Giving Magic To England: How Susanna Clarke’s Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell Blurs the Lines Between History and Fantasy

It is said that many great things start with humble beginnings. Susanna Clarke’s bestselling novel Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell begins with the lines “...there was in the city of York a society of magicians. They met upon the third Wednesday of every month and read each other long, dull papers upon the history of English magic” (1). Immediately, Clarke sets the scene for what is one of the most innovative fantasy books written in the 21st century. How could magic be dull? When one hears the words “English magic” one inexplicably thinks of the colorful worlds of Hogwarts and Narnia, but in just two sentences Clarke manages to turn these convictions on their head. She introduces the reader to the history of English magic but does so in a way that makes the reader almost immediately distanced from it. So begins, in true mind-boggling fashion, one of the most genre-bending novels to ever grace the bookshelf of fantastic literature. In the essays “Realistic Fantasy or Fantastic Realism: On Defining the Genre in Susanna Clarke's Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell” and “History as Fantasy: Estranging the Past in Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell.”, Carl-William Ersgård and Daniel Baker argue that Clarke pushes the boundaries of fantasy, but this is not quite true. Clarke does not just push against the fantasy genre—she blows it out of the water. Susanna Clarke pushes against the fantasy genre by using intensely historical and realistic concepts to place Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell into a genre that is strictly its own.
Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell tells the intertwining stories of two magicians in 19th century England. The fussy and old-fashioned Mr. Norrell endeavors to make magic a respectable, government-approved practice and has a deep disdain for “useless” Faerie magic. The young and sociable Jonathan Strange desires to learn all he can of magic and becomes Mr. Norrell’s pupil. The two eventually clash over Strange’s overwhelming desire to learn Faerie magic, a practice Norrell finds horrid, and they go their separate ways. Strange is sent to Portugal to assist the British Army in the fight against Napoleon, and Norrell stays in England, growing ever more paranoid of Strange’s increasing magical and political power. The two warring magicians are eventually forced together to defeat a deep Faerie evil spreading throughout England. They end the novel as friends, traveling the world while being surrounded by constant magical darkness. Their turbulent relationship stresses to the reader the importance of friendship, equality, and understanding.

The chief topic that scholarship on Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell discusses is Clarke’s bending of the fantasy genre to make her novel seem more historically realistic. In “History as Fantasy: Estranging the Past in Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell.”, Daniel Baker writes that “Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell occupies the space between the present and the past, the real and the imaginary.” Baker argues that Clarke’s stretching of fantasy to meet the historical bounds of her novel creates a sense of otherness for the reader, isolating the concept of history as a whole. In the essay “Realistic Fantasy or Fantastic Realism: On Defining the Genre in Susanna Clarke's Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell,” Carl-William Ersgård writes that “at the same time, however, [Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell] works excellently as an example of how close realism and fantasy really can get.” His essay discusses once again the way Clarke works against fantasy to change its properties in Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell, saying that there is no way
Another common topic of scholarship on *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* is its representation of underlying social issues, especially those involving women. In “Cold Masculine Magic: The Significance of the Depiction of Patriarchy in *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*,” Colm Kearns explores the novel from a distinctly feminist perspective, describing how Clarke’s work of fantasy shows the fallibility of the male-dominated world of 1800s Victorian England. Kearns writes that “[Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell] encourages the reader to question the patriarchal society depicted by vividly reflecting the repression it is founded on.” In another article, Sylwia Borowska-Szerszun expounds upon this topic but in a less extreme way. In her essay “The Interplay of the Domestic and the Uncanny in Susanna Clarke’s *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*,” Borowska-Szerszun discusses how Clarke’s novel brings to light repressed voices by drawing thematic and stylistic influence from 19th century women’s literature. She argues that the use of the uncanny is important to bring attention to these repressed voices.

*Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* has an impact that spreads beyond its 782 pages, and current scholarship shows that. However, this scholarship fails to recognize how Clarke’s groundbreaking mixture of history and fantasy will impact the entire fantasy genre. None of these articles discusses Clarke’s influence on the fantasy genre as a whole, instead limiting their discussion to how *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* works against fantasy within itself. Clarke’s novel doesn’t just push against the fantasy genre—it subverts it completely. This historical subversion of the fantastic is powerful because it can inspire other authors to bend the genre as well.
Even with its unique blend of historical elements, there can be little doubt that *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* is a work of fantastic literature. The novel is filled from cover to cover with descriptions of magical acts and almost-miracles, as well as Faeries and spirits. Within the first three chapters, Mr. Norrell manages to bring every statue in the York Cathedral to life, a feat that is both terrifying and marvelous. The scope of magic in the novel ranges from the extremely elaborate (Norrell’s animation of the York Cathedral statues) to the seemingly mundane (Strange’s ability to procure visions in water). Magic is very book-and-language based, with both Strange and Norrell relying on extensive literature to learn their craft. It is almost treated as something historical, as both Norrell and Strange owe much of their knowledge to their predecessors. Even within the framework of magic, one of the chief aspects of fantasy, Clarke is already planting the seed of historical subversion alongside the fantastic.

Historical and history-like sequences become ever more present throughout the novel, and as one continues to read, they may find themselves struggling to find a boundary or separation between fantasy and history. Clarke works against this notion that the two should be separate, and as the novel progresses the historical and fantastical become more intertwined. She makes references to important and significant historical events, including the Napoleonic Wars and the Black Plague. She inexplicably ties the fantastic to these decidedly nonmagical events, attributing a Faerie King’s behavior to the spread of the plague and inserting magicians into the Napoleonic Wars. She also includes famous figures and attributes portions of their works to the fantastic. At one point, Clarke gives a detailed description of a portrait of Jonathan Strange “surrounded by the dead Neapolitans...regarding him hungrily” (426). She attributes this portrait of a fictional magician to the legendary Francisco Goya, even though it is obvious no such thing exists. Outside the novel these things seem to fit together like mismatched puzzle pieces, but
within Clarke’s fantasy, they do not just fit together but make incredible sense. Ersgård writes that “many novels employ techniques belonging to several genres to create a blend or something entirely new; making the generic perspective all the more difficult to employ when looking at literature” (1). This blending is exactly what Clarke employs to create her subversive fantasy. Just like her warring magicians, Clarke manages to bring together two opposites in such a way that they are inseparable from each other.

Clarke’s magicians are not always at ease with each other’s presence. However, Clarke is incredibly at ease with her mixture of history and fantasy and blends the two so perfectly that a reader questions the true genre of her novel. Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell consistently pushes against the conventional fantastic narrative by showcasing a world where magic and history exist side by side. In order to do this, Clarke uses observant narration, practical and elevated wording, and the inclusion of genuine historical facts to highlight the relation between fantasy and history as well as immerse the reader in the fantastic by making it seem more plausible and understandable. Her writing contains an aura of reserved formalism reminiscent of literature published during the 19th century, further blending the historical and fantastical aspects of the novel.

Clarke also weaves together history and fantasy through heavy employment of accurate historical facts. In chapter 29 of the book, “At the house of José Estoril,” Clarke writes about Strange and his efforts in aiding the British Army in Portugal. On pages 381 to 389, Strange and Lord Wellington discuss the conjuration of a road for the British Army to walk on since the rough rocks and mud take too long to cross. Strange conjures a road for Lord Wellington, which pleases him greatly and makes it easier for the army to travel. This scene is an important example of how Clarke mixes history and fantasy since Lord Wellington did in fact exist and the British
Army was in Portugal—the only true fallacy here is the existence of magic. Clarke makes extensive use of detail to bring realism to her work. On page 390, she includes this line: “A week or so after the first appearance of the road Colonel Mackenzie of the 11th foot came to see Lord Wellington in a great temper and complained that the magician had allowed the road to disappear before his regiment could reach it.” This illustrates Clarke’s use of detail to bring historical realism to a work of fiction—she provides the reader with not just a character name but also a realistic military position, even though the character is fictional and only mentioned once. Small, realistic details like this fill Clarke’s writing. At the bottom of page 391, Clarke even includes a factual footnote describing the fortresses that guarded the border to Spain and Lord Wellington’s interaction with the Portuguese Army. The framing of the fantastic within the very factual content of the chapter makes it seem incredibly real and makes the obviously fictional content seem like nonfiction. Clarke continues to frame fantasy within fact, creating a feeling of “magical fact” that she employs throughout the novel.

