, unbeknownst to him, Chien is a hardened warrior with an innate sense of self-preservation. Upon firing his lone arrow toward the seemingly oblivious wet-nurse, Manfred is met with the stark nature of Niogret’s hero: “La femme, dans le pré, entendit le tir. En un instant, elle leva la tête, saisit l’enfant par la chemise et la jeta devant son visage comme un bouclier” (Niogret 8). In an act of ruthless self-preservation, Chien’s warrior instincts overcome that “domestique.” The child, then, is reduced to a shield to protect Chien as Manfred’s arrow pierces their body with the ease of a hot knife gliding through butter. Niogret spares no details to the reader as she describes the events that ensue:

> La femme voulut jeter l’enfant au sol, mais trébucha ; la flèche s’était logée dans son avant-bras. Elle fit glisser la gamine jusqu’à l’empennage, et força le corps sur les plumes jusqu’à ce qu’il tombe. Puis elle saisit la flèche à plein mains, cherchant l’archer des yeux, et arracha la pointe sanglante de sa chair. (9)

This passage shows Niogret’s desire to defy the patriarchal standards of feudal society by empowering Chien, the seemingly oblivious wet-nurse. It illustrates that she cannot simply be disposed of, as dictated by feudal hierarchy. Manfred chose to hunt what would, presumably, be quite an easy target–instead, he found that savagery is not solely reserved for men. Upon capturing the offending mercenary, Chien uses the very arrow that was destined for her nape to put the archer down–all described in graphic detail:

> Le fer fendit en deux la langue de l’archer, creva son palais et les os de son crâne. La dernière chose qu’entendit Manfred avant que la femme commence à remuer la pointe de flèche à l’intérieur de sa tête pour changer sa fierté et son art en bouillie grise, ce fut : Je suis Chien du heaume, fils à putain, et de l’autre côté tu sauras qu’il faut un dard plus puissant que le tien pour me percer le cuir. (9)

Chien establishes her dominance from the opening sequences of the novel; she successfully ousts a professional male mercenary, and does so with vehemence. This level of violence within the genre is unusual, and even surpasses what is present within the work of Jaworski and Pevel. It is a grim confrontation between a hegemonic masculine society, and a heroine who is willing to fight. Gender fluidity and class intersect a second time; as designated by "fils à putain." Although a women, Chien defines her origin in masculine terms as he name also denotes.

Like in *l'Oiseau Bleu,* Niogret brings the identity of the heroine to the forefront of her fantasy realm. She is the protagonist and victor of the story. As seen, Chien is, first and foremost, a formidable warrior that can easily oust her male counterparts. Her function, then, as an empowered heroine is critical to the overall function of the novel. Niogret's divergence from traditional fantasy manifests through her opposition to the standard hero archetype. Chien represents an ambiguity in the sense that she fills both roles–masculine and feminine, forceful warrior and wet-nurse. She makes an effort to save the child from starvation, but is ultimately driven to protect herself from those who threaten her existence. There is an inherent sense of fluidity within the identity of Niogret's heroine, derived from the merging of masculine and feminine traits within the heroine. Butler likens this social adjustment to the reading of a script: "Just as a script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives" (Butler 526). Niogret constructs the confines of the stage on which Chien will act out her part for survival; she must be forceful to hold her own in a violent world, yet diplomatic to discover the truth of her name. The novel delineates in time and place a "restricted corporeal space" for Chien to grow and take on both traditionally defined masculine and feminine traits and roles. The hyper violent world in which she is raised allows Chien to "enact interpretations," to perform what she understands are

requisite masculine traits to survive in society. When one "interprets" or understands the range of behaviors for them to embody within a precise cultural context, their gendered performance, according to Butler, is simply a practice or performance of "social policy" expressed and mediated through the body (528). This concept is directly applicable to how Chien came to enact a fluid gender. Her sense of heroism was performed on account of her threatening environment. She modeled her behavior after the way in which mercenaries "acted out" their masculinity.

