

Fantastic Machines and National Trauma: Imagining the Post-9/11 Future in Tamora Pierce's Tortall

In her investigation into the subversive potential of fantasy, Rosemary Jackson avers that the inclusion of machines as instruments of villainy in medieval fantasy literature constitutes “referring with disgust to the ‘materialism of a Robot Age’ and looking backwards to a medieval paradise.”ⁱ Jackson’s argument, although eloquent, is a unilateral one rendered all the more anemic by its unyielding association of fantasy with a past-centric, escapist impulse. I propose a countervailing perspective: by releasing medieval fantasy from its tether to retrograde escapism, we allow ourselves room to investigate the ways that machines in fantasy literature, whether engineered for good or evil, allow us to imagine and interrogate the future of our world. My paper will examine an exquisite case study of this reversal in Tamora Pierce’s vividly-rendered Tortallan universe which, despite its young adult audience, features complex and nightmarish machines, the nefarious assembly of which characterizes realistic American anxieties about the uncertainty of the future immediately following 9/11.

After ten books in Pierce’s Tortall universe that contain no references whatsoever to modern—that is to say post-medieval— technology, the first glimpse of a “killing device” in the universe’s eleventh book is jarring, to say the least. This monstrosity is a frightening blend of mechanization and sorcery, all steel pulleys and razor-fingers, and animated by the magically- captured and weaponized souls of refugee children murdered by Tortall’s political enemy. While these abominations are ultimately defeated by the heroine of this arc, their destruction comes at an enormous cost. Referring to the criticism of Fredric Jameson, China Miéville, and their ilk on fantasy as an ideal mode for real social and political commentary, my paper will investigate the many ways that these horrifying machines, and their presence in a YA series written between 1999 and 2002, reflect the turbulent, national trauma immediately following 9/11. It will explore the manifold ways that machines in fantasy literature allow us to imagine the future, and further, how they empower us to do so even when the future seems at its most unimaginable.

ⁱ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1998), 155.