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## A Marvellous (Hi)story: An Analysis of *Tigana* by Guy Gavriel Kay

*Tigana*, a 1990 novel by the Canadian author Guy Gavriel Kay, is an exemplary work of the fantastic which simultaneously follows already established rules of the genre and sets foundations for new perspectives within fantasy, thus standing out from the generic boundaries. This analysis will deal firstly with the way in which the world of the novel is depicted as new, original and fantastic, with a special focus on the manner of introducing this fantastic world into the story. It will point out the most prominent elements of the fantastic in the novel, such as magic, which support the argument that *Tigana* can be considered a marvellous text. Apart from being set in a fantastic world, *Tigana* is at the same time based on the elements of medieval Italy, which are vividly exemplified in the particular context of medieval musicians and religion. This paper will explore the relation of the fantastic text to the 'real world' of the Middle Ages, but also to the relevant issues present in the contemporary world. It will take into consideration Rosemary Jackson's theory according to which fantasy emerges from the real world, at the same time problematizing and subverting it. Finally, the paper will enumerate the main thematic spheres in the novel and the ways in which they are emphasized from the point of view of the marvellous and the historical.



## Kay's Fantastic World-Building

*Tigana* tells the story of a group of individuals fighting to regain their province on an imaginary peninsula of the Palm, which is based on medieval Italy. The peninsula is divided between two foreign sorcerers, one of which destroyed the protagonists' homeland and erased other people's memory of it. In order to analyse how the world of *Tigana* is built, there have to be initial generic demarcations which imply awareness of direction and purpose of literary devices. This paper claims that the novel is a representative work of the marvellous, which is a sub-genre of the fantastic. According to the thematic division of fantasy, *Tigana* can be labelled as a piece of historical fantasy, where "a true historical setting is tweaked, given a new name and usually an unobtrusive magical framework" (Barnard n.p.). This part of the paper will discuss the magical and imaginary framework as an essential component of the marvellous.

### *The genre of Tigana*

In his book *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Tzvetan Todorov develops the theory of the fantastic, which he views as a genre "located on the frontier of two genres, the marvellous and the uncanny" (41). What is necessary to examine when attributing a fantastic work to one of these sub-genres is the reaction which the supernatural elements present in the text provoke in the implicit reader and in the characters. In the literature of the marvellous, according to Todorov, "supernatural elements provoke no particular reaction either in the characters or in the implicit reader. It is not an attitude towards the events described which characterizes the marvellous, but the nature of these events" (54). Therefore, fantastic events in marvellous texts are not presented as extraordinary, but rather as a given.

The same can be observed in *Tigana*, where the marvellous element is already introduced at the very beginning of the novel, in the prologue:

*Both moons were high, dimming the light of all but the brightest stars. The campfires burned on either side of the river, stretching away into the night. Quietly flowing, the Deisa caught the moonlight and the orange of the nearer fires and cast them back in wavery, sinuous ripples. And all the lines of light led to his eyes, to where he was sitting on the riverbank, hands about his knees, thinking about dying and the life he'd lived. (Kay 2, emphasis mine)*

The mention of the existence of the moons, which signals the improbability of the novel being located in an Earth-like world, is followed by what seems to be a standard realistic description of a location, almost cinematically descending from the sky towards a river (although no river called Deisa exists in our world, and even if it did, it would still be a fictionalized river). The character does not express wonder at the existence of the moons, which already confirms to the reader that (s)he can expect a marvellous narrative and accept the alternative world which it offers as a realistic one. Christine Brook-Rose also mentions this interconnection of the marvellous and the realistic: “the marvellous is often more akin . . . to realistic fiction: witness the heavy over-determination of the referential and symbolic codes in Tolkien's trilogy, which has all the trappings of the realistic novel” (123). This is proven by the fact that the narrator of the marvellous offers only “a minor (and over-determined) hermeneutic code, which can generate only a monological and minor metatext” (Brook-Rose 123). In this way, the reader is, similarly as in *Tigana*, over-encoded, and as Rosemary Jackson argues, “merely a receiver of events which enact a preconceived pattern” and does not play an active role, especially since (s)he ought to become a listener of a self-proclaimed realistic story (33).