At this time, the present study will now move away from individualistic, heroic fantasy present within the work of Jaworski, Pevel, and Niogret to focus on the de-heroized nature of Claire Duvivier's *Un long voyage*. Duvivier, in de-heroizing the fantasy realm, broadens the scope of the genre and puts an emphasis on collective destiny, rather than individual destiny. *Un long voyage* highlights the marvel in the mundane, and presents a poetic take on fantasy.

WISTFUL WONDERS – A CASE FOR HUMANIST FANTASY WITHIN CLAIRE DUVIVIER'S *UN LONG VOYAGE*

« Mon petit Liesse… me répondit-elle, personne ici n'est maître de son destin » (40).

Having spent the majority of her career as a copy-editor, Claire Duvivier is no stranger to the literary scene in France.[8] Her first novel, entitled *Un long voyage,* epitomizes the fantasy genre's continued evolution; Duvivier's work plays with the readers' expectations, and deviates markedly from the Tolkienian norm. In fact, Duvivier is almost entirely removed from Tolkien's influence. During a personal interview for this study, she clearly states that *The Lord of the Rings* was not a primary source of inspiration:

> Concernant Tolkien, je pense que malheureusement je l'ai lu trop tard (j'avais 17 ans). J'ai apprécié *Le Seigneur des anneaux,* mais ce n'est pas une pierre fondatrice de mon imaginaire. Je n'ai rien lu d'autre de lui. Je trouve dommage que chaque œuvre de fantasy soit mesurée à l'aune des livres de Tolkien, comme si rien d'autre n'avait été écrit depuis les années 1950. Cela n'arrive pas dans les autres genres, par exemple on ne renvoie pas

> chaque auteur contemporain de romans policiers à Raymond Chandler et Agatha Christie. (Ou à Simenon, pour citer un exemple francophone.) Les classiques sont importants, bien sûr, mais il faut aussi savoir s'en détacher pour créer quelque chose de nouveau. (Duvivier)

While authors such as Jean-Philippe Jaworski described difficulty in grappling with their "traumatisme Tolkienien," Duviver wished to write independently of Tolkien, which is reflected throughout *Un long voyage*; Duvivier builds a fantasy realm in which high-fantasy elements are thoroughly absent. Her new approach proved favorable for critical and casual readers alike–in less than 18 months after its initial publication, *Un long voyage* was distinguished by the 2020 Prix Hors Concours, the Prix Libr'à Nous (catégorie imaginaire), and the Prix Elbakin for the best francophone fantasy novel in 2020. Her novel was also a finalist in the Littéraire Frontières Leonora Miano contest, as well as Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire 2021 and the Prix des Imaginales 2021. This collection of accolades illustrates the novel's importance and efficacy as a fantasy genre that diverges from its historical precedent.

Duvivier underscores a critical point of contention with traditional fantasy, insofar as that it often loses sight of the human condition. Duvivier argues that the human capacity to persevere and endure offers a marvel in and of itself; it is within this interpretation of the fantasy realm that *Un long voyage* sets itself apart. The novel offers a narrative that is deeply rooted in the complexities of human virtue, demanding introspection. It lingers in the reader's mind long after the last page has been turned. *Un long voyage* is a story of melancholic hope that rejects the finality of the human condition; despite the end of empires, and despite the cataclysm, a certain inalienable continuity to life and collective destiny exists. Duvivier's optimism stems from her take on atrocity as a whole; violence, for example, is reduced to a single event in *Un long voyage.* It is not the primary focus of the novel; rather, Duvivier explores what happened before, what happened after, and questions the cyclic, self-perpetuating nature of conflict. Duvivier's humanist

fantasy is sustained by two key factors: a re-imagined plot which denies the high-fantasy quest, and the minimal involvement of magical elements which rejects the authority of individual destiny to favor that of the collective. The author enacts techniques that are wholly different from those previously studied; it is a de-heroized, poetic fantasy realm that adds a new dimension to our exploration of modern French fantasy from 2010–2020.

