

American and Croatian High Fantasy: Influences, Parallels and Points of Interference

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Abstract

While Croatian fantasy is rooted in ancient Slavic mythology, the subgenre of high or epic fantasy is a relatively new type of literary genre that has been heavily influenced by American and, to a lesser extent, British high fantasy. The paper analyzes the influences the American fantasy literature has had on the Croatian fantasy literature, and presents the similarities in topics, characterization, onomastics, as well as identity formation of female characters. It also examines some of the negative intertextual influences that can only partly be explained by the attempt of the authors to create works the readers will recognize and accept as genre literature. Attempts to combine the established literary techniques of American fantasy and traditional Croatian topics are rare and usually unsuccessful.

Keywords

Croatian high fantasy, American high fantasy, Croatian mythology and folk tales, linguistic influences, representation of female characters

1. Introduction

Fantasy, together with science-fiction and horror, comprises a genre group commonly referred to as *speculative fiction*. Attempts at defining the genre are numerous and we cannot go into details in this paper. According to K. Hume:

Fantasy is any departure from consensus reality, an impulse native to literature and manifested in innumerable variations, from monster to metaphor. It includes transgressions of what one generally takes to be physical facts such as human immortality, travel faster than light, telekinesis, and the like. [5, 21]

Colin Manlove suggested a definition that appears to be quite appropriate and plausible:

A fantasy is: A fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of the supernatural with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms. [10, 157]

Manlove states that if we view the supernatural as the symbolic extension of human thought, we cannot speak of fantasy. This is the case in *Alice in Wonderland* because the action takes place in a dream state. Manlove quotes

Tolkien who says that the basic premise of Alice is satirical, as well as a “mockery of unreason”, while the dream element is “not a mere machinery of introduction and ending, but inherent in the action and transitions” [10, 161]. The genre of the Gothic novel is not fantasy either, because the supernatural element is very often revealed to be a natural phenomenon or a trick. Such novels are no different from horror novels because the aim of both genres is to instill fear in the readers’ minds. Moreover, the supernatural and impossible in fantasy are neither merely something unusual nor wondrous, nor distant – the reader becomes, at least to some extent, intimately acquainted with and included in the secondary world and the characters establish close relationships with beings and objects from that world [10, 163].

It is necessary to point out the difference between the terms “fantastic” and “fantasy”. The term “fantastic” can denote a component of a literary work that does not necessarily belong to the genre of “fantasy”. Of course, “fantasy” is a genre that contains the “fantastic”, but they are not equal. Larry McCaffery quotes W. R. Irwin who says that “fantastic” includes the opposition of “anti-real ... against an established real”, while “fantasy” is to be understood as a rhetoric strategy, as a “game of the impossible” [11, 23], in which non-reality appears as reality. According to M. Večko, “this secondary world is structured around and governed by internal logic similar to the one of empirical reality, providing a comfortable degree of familiarity” [17, 54].

In the thematic sense we can speak of a broad spectrum of elements that can be found in fantasy literature: they include the clash between good and evil, various invented and mythological beings, references to myths and legends, folk tales and fairy tales, use of magic, portals into other worlds or into the past, some sort of quest (for a person, an object, or in a spiritual sense), talking animals, milieu that reminds us of the Middle Ages, and other elements [15, 5]. Similar elements are mentioned by J. Timmerman who adds “the depiction of common characters and heroism” to his list [16, 4]. A particular characteristic of fantasy is antimodernism, i.e. “aversion to changes that in our reality are considered to be historical” [8, 26].

2. Croatian and American High Fantasy

The so called epic or high fantasy of Anglo-American tradition is characterized by several elements that have been completely appropriated by Croatian authors: fully established secondary world, quest, strong and powerful hero (who can attain his power gradually, like in a *Bildungsroman*), supernatural beings that interact with main characters (dragons, elves, trolls, witches, etc.), “timeless” names of people, cities, regions and countries, and a map printed with the novel that helps the reader to follow the adventures of the hero.

Fantasy in Croatia has developed, like in many other countries, from oral folk tales which are very often based on elements of old Slavic and old Croatian mythology. The earliest written work of fantasy that has attained high praise is *Tales of Long Ago* by Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić (published in 1916); in this collection of tales the author combined many folk tale elements with her own ideas. The high or epic fantasy in Croatia has developed only in the last twenty years under the influence of a large number of translated novels by American authors. It is, however, unusual that Croatian authors of high fantasy do not use any topics from old Croatian/old Slavic mythology in which there is a kind of “pantheon” with numerous gods and goddesses, such as Svarog (god of fire and sky), Perun (god of thunder and clouds), Veles (god of water), Crnobog (“Black God”, god of evil), Vesna (goddess of spring and youth), Morana (goddess of death and winter), Davor (god of war), Stribor (god of forests and wind), as well as many other gods and lesser supernatural beings. Only in contemporary Croatian horror stories do we encounter some traditional supernatural beings such as werewolves or vampires, but only because they were incorporated into Anglo-American fantasy and horror literature a long time ago, thus returning to Slavic fantasy and horror literature in general.