### *The marvellous narrator*

The role of the narrator is crucial for the establishment of the sub-genres of the fantastic and in the creation of a convincing world. The voice telling a marvellous story, according to Jackson,

has absolute knowledge of *completed* events, its version of history is not questioned and the tale seems to deny the process of its own telling—it is merely reproducing established ‘true’ versions of what happened. The marvellous is characterized by a minimal functional narrative, whose narrator is omniscient and has absolute authority. (33, emphasis in the original)

Even though the omniscient narrator is presenting the supernatural, (s)he is very similar to a historian, not only by presenting the events as true, but also by setting them into a distant past which is subsequently perceived as being fixed and unalterable. In *Tigana's* prologue, the already introduced character is soon revealed as Saevar, a renowned sculptor for the Prince who accompanies him on the riverbank. Saevar becomes the first focalizer in the novel:

The Prince called him a friend. It could not be said, Saevar thought, that he had lived a useless or an empty life. He'd had his art, the joy of it and the spur, and had lived to see it praised by the great ones of his province, indeed of the whole peninsula. Then he'd turned, quickly, . . . and had ridden away with his Prince to war against those who had come upon them from over the sea. (3)

This paragraph announces that a war is about to happen on the imaginary peninsula, but also implicitly demonstrates the narrator's means of persuading the implied reader that they are dealing with a true account, giving evidence of the past, which is the most valid narratorial element of reality. After the prologue, the reader discovers that the described events were in themselves another past, 18 years before the story-

now, when an entire province called Tigana was destroyed by a conqueror named Brandin and its citizens were punished by erasing Tigana's name from history.

### *Supernatural elements in the novel*

The weapon which enables Brandin to commit such atrocities is magic, which is another essential element of the marvellous. Brandin is not the only character in the novel who has magical powers; there is another sorcerer called Alberico, and also the *riselka*, a creature perceived as supernatural by the characters. It is a mythological being to whom a legend is attributed, which says that if one man sees her, there will be a fork in his path, and if two see her, death will occur. The *riselka* is described by Brandin as not being “entirely human . . . Skin so white I swear I saw blue veins beneath . . . And her eyes were unlike any I've ever seen. I thought she was a trick of light, the sun filtering through trees” (189). The mythological basis for this character is used on purpose in order to upgrade the novel's the reality effect of medieval times which were embedded in superstition, albeit appropriated from another culture. The *riselka* is an important plot device as well, appearing in front of three men at the very end of the novel and inherently giving it an open ending. The existence of supernatural beings in a text is, according to Todorov,

one of the constants of the literature of the fantastic: the existence of beings more powerful than men. Yet, it is not enough to acknowledge this fact, we must further seek its significance. We can say, of course, that such beings symbolise dreams of power; but we can go no further. Indeed, in a general fashion, supernatural beings compensate for a deficient causality. (110)

Todorov claims that this “deficient causality” propels the human need to explain the events characterized by chance as having a predetermined cause. In the literature of

the marvellous, this is made possible because new laws of nature are introduced which do not exist in our world, such as the consequence of one of two people seeing the *riselka* in *Tigana*. This element of the supernatural is explained by Jackson as a consequence of a predominant culture, in this case a “supernatural economy,” where “otherness is transcendent, marvellously different from the human” (24). Jackson claims that a culture’s definitions of that which can be are exposed by presenting that which cannot be (23). The fact that the *riselka* determines the future of the characters questions the reader's own idea of fate and causality.

### *Geographical map as a paratext*

Another recurring element which indicates “that which cannot be,” and yet exists in the works of the marvellous, and especially of high fantasy, is the geographical map of the imaginary world. Kay’s use of it represents a part of Tolkien’s literary legacy:

In the field of fantasy, eras are measured as B.T. or A.T.—before Tolkien or after Tolkien. Certainly that is true in high fantasy, with its autonomous, secondary worlds. And it has particular application to the work of Guy Gavriel Kay, who helped J.R.R. Tolkien's son Christopher edit *The Silmarillion* in the 1970s. (Gunn n.p.)

Inspired by Tolkien, Kay uses geographical maps for a more clear depiction of the secondary worlds of the marvellous. *Tigana* is one of the nine provinces on the peninsula of the Palm, a land evoking Italy. Other than the shape, the difference between them is the fact that the Palm is a mirror image of Italy, extending towards the north. When the reader opens the book, (s)he is faced with the rules governing the world of the novel, and by looking at the map (s)he can more easily visualize this

world and willingly suspend disbelief. The narrator often refers to places without explaining where they are located, almost forcing the reader to return to the map, which creates a feeling of reading a historical text with geographical references. The map adds up to the narrator's implied claim that this fantastic world is a legitimate one, as real as the Earth, which is the key to the marvellous.