Narrative synopsis

Un long voyage is the first-hand account of the orphan Liesse, his trials, and his life amidst repeated tragedy. Born on a remote archipelago, Liesse has an impoverished upbringing with his mother and is kept close-to-home. Financial hardship leads Liesse's mother to surrrender him to imperial protection, where he lives as an indentured servant for a short time. Under imperial control, he is surrounded by all things strange and unfamiliar, and his humble upbringings is slowly replaced by imperial norms. At the age of 14, Liesse meets Malvine Zélina de Félarasie, an aristocrat who is slated to become the new governing official for the adjacent city of Solmeri. Malvine is well-educated, well-spoken, and highly respected–a seemingly polar opposite for the young Liesse. Nonetheless, Malvine appoints Liesse as her personal secretary and the two form an inseparable bond as time passes.

Liesse excels as Malvine's scribe and begins to climb the social ladder. When the time comes for Malvine to report to Solmeri, she decides to send Liesse ahead of her arrival. Liesse awaits Malvine in Solmeri, accompanied by her entourage and fellow governing officials. After arriving safely in the new city, Liesse and company begin to ready Malvine's workplace. They make all the necessary preparations, and notice that weeks are beginning to pass–Malvine has not arrived, and there's no word from her or the capital on her whereabouts. The entourage begins to worry, and slowly builds a contingency plan in the event that she never arrives to claim her post.

Unbeknownst to Liesse and company, Malvine stops in the village of Haute-Quaima on the way to Solmeri, and this is where her disappearance occurs. As the counsel begins the process of appointing a new official, Malvine suddenly appears in front of the city gates. She is dazed, and only able to speak her name. The counsel brings her into the city, and a general confusion reigns for some time. Malvine's incoherence is troubling, and she appears to have aged. As time passes, however, order is once again re-established and Malvine becomes more like her old self. What does not change is Malvine's moments of disconnection – she goes into a trance-like state, as if divorced from reality. Only physical touch can snap Malvine out of her trance and put her back into a state of equilibrium with respect to time.

A sense of normalcy falls over Solmeri. Liesse marries his love interest, Danica, and has children. All seems to be progressing as planned–the new government is set into place, Malvine is more or less her old self, and the people of Solmeri are content. This, however, is short lived. A band of ashen soldiers appear outside the gates of Solmeri, and the Solmeritains are presented with a sudden threat. The Nemis army, named "the statues," begin to form a camp near the city. Their language is incomprehensible, but their intent to lay siege to the city is clear. Malvine, in an act of diplomacy, visits the Nemis camp and attempts to open a dialogue. Although it is unclear from the outside looking in, Malvine and the Nemis army share a connection with respect to her disappearance and to her time in Haute-Quaima. The governor gathers that the army intends to march through the city, and convinces Solmeri's counsel to allow it to happen. This insight into the intentions of the Nemis army stems from her stay in the village of Haute-Quaima; once there, Malvine is subject to a weapon named le Beffroi (the Belfry) which transports her to a world in-between the real and the ethereal called Basse-Quaima. Basse-Quaima is a temporal prison–a space removed from present time, where potential invaders are sent to live out their lives in

eternal dissonance. It is within this prison that Malvine discovers the Nemis army and leaves the clues for them to activate the Belfry and escape.

On Malvine's suggestion, the Solmeritains allow the Nemis army to march through the city gates, and tragedy ensues. The Statues massacre the Solmeritains, invade their homes, and exile them from the city. In the chaos, Liesse loses his wife, and Malvine is executed shortly thereafter. Despite the city's massive loss, time goes on, and Liesse's two children survive to pick up the pieces of their shattered life. It is revealed that the character Gémétous, to whom the entire story is addressed, is a Nemis soldier–the same Nemis soldier that took up residence in Liesse's old home after the march. Liesse and Gémétous grow fond of each other, and the scars of the past diminish as both the Nemis and Solmeritains adapt to the new world in which they find themselves. The end of *Un long voyage* demonstrates Duvivier's focus on collective destiny; unity develops between two warring tribes, and is therefore privileged over Liesse's grief–the grief of the individual. This is an unusual perspective within the genre, as fantasy tends restrict its scope and hyper-fixate on the individual.

