

SOME DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AMERICAN AND BRITISH FANTASY LITERATURE

Jules Zanger

Appearing, respectively, eighty-eight and seventy-three years ago, Dorothy of Oz and Tarzan of the Apes remain two of the most familiar American fantasy characters ever created. Hardly any literate, or movie going, or television watching young American needs to be reminded of how Dorothy and Toto were transported from Kansas to Oz by a cyclone or how Tarzan was raised in darkest Africa by a tribe of great apes. The books and moving pictures and stage plays and comic strips which chronicled the adventures of these two very different characters have made them part of American folklore.

Frank Baum's book, *The Wizard of Oz*, in which Dorothy first appeared, was published in 1900 and became an immediate success going into repeated editions; from it spun off the Oz series containing finally a full forty volumes.¹ It has been called 'the first indigenous American fairy tale'. Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan of the Apes*, published fifteen years later, had similar popular success. Over twenty-five million copies of the *Tarzan* books have been sold since the first appearance of the Lord of the Jungle, and the moving pictures, comic strips, and blatant imitations of Burroughs's fantasy are innumerable.²

It is conceivable that Dorothy and Tarzan are the two most popular fictional characters for young readers ever created in the United States; they represent the emergence of a native American tradition of popular fantasy-adventure, and, whatever their possible indebtedness to such British models as Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Books*, they reveal a shared set of values grounded in the native American experience and distinctive from that found in English fantasy.

¹ For a complete publishing history of the Oz books, see F. T. Baum, *To Please a Child*, Chicago, Reilly and Lee Co., 1961.

² See Richard Lupoff, *Edgar Rice Burroughs, Master of Adventure*, Canaveral Press, 1965, pp. 229 ff.

The presence of such a shared value structure seems to me to be particularly significant in the face of the extraordinary differences that distinguish Oz books from the Tarzan series. On one level, these works appear to have nothing in common beyond their popular success and that disregard for realistic probability appropriate to all fantasy. The differences in language, in tone, in subject matter, in moral atmosphere, and in intended audience that distinguish them from each other all are extensive; it is the extent of these differences that makes those characteristics they have in common the more remarkable.

The differences stem basically from the fact that the books were directed at quite distinct audiences. Baum explicitly intended his books to be read by children, an audience which, until he began to write, was reading or being read the fairy tales of Grimm or Anderson or from the collections of Andrew Lang. Though his work was occasionally enriched by an ironic and veiled political allusion to reward the discerning adult, his primary audience was the pre-adolescent for whom the books had to be purchased; consequently, his books required (and achieved) parental approval. In his preface to *The Wizard of Oz*, Baum promised the parents of his readers '... a modernized fairy tale, in which the worderment and joy are retained and the heartaches and nightmares are left out.' His stories were frequently advertised as 'American Fairy Tales', and the combination of modern and American apparently appealed to the parents of the brand new century.

Burroughs's intended audience, on the other hand, was clearly that of adolescent and adult readers. His first stories appeared in pulp magazines, a literary form which, like its predecessor, the dime novels, had a kind of fragile, sub-rosa legitimacy; they were certainly not pornography, but not literature either — 'a waste of time and money'. The pulps were purchased by their young readers themselves, frequently against their parents' wishes, or by adults as the sheerest escapism. When *Tarzan* was published in book form in 1914, it retained many of the characteristics of his earlier pulp fiction.

Baum's language was, appropriately, relatively simple and familiar, though an occasional long word might appear, especially in the mouth of some comic, vaguely academic character. In the main, he wrote in easily accessible diction, using short sentences and a great deal of dialogue whose language corresponded to the homely American origins of Dorothy herself.

Burroughs's language in the Tarzan series was much more elaborate, pretentious, and elevated than Baum's. He used longer, more consciously rhythmical sentences, and a vocabulary laced with occasional mild archaisms to create a suitably epic tone: 'Even the haunting mystery of the long tunnel failed to overcome the monotony of its unchanging walls that slipped silently into the torch's dim ken for a brief instant and as silently back into the cimmerian oblivion behind to make place for more wall unvaryingly identical.'³

³ *Tarzan, Lord of the Jungle*, New York, 1928, p. 120.