Since fantasy follows firm genre conventions some Croatian authors have attempted to extricate themselves from these conventions by the following means:

- Use of highly stylized archaic vocabulary – P. Raos in his novel *Flight of Nancije Konratat* [14] uses the archaic Croatian language that is primarily characterized by the use of two past tenses – the aorist and the imperfect – that are not used in everyday speech or writing any more. The author also uses a large number of archaic words and expressions, as well as the archaic syntax. The result is a novel that is extremely hard to read and for that reason it has not gained popularity among readers.

- Use of dialects – T. Košta in his novel *Marriage to the Wind* [7] uses the Chakavian dialect that is spoken along the Croatian coast and on islands. The dialect is not used by all characters in the novel and the translation of most complicated words is available in footnotes. The novel is once again hard to read, but apart from that it contains a serious logical error: it is quite impossible (even in fantasy) that this dialect would be used in a secondary world of fantasy. The author’s efforts would make sense if the action of the novel took place in Croatian history (or pre-history), or if it were based on traditional Croatian folk tales or fairy tales, but in this way the reading process requires an even greater suspension of disbelief on the part of the reader – the novel feels strange and illogical.

- Tricking the readers into believing that they read a true fantasy novel – O. Franić in his novel *Araton* [4] tricks the readers into thinking that what they read is a true fantasy novel. This has been accomplished by the cover page that depicts a strong hero protecting a woman from a dragon, by a typical map included with the novel, as well as with the style and language of the novel that reads as fantasy; however at the end of the book the readers find out that the action takes place in some distant postapocalyptic future. This could, at best, be considered as a blend between fantasy and science-fiction.

3. Linguistic Influences

One of the most notable features of Anglo-American fantasy literature is the use of “timeless” and “spaceless” names of people and places. This feature has almost completely been transferred into the Croatian high fantasy. For example, in the novel *Araton* by O. Franić we can find names such as Andor, Nandor, Korimor, Mantas, Almas, Aram Tar, Zilnar and Toktas [4]; in the novel *Flight of Nancije Konratat* by P. Raos there are names like Malap, Ittinan, Narr, Siginid and Zael [14]; in the novel *Moon Priestess* by M. Benini we can read about Kalaide, Matrielen, Tahal, Grinor, Laedor Boratonis Ato, Nar Reaolis and others [2]. All these names have no connection to the Croatian or Slavic tradition and could without any changes be used or found in an American high fantasy novel.

However, with most analyzed authors we can observe numerous inconsistencies in spelling because some names are written according to the Croatian and some according to the English language rules. For example, in the novel *Snakes of Nikonimor* by S. Lovrenčić [9] there are two countries – Yalna and Svardija. However, the letter “y” does not exist in the Croatian alphabet – the letter “j” is used instead. There is no reason to use a typical English language letter in an imagined world where certainly nobody speaks English. The other country name, Svardija, contains in its penultimate position the letter “j” and in this it follows the Croatian rules for spelling country names (Svardija instead of Svardia, which would be common in English). A similar mistake can be observed with the person names Trissia and Bardilija – the first name ends with “ia” and the second with “ija”; in the first case the English rule is employed, and in the second the Croatian one. Many other names have been anglicized as well, for example Tisya, Vallna, Ilya, Thana, Birkenna, Brissa and Mytla. The graphical sequences “ll”, “nn”, “ss” and “th” do not exist in the Croatian language. In the name Genthenna there are no less than two such letter pairs (“th” and “nn”) that do not exist in Croatian, but are common in English.

Since in that secondary world nobody can write Latin letters or English, it is obvious that the names were anglicized in order to visually make them more similar to names in American fantasy literature the Croatian readers have become used to.

Even more inconsistencies in spelling can be found in the novel *Ruler* by D. Blažeka. Some names have been spelled according to the English rules (Bashra, Sakaal, Uyte...) and some according to the Croatian rules (Rea instead of Rhea, Darlija, Targija, Kajl instead of Kyle). The choice between the Croatian and English spelling appears to be completely arbitrary; in one case we encounter a city called Kaxasa (“x” does not exist in the Croatian alphabet) and in another a person called Ksadora (with “ks” instead of “x”); there is a goddess named Ištara (with the Croatian letter “š”) as well as a person named Bashra (this time with the typically English “sh” instead of “š”); and in some names the English and Croatian spelling rules have been merged – for example in the name Opyedaja (the correct Croatian spelling would be Opjedaja, and the English Opyedaya) [3].