Narrative framework

Un long voyage constructs a narrative that is conducive of its high-fantasy opposition by way of a plot reversal. (Wis 1:06–1:16). Although plot reversals are commonplace within literature on the whole, Duvivier presents it in an innovative way–she offers an extended *dénouement*, and uses the plot reversal to further de-heroize her characters. As far as genre works are concerned, what Duvivier presents is atypical. The plot reversal equally distances the novel from the predictability of high-fantasy–the hero, and the group bound together by an epic quest–are all non-factors in Duvivier's universe. Instead, her fantasy focuses on the voyeurism of the everyday person, and how they are powerless when faced with the unraveling of an empire. Duvivier de-heroizes the

protagonist in an effort to broaden her focus, and elevate the collective. In an interview with Radio Sensations, Duvivier spoke on the subject of her character choice:

> Surtout, je voulais écrire une fantasy qui soit autour d'hommes et de femmes. Donc, pas forcément me concentrer sur les dirigeants – même si Malvine est la gouverneuse de la Province – et pas focaliser sur les guerriers, les dirigeants, ou l'empereur, ou des choses comme ça, mais plutôt sur les gens qui font le quotidien… des types de personnages qui sont pas forcément représenté d'habitude dans la fantasy. (Wis 4:57–5:18)

By way of Malvine and Liesse, Duvivier illustrates her focus on "les gens qui font le quotidian;" they are everyday people, yet they are living extraordinary circumstances. Neither Malvine nor Liesse have heroic qualities, as Duvivier makes them out to be nothing more than human. Duvivier de-heroizes Malvine and Liesse and makes them vulnerable, akin to the everyday person. The two are "conçu comme deux faces de la même pièce," and it is within this relationship that Duvivier highlights their virtues: patience, trust, and reciprocity (Wis 3:36–3:38). The *retournement de l'intrigue* is not solely chronological – it has to do with reversing our expectations, and laying the framework for a humanist fantasy. A humanist fantasy that focuses on the perceived meekness of the human condition.

NARRATIVE FRAMEWORK – OVERALL STRUCTURE

Duvivier's affinity for a character-driven plot is matched only by her desire to re-imagine the narrative structure as a whole. Her intent is for the novel to read as two distinct moments in time, and to accomplish this task, she uses the climax as a new point of departure rather than a means of resolution. The march of the Nemis's army, while violent and central to the story, is not intended to be our main focus. Instead, this moment of cataclysm allows for the reader to discover what Duvivier has articulated as her true intentions: "Ce qui m'a intéressée surtout, c'est de raconter ce qui s'est passé avant, ce qui s'est passé après, et surtout comment les personnages

continuaient à vivre, continuaient à travailler, continuaient à avoir des enfants, continuer à aimer, malgré tout, après tout ça" (Wis 6 :33–6 :45).

The siege of Solmeri is the result of the Nemis army's escape from the Belfry, pursuant to Malvine's intervention–it is a moment of collision between the past and the present. A tragic re-birth mixed with the desire to reclaim a previous moment in time. The siege of Solmeri is unique within the overall narrative framework of the novel in the sense that it is a stand-alone event – there's no retaliation arc, and there are no groups that set out on an epic quest for vengeance. It is analogous to the function of the Belfry–an eruptive event that happens once, before disappearing into the ether. This critical moment within the novel will be analyzed in its role as a re-imagined climax, as well as its similitude to the Badouain notion of *the event.*

As far as its function as a climax, the siege of Solmeri is atypical. It is less of a standard climax, and more a deliberately placed narrative partition–it splits the story down the middle and encapsulates the Nemis march in a singular moment in time. As such, Duvivier creates two distinct areas of inquiry–before, and after, the eruption of violence and the fall of an empire. The story revolves around this one, explosive moment that ends up shaping the future of both parties. In compartmentalizing the events before and after the siege, Duvivier's narrative partition draws the reader's attention away from the massacre; instead of focusing solely on the violence, the reader is absorbed by the author elevates the story's ancillary details. Duvivier fixates on how the Nemis and Solmeri peoples continue to intermingle, to grow, and to live, despite the tragedy of the Nemis march; Duvivier's unique narrative structuring is the catalyst to this discovery.