The proportion of description to dialogue in the Burroughs books was much greater than in Baum's work, as might be expected in a series whose hero was laconic if not inarticulate, and whose other major actors were frequently wild beasts.

Baum's audience was not only younger than Burroughs's, but also, it would appear, much more strongly feminine. We must distinguish here the audience who purchased it from that for whom it was intended. In all the forty Oz books, only five have boy heroes, and of those, one is revealed at the end to be a girl. Otherwise, Dorothy and General Jinjur and Ozma and Glinda dominate Baum's fiction. Tarzan's world, on the other hand, is a totally masculine adolescent fantasy in which women exist to be defended, rescued, desired, and fought for by men, but otherwise have little to do.

This difference in audience also explains the difference in tone and moral atmosphere of the two series. In line with Baum's stated intention to leave out "the heartaches and nightmares" of traditional fairy tales, there is little violence in the world of Oz. It is true that Baum included hairbreadth escapes and exciting moments and that a sensitive child might very well have an occasional heartache or nightmare from an Oz book, but, generally, conflicts in Oz were resolved without blood or death or pain. When Oz was besieged by the Nome King, Queen Ozma announced, 'I do not wish to fight. No one has the right to destroy any living creatures, however evil they may be, or hurt them, or make them unhappy. I will not fight, even to save my kingdom.' Tarzan's Africa, of course, is filled with bloody, mortal violence between men and beasts and men and men. It is a Darwinian garden in which Tarzan survives only by virtue of his continuing willingness and ability to kill.

Finally, for the purpose of this comparison, there are consciously erotic and sadistic elements in the Tarzan books which are completely absent from the preadolescent Oz series.

These extensive differences would appear to place *Oz* and *Tarzan* in quite different literary categories. Nevertheless, beyond these differences there are to be found a number of shared characteristics that make my comparing them not altogether capricious.

One obvious characteristic these two share is that both in their own particular terms are heroic works involving the overcoming of danger in order to achieve a triumph of virtue over villainy. This characteristic, however, in no way distinguishes these American fantasies from their British counterparts.

On the other hand, these American fantasies have in common a number of patterns and emphases which are not usually apparent in the great models of English fantasy. To begin with, *Oz* and *Tarzan* are set in worlds in which the fantastic is continually mingled with the ordinary, with the 'real' world. Tarzan's Africa juxtaposes the familiar materials of the geography primer and of contemporary technology and events with lost colonies of sunken Atlantis, hidden cities peopled by thirteenth century crusaders, and mysterious races of giants and lili-putians. In *Tarzan, Lord of the Jungle*, Jimmy Blake shoots down a medieval, fully armored Knight of the Sepulchre with his forty-five automatic, recalling to

the reader a similar if less bloody confrontation in Twain's *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. In Oz, when the Scarecrow, Jack Pumpkinhead, and Tip are trapped in the Emerald City, they escape on the back of a magically animated carpenter's sawhorse to which they tie themselves with a length of familiar clothesline. On differing degrees of appeal and with differing degrees of realism, we have in Africa and in Oz 'magic countries' whose fantasy employs the familiar American device of incongruity.

Much of this incongruity stems from the fact that these seminal American fantasy-adventures are contemporary in their settings while British fantasies frequently take place in some mythic or pre-historic past. British fantasies often take the form of unfamiliar histories set in familiar landscapes of the past and future: Camelot, Stonehenge, the Roman Wall become the loci for the fantastic adventure. H. G. Wells's Morlocks live in the ruined tunnels of future London's Underground. If time is the stuff with which British fantasists work, space seems to be the American imaginative medium. British fantasy draws upon a rich historical, literary, and mythic past. American fantasists, lacking such a past, learned to rely on American distances, on empty places on the map for their fantastic milieux. The Seven Cities of Gold, Cibola, and El Dorado were all prefigures of Pym's Antarctic and Dorothy's Oz.

Both Baum's and Burroughs's books take place in distantly imagined, exotic lands, but both occur in a clearly recognizable present. Baum's Oz and Burroughs's Africa are continually grounded in present time by contemporary allusions and references to drought-stricken Kansas and modern Europe.