### ***Tigana's Relation to History and Reality***

However, this new world is not built for its own sake. Although it is new and different, it has a relation to the real and the present. The topography of the marvellous is, according to Jackson, considerably different from the one of the 'pure' fantastic, which is "bleak, empty," with "indeterminate landscapes, which are less defined as places than as spaces" (42). The places of the marvellous, including Tigana, belong to something that Jackson calls a "secondary, duplicated cosmos," which is "relatively autonomous" (42) and relates to the 'real' and its values only "retrospectively or allegorically." Since this new world is constructed using the elements of the real one, is an "exemplification of a possibility to be avoided or embraced" (43). *Building this world of possibilities, as observed by Ordway, Kay draws elements from the primary world, making a collage of its mythology, history and literature, all of it moulded by his own imagination, which makes it new and original, rather than a copy of pre-existing elements.*

#### ***Mirroring history***

*The reality which Tigana refers to is Italy, more specifically the Italy of the late Middle-Ages and early Renaissance. The 'Italianness' is achieved by the use of names that are non-existent, but evoke the Italian ones with their phonological quality.*

David Ketterer notes that "like Tolkien, Kay has a gift for inventing appropriate and evocative names and conveying the sense that these foreign words are part of an entire functioning language" (115). Such nouns are *trialla*, an imaginary bird; *Chiara*, a province on the Palm; and names like *Catriana*, the love interest of Devin, who is a singer in a troupe of musicians and one of the novel's protagonists.

The musical troupe traveling around the Palm trying to get a job in esteemed people's houses is one of the elements used to depict the timeframe of the novel. They participate in a large festival, evoking late-medieval festivals in Italy such as the Venetian one, which was world famous already before the 1500s, emerging from three holidays which

were also (and perhaps fundamentally) civic festivals, patriotic occasions that brought together in a showy procession the entire active citizenry. By the fifteenth century, the three holidays had to some extent flowed into one: "a vast spring festival complete with public entertainments," including a fifteen-day fair, held in the piazza and along the adjoining merchants' streets, the *Mercerie*. (Davis 25-26)

A similar festive atmosphere is depicted in *Tigana*, including the elements of the entertainment—the secular—showing the lives of musicians going to taverns and *khav* rooms<sup>9</sup>, drinking and betting. But, Kay does not stop at the secular and the profane. He completes the picture of a 'medieval' world by inventing a religious system, which was the centre of the medieval life in the real Europe. One of the basic rules of high fantasy, according to Janeen Webb, is "the fictional validity of the

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<sup>9</sup> Kay tends to blend in numerous motifs from various sources to add to the medieval atmosphere. The *khav* room motif comes from the Ottoman world.

tenets that underpin the world in which the characters move and act, and one of the most difficult areas in which to achieve this is the system of religious belief that guides the imagined society" (n.p.). Kay is successful in achieving the validity of this system, where the Triad of the goddesses Eanna and Morian and the god Adon and his priests is deeply embedded in the workings of the social system on the Palm. Kay founds the religious system of *Tigana* on Mesopotamian mythology:

[t]he mythological basis for *Tigana's* Triad recalls the story of the love of the mother-goddess Ishtar for the youthful Tammuz, whose yearly death is mourned to the music of flutes, and whose resurrection revives the natural world. The Semitic word *Adon* simply means *Lord*. (Webb n.p., emphasis in the original)

Religion adds up to the novel's clear vision of the late-medieval mindset. This makes *Tigana* in itself not significantly different from the history which it tries to mirror, since history, too, can only be accessed through its texts. It is in itself a text which historiographers organize by the means of emplotment (White 29), using literary devices.

An example of how *Tigana* reuses and changes history can be seen in the events on the island of Chiara. A Tiganian woman named Dianora, daughter of the sculptor Saevar from the prologue, is sworn to avenge her father killed by the sorcerer Brandin, but falls in love with him in the process. There is a legend on the island which says that Grand Dukes used to throw a ring to the sea and a woman would dive for it "to reclaim the ring from the waters and marry her Duke" (Kay 134). A similar tradition can be found in actual history books telling about late 15<sup>th</sup>-century Venice, where the doge's Marriage to the Sea would be performed by the doge "throwing a wedding ring into the water, to the accompaniment of fireworks, music,

and general aquatic splendour" (Davis 127). Kay adapts this historical source by giving it more pronounced legendary grounds in the history of the Palm and rendering it an important element of the plot, when a ring Dianora sees in the water prevents her from drowning and gives Brandin legitimacy to rule his part of the Palm.