The march of the Nemis army, and the uncontestable change therein, also serves a greater purpose than solely re-imagining the climax. This sequence may be likened to French philosopher Alain Badiou's concept of the event, given that it presents an abrupt moment of change–it disturbs the natural order, and this disturbance influences the extended *dénouement* that

the novel presents. “Un événement est toujours localisable,” Badiou states in his 1988 book *L’être et l’événement* (3510). “Nous poserons une fois pour toutes qu’il n’y a pas d’événement naturel, ni non plus d’événement neutre” (3510). One can interpret Badiou’s event as a provocation of meaning; it is not a random occurrence, but one that exists to create a certain “vérité,” as he calls it. “L’existence d’une vérité est suspendue à l’occurrence d’un événement” (712). This is pertinent to an analysis of *Un long voyage* due to the novel’s unique narrative structuring, especially as a genre work. Duvivier’s intent, as outlined during her interview with Radio Sensations, is to create a schism that elevates the everyday person–to focus on how they continued to live, work, and raise children in the wake of tragedy (Wis 6 :33–6 :45). One can interpret the “vérité” revealed by the Nemis march as a question of collective destiny–one that is catalyzed by Duvivier’s de-heroized characters. This is illustrated by Malvine’s intervention within the Belfry, and this interaction further supports the Badiouian event. Philosopher Daniel Bensaïd, commenting on Badiou’s theory, states that the event is equally characterized by its un-predictability: “l’événement se caractérise donc par l’irréductible imprédictibilité de ce qui aurait pu aussi bien ne point advenir” (3). Malvine’s disturbance of the Belfry’s natural order was subject to chance; it may or may not have come to pass. In a personal interview for this study, Duvivier describes Malvine’s intervention as happenstance–if she had not fallen victim to the Belfry herself, the Nemis army would have been forever stuck in their temporal prison, condemned to disappear. Malvine’s involvement, and the subsequent Nemis march, is the abrupt disturbance that sets the Nemis’s destiny into motion.

What’s more, the Belfry entangles itself with Duvivier’s humanist fantasy realm by exerting its influence beyond the Nemis escape–it is later revealed that, although the Nemis have taken control of Solmeri, they are not able to bear children. In actioning the Belfry, they become subject to the same temporal delay as Malvine. Without physical touch, the Nemis go into a state

of *décalage.* Even after their escape, they are still doomed to disappear. Nonetheless, Duvivier combats this finality by presenting a symbolic unity between the two warring tribes. The Nemis will endure, albeit for a limited time, through the people of Solmeri; Liesse and Gémétous' relationship is indicative of this mutual dependence. The Belfry, being the only lingering element of fantasy that Duvivier presents, embodies a finality–yet, paradoxically, the collective still endures. In rejecting the finality presented by the Belfry, Duvivier promotes a fantasy realm based on cooperation and mutual dependence–one that ensures the trajectory of the collective. The irreparable convergence of the Nemis and Solmeri people in *Un long voyage* invokes the Badiouian event, and resists the finality associated with the end of empires; Badiou's event presents one way of interpreting the introspective qualities of *Un long voyage*. Duvivier argues that the human condition has the capacity to endure and continue, which is illustrated through Liesse and Gémétous. This is a deviation from traditional fantasy, and is characterized by her the use of a character-driven plot that reverses our expectations. The result is a fantasy novel that revives the marvelous through the collective, by way of ordinary people.

Beyond the philosophical framework with which the author has analyzed Duvivier's work, *Un long voyage* makes an emotional appeal to the reader that further supports Duvivier's humanist perspective. The novel activates a nostalgic response that grounds the characters in the real through the life and trials of Liesse. It creates a relationship between time, memory, and the collective, and affirms a persistence therein. The sensation that dominates is one of melancholic continuity; although Liesse had lost his wife to the Nemis, his children would have gone hungry without them. If he had not returned to his home, his relationship with Gémétous would have never bloomed. Yet, amidst the melancholy, there lies a hopeful sense of continuity. Malvine, through her intervention in the Belfry, enables the Nemis' future–an *à venir*–which is later solidified by Liesse, as he grazes the arm of Gémétous: "…tu avais besoin de quelqu'un qui

t'effleure de temps à autre pour t'ancrer à notre temporalité, et j'aime toujours autant t'effleurer" (311). The idea of sameness activates the poetics of nostalgia within the novel, and it is under the umbrella of memory that Duvivier establishes the persistence of the collective.