In British fantasy, the forces of evil are often depicted as emerging from below — Goblins, Weasels, Orcs, Morlocks — possessing a kind of intrinsic wickedness quite apart from any inspired organizing principle that leads them. (It is difficult to imagine a benign Orc in Tolkien's Middle-Earth, even after the passing of Sauron — or even a trustworthy Weasel in Grahame's *Wind in the Willows*.)

The forces of evil in Oz, however, come from above, not below. Baum's lower classes are hardworking, virtuous, and kind — in line with Baum's populist sympathies — and even when they serve evil, they do so only under constraint. Where British evil frequently tends to be proletarian, the American vision of evil is autocratic.

In Tarzan's world, evil comes to his jungle from above in the form of British bankers slaughtering game, or Arab slavers, or German diamond hunters, or a variety of European types motivated uniformly by greed. The simple Waziri, Tarzan's Munchkins, must be protected by him from the exploitative representatives of higher civilization. No White Man's burden for Tarzan, however: he carries no torch of commercial civilization or Christianity to the savages.

The only concession to civilization that Tarzan does make is to farm. (I confess my own astonishment at learning this.) Tarzan, with the help of his Waziri, runs the Greystoke Farm until it is destroyed by invading German forces during World War I. It was to this farm that he returned after rejecting his hereditary role of Viscount, Lord Greystoke in England, precisely as Dorothy elected to re-

turn to the Kansas farm of Uncle and Aunt Em rather than remain as ruler in Oz.

But English Lord and jungle Lord are quite different roles: the first is based upon a fixed system of rank and privilege, which in turn is based upon birth; the second is pragmatic, individual, and continually subject to renegotiation. Tarzan remains lord of the jungle only as long as he can prove by his strength and skill his right to hold that position. In fact, the whole twenty-five Tarzan books might be seen as the chronicle of his aggressive defense of his claim against beasts, blacks, and Europeans who would challenge him. He is Lord Greystoke by birth-right; he is lord of the jungle by achievement.

Tarzan chooses to be the Jeffersonian aristocrat of merit rather than the European aristocrat of caste. And Dorothy of Oz shares many of his characteristics. In both we discover what have been called the populist virtues — simplicity rather than sophistication; individualism, and self-reliance — virtues born in a rural America not many years distant from the American frontier. Both Dorothy and Tarzan, having been shown the riches of the world, go back to the farm, just as Jesus goes back to the desert.

Unlike such British heroes as Tolkien's Strider, or, C.S. Lewis's Rillian, or even young Arthur himself, who move from obscurity into the transcendent Kingship that is their destiny, these American heroes move from private obscurity to greatness, then back to relative obscurity again. Hawthorne's Gray Champion and the Lone Ranger suggest the range of possibility implicit in the pattern. A model for this pattern, especially for Tarzan, may have been the mythic Daniel Boone, who silently emerged from the darkness of the forest to effectuate the rescue of the helpless — and then as silently disappeared. Another model might be found in the American Presidential system with its representative oscillation from public light to private darkness. Jefferson retiring in honor to Monticello and Nixon in exile in San Clemente are only variations on a basic American political design that is echoed in Dorothy's return to Kansas and Tarzan's return to the jungle.

The earliest version of this pattern may have been the Society of Cincinnatus, created by former officers in the American Revolution honoring that legendary Roman general who in the time of Rome's need, left his plow in a half-tilled field to serve and save his city and then returned to complete his plowing. General Washington, we remember, rejected the crown the third time, as Caesar did not, to return to private life.

Generally, British fantasy, taking its representative shape at the height of British imperial expansion, moves toward the achievement of social integration, community, and order — and kingship and aristocracy, by extension, are the external signs of such a state. In a special sense, that imperial vision moves also toward a kind of deathless transcendence. Imperial fantasy is haunted by heroes and kings who will not die, who merely sleep till their time shall come again, till their second coming as armed messiahs: Drake under the chalk cliffs waiting to repel the ultimate armada, Barbarossa in his cavern in the Hartz mountains, Arthur in Avalon.

That ancient royal formulation, 'The King is dead; long live the King,' elegantly elides those mortality-steeped modifiers, 'old King,' 'new King,' affirming in its deliberate imprecision the mystery of the immortality of Kings.