In addition to the factual content of the scene, Clarke’s use of elevated yet practical vocabulary and observant narration creates a more historical and realistic tone. The following quote definitively illustrates the elevated language Clarke uses:

Lord Wellington and Strange agreed that as a general rule the road should be in place a couple of hours before the first regiment stepped on to it and disappear an hour after the last soldier had passed along it. This was to prevent the French Army from gaining any benefit from the roads. (390)

This could have been said in fewer words using less formal language but Clarke makes the deliberate choice to use elevated practical tone. She also uses vocabulary that gives her work an air of realism—she writes as if she is a historian, not a fiction author. The style of narration also
contributes to this feeling. Instead of giving the reader access to the thoughts and feelings of the characters, she maintains a detached and observational style of narration that is reminiscent of historical texts. The novel is also written in the past tense, which helps to highlight the historical feel of the novel. Clarke also addresses Jonathan Strange and Lord Wellington by either their last names or official titles, maintaining that distance between the reader and the characters. She uses many instances of over description and formal language to deliver her novel. Her writing is reminiscent of that of Jane Austen, and her narration casts the reader’s eye over the much broader scope and meaning of her work. In this way, Clarke pushes against the standard disbelief that fantasy brings, drawing her work into a more realistic, although sometimes confusing, world.

History is woven so deeply in the fiber of Clarke’s novel that it is hard to distinguish it from fantasy. Here, like in many things, truth seems stranger than fiction—to say that magicians served in armies during times of war and that politicians held magical gatherings in their homes seems too fantastical to be true. However, both of these things are true. It is recorded that during Napoleon III’s Second French Empire the French dispatched the now legendary Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin to Algeria to show the might of the French empire through magic. In his memoir, Robert-Houdin writes that “I, a simple conjurer, was proud of being able to render my country a service” (372). The legendary magician, now hailed as The Father of Magic, was tasked with proving that “magic” performed by Algerian sorcerers was weak compared to French magic. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, an influential Parliamentary politician and writer, was heavily swayed by his own occult beliefs. Bulwer-Lytton would often host parties during which he would assume the persona of ‘Le Vieux Sorcier’ and tell the fortunes of his guests (Wilburn 1). It is easy to draw parallels between history and the fantasy Clarke describes in her novel, but
sometimes even those lines are blurred. Once again she pushes against fantasy, tilting it into the realm of nonfiction. Things that were once unbelievable are now believable, and even here she strives to bring *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* into a genre of its own.

It is tempting to believe that Clarke’s book belongs entirely to the realm of history, but since its publishing in 2004 it has had numerous modern impacts. While *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* is a relatively new book on the fantastic literature scene it has already inspired a slew of academic opinions on its historical nature, it’s bending of the fantasy genre, and its discussion of important social issues. However, while each of these contributes to a reader’s overall understanding of the novel and deepens the relationship between Clarke’s novel and the real world, current scholarship fails to touch on the long-lasting impact this novel has on fantastic literature. Clarke’s historical subversion

Once again, Susanna Clarke pushes against the fantasy genre by using intensely historical and realistic concepts to give *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* its own genre, something that is both history and fantasy at the same time. Clarke’s magicians often strive to create something out of nothing, spending much of the novel attempting magic that seems impossible. Clarke, on the other hand, manages to not just create something out of nothing but to create something out of nothing that feels familiar to the reader. *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* feels like a history book in all the right ways, bringing together history and fantasy in a way that was previously not attempted. Clarke’s work touches history and bounces off of it like a reflection, and her tale of two magicians in England has the power to transform not only itself but also an entire generation of fantastic literature. What Clarke has done is create something outside the bounds of “genre” or “category.” She has given her novel all the best aspects of history and fantasy and delivered them to the reader with the intent that they not be distinguished from each other, but understood within
each other. Susanna Clarke immerses us in this tapestry of historical fantasy, and it doesn’t take long before we feel that we are the ones reading those (not so dull!) papers upon the history of English magic.
Works Cited