Un long voyage blends hope with melancholy in an attempt to illustrate the continuity of entire peoples. Certainly, Gémétous is not immune to the fate of the Nemis people; this is to say that, eventually, Liesse will have to deal with a trifecta of loss–first Danica, then Malvine, and Gémétous to inevitably follow suit. It is a unique take on the genre insofar as that it does not present a happy ending, but rather a wistful acceptance of what is to come, a hopeful sense of continuity. This evokes a specific emotional response that resists naming–a feeling akin to leaving a childhood home–to living moments that will not be forgotten. John Koenig's creative work *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrow* (2021) illuminates Duvivier's efficacy in writing deeply human narratives, and allows for a clearer description of what this study has labeled as "humanist" fantasy. He attempts to classify unspoken emotions, and in doing so, increases the available lexicon for literary analysis. He defines universal emotions through words that do not yet exist. "Lachesism," for example, is defined by Koenig as the desire to be struck by disaster in the hopes of shaking up one's life; "kenopsia," another example, is the gloom that follows the abandonment of a once bustling scene (Koenig 12). Koenig's work is a poetic collection of emotions unexpressed–an attempt to put into words these feelings that one is intrinsically familiar with, but cannot articulate. His study, while inherently fictitious, is rooted in epistemology; as such, it carries a certain inter-disciplinary weight. On the same token, an examination of Koenig sheds light on Duvivier's use of emotionally-charged fantasy.

Mitchell M. Handelsman recently wrote of Koenig's work in a January, 2020 Psychology Today article. Handelsman chose to hone in on one word in particular from Koenig's lexicon–"sonder"–which describes the melancholic realization that humans have shared complexities.

Although not directly stated by the author, one might interpret "sonder" to have roots in the French verb "sonder," meaning "to plumb," or the German adjective "besondere," meaning special. Koenig describes "sonder" as a word charged with introspective sentiment–he uses it as a means of questioning what would otherwise go unnoticed. Koenig's definition of sonder explains that the everyday passerby carries on a life that is as rich, vivid, and complex as one's own; uniqueness is not proprietary, but instead it is commonplace (Koenig 24). He asserts that people's lives are "populated with their own ambitions, friends, routines, worries and inherited craziness–an epic story," and that life is vast beyond one's small sphere of influence (Koenig qtd in Handelsman). For Handelsman, Koenig argues that our knowledge of others is often finite, and even fleeting. To this end, social interaction contains a depth that we can only understand to a certain extent–this makes for an ostensibly sad definition (1). Nonetheless, sonder presents its beauty through the quest of knowing–a quest that Duvivier exemplifies throughout *Un long voyage.* The Nemis people epitomize the feeling of sonder, as they maintain their complexities despite being removed from their own time and location. They evoke an emotional longing within the reader that contrasts with the vengeful sentiments precipitated by their march on Solmeri–it is this very confrontation that Duvivier seeks to exemplify.

Duvivier's approach to fantasy is unlike her predecessors due to her emphasis on the human–the collective takes the place of magic as the novel's absolute. Koenig's definition of sonder contextualizes this new approach; it is a longing for unity, paired with a respect for autonomy. Malvine's motivation to allow the march of the Nemis people on Solmeri is driven by her respect for their complexity. Despite being generations removed from one another, Malvine exhibited a form of sonder; without her intervention, the Nemis people would not have escaped the Belfry, resulting in perpetual isolation and the removal of their collective destiny.