In this sense we can suggest that what I have described as imperial fantasy is essentially eschatological, having as its wellspring and template and end, nothing less than the vision of the coming of the Kingdom of God in the last days. C. S. Lewis's *Narnia* series is only an extreme case of this general tendency.

American fantasy reverses the royal formula, so that 'The King is dead; long live the King' becomes 'Long live the King', followed by 'The King is dead', stripping kingship of its mystery and restoring it to the inexorable narrative forms of nature.

By comparison with imperial fantasy, the American fantasies seem anarchic. They consciously prize simplicity and rural isolation; their heroes tend to be intensely pragmatic and self-reliant. When, in *The Wizard of Oz*, the Scarecrow, the Tinman, and the Cowardly Lion move to take their respective kingdoms, we see a deliberate democratization of kingship — the king as agricultural worker, as mechanic, as politician. Kingship has become homely and familiar, based on common sense and kindness rather than on birthright or divine right. Oz's rulers are elected by acclamation in an atmosphere Baum has made deliberately reminiscent of a midwestern political rally.

On the other hand, British fantasy's villains (morlocks, weasels, and goblins) suggest the British middle-class fear of chartist revolutionaries — underfed miners and operatives pouring forth from their hovels and holes to terrorize the countryside.⁴

Like British fantasy, American fantasy can be perceived as responsive to conditions of social and economic change. The United States in the decades bridging the turn of the century suffered extreme economic depressions. By the end of the nineties, nearly a third of the nation's farms were mortgaged. Corn was selling for ten cents a bushel in Dorothy's Kansas, and cotton was getting five cents a pound. Between two and a half and three million — one out of five — workers were unemployed. More than 660,000 men were thrown out of work by strikes and lockouts, and following the model of 'Coxey's Army', no fewer than seventeen 'industrial armies' of the unemployed marched on Washington. It is this social and economic context that shapes both Baum and Burroughs. Both men were accounted failures by the time they had reached middle age. Both had failed repeatedly in business enterprises before they turned to writing fantasy. Like their British counterparts, they created fantastic alternatives to their experience, but instead of a hierarchical, conservative vision of social order, the vision that impels their work stems from an older, rural, even frontier, America. Baum's world is much gentler, kindlier, more innocent than Burroughs's, which is filled with violence and death, but together they share the values of self-reliance, sim-

⁴ See my 'Goblins, Morlocks, and Weasels: Classical Fantasy and the Industrial Revolution', in *Children's Literature in Education*, Vol. 8, No. 4, pp. 154–162.

plicity, and independence — values grown increasingly difficult to maintain in a rapidly urbanizing and mechanizing society.

The models I have described are, of course, neither mutually exclusive nor absolute. This has become especially true since the extraordinary American success of Tolkien's Middle Earth fantasies, which have given certain elements of the imperial model a tremendous popularity that American writers have been quick to pick up on: both McKillup's *Riddle Master* trilogy and Herbert's *Dune* series are indebted to the Arthurian model, and Luke Skywalker of Star Wars seems moving inevitably toward his mystical kingship now that his royal lineage has been discovered.

There are exceptions,⁵ of course, but in the main, those individualistic, democratic heroes who followed Cincinnatus back into the obscurity of their private lives seem to be disappearing with the spacious world that created them.

K NĚKTERÝM ROZDÍLŮM MEZI AMERICKOU A BRITSKOU LITERATUROU S FANTASTICKOU TEMATIKOU

Dorota v knize Franka Bauma *The Wizard of Oz* (Čaroděj ze země Oz) a Tarzan Rice Burrougha v knize *Tarzan of the Apes* (Tarzan z rodu opic) jsou nesporně dvě nejoblíbenější postavy, které kdy byly vytvořeny pro mladé americké čtenáře. Jsou spojeny se zrodem domácí americké tradice fantasticko-dobrodružného vyprávění, rozdílné od tradice britské. Zatímco britská fantastická literatura je v podstatě historizující, americká tíhne ke geografičnosti, zůstává v současnosti, ale pohybuje se v prostoru. Tam, kde britská tíhne k eschatologičnosti a zaměřuje se k imperiální hegemonii, americká je jeffersonská a anarchická.

⁵ Ursula LeGuin's hero, Ged, in the *Earth-Sea Trilogy* immediately comes to mind.