In the novel *Marriage to the Wind* by T. Košta there is a mixture of traditional Croatian names, such as Blaž, Ivana, Jelena and Marko, and “timeless” and “spaceless” names such as Natalis, Vex, Denron, Simus, Tvisa, Massig and Holm [7]. This would be justified in case the characters were actually Croatian, but the action takes place in a conventional “timeless” period.

Another influence of the American high fantasy is the use of English on maps printed in the novels. The four cardinal directions are almost always denoted with English initials – N for north, S for south, W for west and E for east; this is the case in three of the analyzed novels (*Snakes of Nikonimor*, *Marriage to the Wind* and *Moon Priestess*); in *Araton* O. Franić avoided this appropriated convention and decided to denote the cardinal directions with invented abbreviations – URG for north, OG for south, OZ for west, and AG for east [4]. A unique error occurred in the novel *Snakes of Nikonimor* by S. Lovrenčić: north, south and west are denoted with the English initials N, S and W, but east is denoted with the Croatian initial “I” (which stands for “istok”) instead of the English initial E [9].

4. Representation of Female Characters

In traditional high fantasy (up to 1970s) women either did not exist at all, or had the role of “damsels in distress” that needed to be rescued, and sometimes had the roles of wives/fiancées/girlfriends awaiting their heroes to return from their quests. The traditional male hero possessed “male” characteristics (bravery, intelligence, physical prowess, independence, courage, determination), and the

traditional female character possessed only “female” characteristics (passivity, weakness, use of instinct instead of reason, fear, subordination). While male heroes possessed all characteristics important for the creation of their identity, such as agency, voice, choice, resistance, autonomy, responsibility and power, the female heroes possessed not a single one. Starting with 1970s several female authors (e.g. Ardath Mayhar, Lynn Abbey, Phyllis Ann Karr, Elizabeth A. Lynn and Jessica Amanda Salmonson) started to appropriate the genre conventions of high fantasy and finally enabled the female heroes to be women and not ciphers, or in the best case “merely sword-swinging men with female bodies and female names” [1, 85]. The new female heroes were allowed to take several roles at the same time, not excluding the role of mother which was traditionally thought of as the only appropriate role for women. When Peter Hunt speaks of Anglo-American fantasy he states that “the images of active male heroes and passive (or invisible) females (or visible hags) are now widely unacceptable, and do not reflect human realities.” [6, 168]. Although the traditional Anglo-American high fantasy demonstrated a sharp gender division in which men were leaders and women were followers it appears that the Croatian high fantasy for the most part avoided this stark division, but only due to its late emergence. Moreover, a considerable number of authors of high fantasy in Croatia are women and they very often introduce strong female characters into the story (e.g. Blažeka, Benini, Lovrenčić).

However, in both Croatian and American high fantasy we can observe the existence of the so-called “father figures” (or, according to Ney and Sciog-Lazarov, binary clusters father/daughter and mentor/pupil [13, 236]) that direct the actions of main female characters or at least influence their decisions. For example, in the novel *Moon Priestess* by M. Benini we find the following scene:

Kalaide felt that her eyes filled with tears. She blinked and felt the trembling of the dagger under her throat. He is going to kill her now: she was sure of it, but, curiously enough, she felt no fear. She only wondered what dying felt like, and she was a little angry that something like that had to happen to her right now. How will they manage without her: her father, Koli, the whole house? What will her eldest brother say when he comes home and learns that she managed to get herself killed? So irresponsible. Kalmar always used to tell her that she was too compassionate. [2, 16]

In the moment of deadly danger the main female character, Kalaide, ponders how the men are going to manage without her and what her eldest brother is going to say. Similar father figures in the form of fathers, brothers or teachers are

still very common in the Croatian high fantasy and can in theory testify to the perpetuation of patriarchal social values still present in the society. However, since the action of high fantasy novels usually takes place in the milieu resembling the Middle Ages, the authors may feel that their options are limited, but that does not prevent a number of contemporary American female authors (most notably Jacqueline Carey in her *Kushiel's Legacy* trilogy and its sequels) to break with the obsolete male and female hero representations. Some Croatian female authors attempted to overcome such conventions by androgenization of main female heroes: for example the novel *Ruler* by D. Blažeka shows a matriarchal society in legendary Atlantis where women are warriors and men servants. The young ruler of Atlantis was described with the following words:

Sutahan was silent. She was only twenty-two, but on her regular, decisive face one could notice several wrinkles: voiceless witnesses of the burden of her responsibility and numerous sleepless nights. She was an exceptionally tall and strong woman. She ruled with an iron hand and her warriors respected her. ... The people greeted her birth with a relief and songs of gratitude to the Goddess; already with fifteen she lost her mother and since then she performed all her duties and dealt with the responsibilities of the ruler by herself. Under pressure of misfortunes the cheerful girl was quickly transformed into a taciturn, mistrusting young woman whose cold, ruthless intelligence amazed the majority of noble women. [3, 3]

The problem with the procedure of androgenization of female characters is, like in American fantasy (e.g. in the trilogy *Deed of Paksenarrion* of the pentalogy *Vatta's War* by Elizabeth Moon), that the male hero is simply transformed into the female hero, usually without taking into consideration the different psychological and physiological characteristics of men and women.

S. Lovrenčić deals with this problem with some success in her novel *Snakes of Nikonimor* because her female characters are for the most part spiritually strong and at the same time independent without sacrificing their female characteristics. In a story within a story the life of the hero's mother is described as follows:

Just like the house was hers, his were the ships – master and mistress, one did not rule over the other. She would await him and bid him farewell on the terrace, or in that room over the sea, the only one that had a window overlooking the open sea. She would be sad when he had to leave, and happy to see the masts and blue sails again, but in fact she loved that

rhythm of leaving and coming, and his absence did not bother her much. She loved the white stones of the city and her position as the mistress of the house, whose proud independence was protected by the sea. [9, 18]

Some pages later we find a legend of the creation of the world; female independence is again stressed:

Thus searching they opened a door that had not been opened yet. Behind the door there sat a woman who Daorsoy considered to be his own. She, however, did not consider herself to belong to anybody, and her name was Pirusta. The Builder trusted Pirusta more than anybody and therefore he entrusted her to speak for him. [9, 61]

Later in the novel we meet a young barbarian girl, Lissni, who was an excellent archer and “very proud of her scouting skills” [9, 105]. However, in the very first fighting scene she is easily disarmed by king Gurna:

Lassni went through the passage and was now at the storeroom door, discharging one arrow after the other with a wondrous speed. But not for long. Gurna, still wielding his sword, started for her. He looked straight in her eyes, and perhaps that confused her; her arrows flew slower and hit the targets with less precision. Although an arrow hit his upper arm – his chest being protected by light armor worn by imperial armies – Gurna disarmed the girl with a single strike. [9, 116]

Thus, the excellent marksman Lassni was unable to seriously wound Gurna who managed to defeat her with a single strike. Although Lassni is described as very skillful and competent, it is her physical weakness that is accentuated in combat.

Ney and Sciog-Lazarov state that the ideal way to represent female characters is through the appropriation of traditional male roles while keeping the female characteristics and femininity, and at the same time the accentuation of agency [13, 241]. The fundamental elements of female identity are the articulation of interpersonal relationships, love and family. If these elements are neglected or suppressed the identity creation of female characters suffers and ultimately fails [Ibid.]. According to the relational identity theory close personal relationships (such as family relationships) are the basic components of identity and self [12, 256].

Moreover, the development of friendship plays a crucial role in the process of identity construction; according to some theorists, friendship is more important than family relationships because of the voluntary nature of friendship relationships [Ibid.]. In contemporary American fantasy literature we can find numerous examples in which authors emphasize interpersonal relationships, love, family and friendship – in the last decade this is particularly observable in novels by Jacqueline Carey – and this trend can be noticed in Croatia as well, particularly in the novels by S. Lovrenčić and M. Benini.

5. Conclusion

The Croatian authors of high fantasy attempt to imitate the American authors of high fantasy, which can be observed in the topics of novels, fabulation, representation of main heroes, use of “timeless” and “spaceless” names and titles, as well as the use of English spelling or abbreviations. Occasional attempts to avoid the established genre conventions by introducing novelties into the genre (e.g. through archaic language and syntax, use of dialects) are not successful due to their forceful introduction in the conventional storytelling that is viewed by readers as “natural”. There are no works of high fantasy that would include elements of the Croatian traditional legends and mythology; instead, completely new worlds and mythologies are imagined, again in accordance with the conventions the Croatian readers are used to.

There is some conservatism in the representation of male and female characters, which is visible in the use of “father figures”, but the traditional representation of female characters as passive, weak and unintelligent is for the most part avoided. Many female characters do have their voice, choice and autonomy, as well as the ability to resist the patriarchal social structures. The male heroes are not uniformly shown as strong, active and dominant; there are characters that possess empathy and are insecure, although in fewer numbers than is the case with female characters.

It remains to be seen whether a work of high fantasy will appear that will successfully incorporate the genre conventions with traditional Croatian mythology and legends, as well as the contemporary postulates of representation of male and female characters.

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