Un long voyage and its place within the scheme of this study

Un long voyage broadens the scope of this study by de-heroizing the protagonist, and raising the question of collective destiny which manifests by way of Liesse, Malvine, and Gémétous. Liesse and Malvine, specifically, are emblems of collective concerns and collective destiny. There is an analogy between their destinies, and those of the collective–it seems that despite the loss of the individual, the "people" as a whole continue. There is a certain reciprocity that exists between the individual and the collective, where the de-heroized individual reveals what the collective cannot on its own. Within Duvivier's fantasy realm, change is enacted on a larger scale, and the destiny of an entire people is considered in lieu of the destiny of one. The principal players are reduced to everyday citizens and stripped of the grandeur of the fantasy realm. It is an imaginative universe that more closely resembles our own. In diverging from the work of her predecessors within the genre, Duvivier reveals a marvel within the mundane–one that is emotionally resonant, and deeply rooted in the human condition. In an interview with web magazine *20 Minutes*, author Marceline Bodier spoke of Duvivier's fantasy in a similar fashion: "Son surnaturel ressemble à celui qui est dans la tête de chacun, d'une manière informe, désordonnée, semi-invisible à nos propres yeux, et qu'elle a rendu cohérent et visible, incarné dans un monde qu'elle a bâti. Son monde ressemble au nôtre, à ceci près qu'il abolit les frontières entre ce qui est réputé réel et ce qui est réputé imaginaire" (Bodier).

In sum, Duvivier's divergence is underpinned by a re-imagined narrative structure which limits the use of magic and argues for a collective destiny. The story is not defined by the singular violent event, but is instead concerned about what happened before, and what happened after–*Un long voyage* evokes a sense of unity, and outlines how characters continued to live, continued to love, and continued to grow together despite an undisputable tragedy. The novel plays with traditional fantasy coding by evading a plot in which the aggressor is pursued; it

resists the finality of cataclysmic, and makes a case for an irrefutable continuance of the collective and its destiny.

Conclusion

This study has analyzed the works of modern French fantasy authors Jean-Philippe Jaworski, Pierre Pevel, Justine Niogret, and Claire Duvivier in an effort to illustrate a divergence from their high-fantasy predecessors. This divergence is most notable within the authors' construction of the hero; throughout these novels, the hero deliberately works against the high-fantasy archetype. The sheer lack of the inherently "good" hero has compromised the traditional canon of fantasy literature in France, replacing it by more resistant constructions. There is a distortion of the righteously motivated protagonist within *Gagner la guerre, Le chevalier*, and *Chien du heaume*, which aims to re-imagine the manner in which the fantasy realm defines heroism. Within the work of Jaworski, Pevel, and Niogret, the hero is faced with the bleak, crude realities of a somber world; consequently, this has a negative effect on their world view, and twists the otherwise joyful wonder that has been so often associated with the fantasy realm. Moreover, these heroes are not defined by the divine quest, as is the case with epic, high-fantasy heroes. Instead, they struggle to establish their agency in a thoroughly unjust world–a world where they are not precluded from seeking vengeance or self-gratification, as there is an embrace–an acceptance–of impurity. This sinister heroism is what makes the fantasy realm strange once again; it revives the cryptic mysticism of the fairy tale, and opposes the easily motivated innocence of the high-fantasy hero–a deliberate sedition of sorts. Conversely, Duvivier redefines heroism by focusing on the everyday person. Her approach de-heroizes the protagonists, which allows her to focus on the fantasy realm is a much more broad sense. The novel is less concerned with the destiny of the individual, and more concerned with that of the collective. When contrasted against the other

protagonists analyzed in this study–don Benvenuto, Chien, Lorn–the shift in perspective come to the forefront. The construction of Liesse is vastly different; he lacks the ability to effect change on events that are well beyond his control. In this capacity, he is a privileged witness to the great events of history, rather than an agent of change. Duvivier adds to the discussion of intra-genre divergence by deliberately opposing standard heroics.

This purpose of this study is to provide an observation–to start a dialogue on the state of the genre, in an effort to encourage further research. At the time of this writing, there are very few scholarly sources that analyze the above works in any length; it is the hope of the author that this project will be, if anything, a talking point for later analyses within the community. The claim is that these four authors, Jaworski, Pevel, Niogret, and Duvivier have made significant strides to divorce the genre from the high-fantasy, Tolkienian grip; this movement manifests by way of the hero, and is compounded by an affinity for a fantasy that does not ignore the cruelty of reality. Except for the case of Duvivier, this re-imagined fantasy realm offers no respite from the real-world. The horrors and corruption of the human are reflected within the imaginative space. This study will benefit from future research that is specifically tailored to the domain of psychology and theology; why, exactly, this shifting has occurred is a question that has yet to be answered. One assumption that could answer that query is France's rigidly secular up-bringing, which is meant to ensure a distinct separation between church and state. With a handful of the high-fantasy greats being rooted in religious fundamentals, such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, France's protection of secularism may have played a role in the genre's divergence. Future empirical research would prove to support or refute this assumption.

The case of Duvivier's *Un long voyage* presents unique opportunities for further study. Duvivier expounds on the genre's digression by presenting a humanist fantasy, and this movement is equally present within Patrick Dewdney's 2018 novel *L'enfant de poussière*, and

Alain Damasio's 2004 work *La Horde du contrevent.* Given its publication date, Damasio's work displays several tenants of high-fantasy–he incorporates the epic, group pilgrimage into his writing, and the main players are destined to assume their quest from birth. Nonetheless, one can argue that Damasio was the first to spearhead a shifting toward humanist fantasy. He concerns himself with the intermingling of man and nature, and fosters a quest that is dependent on the human capacity to persevere. In Damasio's universe, nature reveals "la force vitale de l'homme" while remaining a static, immovable constant (Heraud 7). *La Horde du contrevent* submits that nature is purifying–that one will return to the savage state in which they were born. This idea of beginnings–of the Deleuzian idea of "becoming"–is central to Damasio, Duvivier, and Dewdney. The present study suggests that there is an argument to be had in favor of humanist fantasy across these three authors, and this line of inquiry is open and worthy of further study.

The fantasy genre, like any other literary genre, is dynamic–it is in a constant state of flux. The examined corpus falls within a ten-year time frame, from 2010–2020; surely, in the next ten years, the genre will have exhibited yet another digression, with the present time serving as the historical precedent. For now, it will suffice to say that the exponential growth of the fantasy genre has contributed to a divergence from the high-fantasy, Tolkienian norm. All of the modern authors mentioned throughout this study are still actively writing and publishing; the genre will continue to evolve as a result. With this growth, new conversations will be born, yet the works of these authors will remain.

Notes

1. See page 145 of Besson's "Comme une ombre lointaine: l'influence de Tolkien sur la fantasy française" for further contextualization.

2. See Christophe Arleston's *Le souper des maléfices* (2015), and Jime Hines' *Jig le goblin, tome 1: Le graal du gobelin* (2004) for further reading.

3. Jaworski continued to develop his rich writing style with the publication of *Les Rois du Monde,* a three part series that claimed both the Prix Imaginales in 2014 and the Prix Planète SF des bloggeurs in 2015. The recognition that Jaworski's work has received in recent years is a testament to his narrative expertise; several independent critics have likened Jaworski's work to that of George R.R. Martin, claiming it as "the French *Game of Thrones,* but done right" (Christophe 04:51).

4. Eucatastrophe, as defined by J.R.R. Tolkien in his essay *On Fairy Stories,* is defined as the "sudden joyous turn," more commonly known as the "happy every after" (75).

5. See Baumeister, Roy F. "Masochism As Escape from Self." The Journal of Sex Research, vol. 25, no. 1, 1988, pp. 28–59 for further reading on masochistic tendancies.

6. Livingstone is not commenting directly on Jaworski's work; rather, he is explaining the role of the Dungeon Master in an RPG setting.

7. See Jauss' "Levels of Identification of Hero and Audience" for further reading on catharsis.

8. After working in a variety of publishing houses, Duvivier established her own–Asphalte–alongside long-time friend Estelle Durand in 2009. Duvivier holds a DESS from the University of Paris-Sorbonne, and began her journey as an author in 2020.

Addition: Panel discussions, interviews, and book reviews fall outside the realm of academic criticism; nonetheless, the thought-provoking discussion generated by these sources merits careful consideration.

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