Medieval Italy is mirrored by the Palm not only geographically and culturally, but also politically: they are not unified countries, but consist of a number of provinces. However, this is not the only extraliterary place and society referred to in *Tigana*. The Tyrants, two sorcerers that hold two halves of the peninsula, are foreigners; Brandin and his harem evoke the Ottoman Empire, while the other sorcerer Alberico might represent the Spanish, who actually ruled over parts of Italy in the Middle Ages (Findlen 21).

### *Subverting the real*

Another reality which *Tigana* reflects and subverts is the reality of the present moment, contemporary both to the author and his readers. Kay is not only a prime example of a post-Tolkien high fantasy writer, but also of a Canadian fantasy author. What encourages the Canadians to be more inclined to write fantasy than SF is, according to Andrea Paradis, "the fact that, unlike the nation of pragmatic technocrats to the south, Canadians tend to be more concerned with preserving our past—our separate cultural ties and heritages—than with speculating on our somewhat dubious future" (44). Fantasy is the more historical one of the two genres, notwithstanding the fact that this history is imaginary—the idea of cherishing the fixed past remains.

The problem faced by Kay's contemporaries, reflected in *Tigana* and recurring in high fantasy, is "the late twentieth century sense of innocence lost" (Webb n.p.).

Webb argues that there has been an erosion of the Romantic belief in the importance and value of the human identity, a subjectivity which “no longer expects transcendence.” The novel reflects this pessimism by thematizing the lost identity of a community. The magician cursed an entire province to the loss of its history, which is symbolized by the loss of the memory of its name. When put into the Canadian context, the novel discusses, in the framework of fantasy, cultural memory and constructions of Canadian identity, reflecting one of the key concerns of Anglophone Canadians—how to assert themselves against the American identity (Ketterer 3). The novel gives voice not only to the particular communities forced to replace their country and identity, but perhaps also to the globalized world and the loss of individual identity, of a person and of a country.

*Kay himself wrote about the relation between historical fantasy and reality, and the positive aspects of the imaginary:*

It takes incidents out of a very specific time and place and opens up possibilities for the writer—and the reader—to consider the themes, the elements of a story, as applying to a wide range of times and places . . . And, paradoxically, because the story is done as a fantasy it might actually be seen to apply more to a reader’s own life and world, not less. (n.p.)

This claim can be expanded to fantasy in general. Being a very malleable genre, it offers the possibility of a universal perspective, detaches itself from the particular and makes the reader focus on the general human issues, themes and values, regardless of their country of origin and socio-cultural status. The following part of the paper will analyse such universal themes illustrated in *Tigana*.

## Thematic Spheres: Memory, Power, Gender

The marvellous and the historical are both employed to emphasize the main themes in the novel, most prominent of which being the ones of memory—which is connected to the idea of the name—and history. The secondary themes are the question of gender and morality of power. The abovementioned use of history for the purposes of establishing the genre is not its only use in the novel. It is also present on the plot level. When Brandin decides to erase people's memory of Tigana's history, he is performing a conscious act of violence, aware of the fact that names and memory are “the fabric of identity” (Kay 153). Helen Siourbas claims that “[t]he sorcerer, . . . knowing that history can ensure the survival of identity, uses his power over language to rob his victims of both” (75). The Tiganians which survived remember their home, but those who were not born there cannot even hear the word Tigana. As a vengeance for his son's death in the battle 18 years ago, Brandin made sure that the memory of Tigana would die together with the last of its survivors. Devin, one of the two main focalizers in the novel (the other one is Dianora) was a child when Tigana was destroyed. He does not know the name of his province until Alessan, Tigana's exiled Prince and the leader of the group of revolutionaries, tells him the story. Devin finally feels completed after a lifetime of being identified as someone from another province, troubled by an inexplicable sense of displacement.

For the revolutionaries, memory is the only weapon left. In the second epigraph of *Tigana*, Kay quotes George Seferis: “[w]hat can a flame remember? If it remembers a little less than is necessary, it goes out; if it remembers a little more than is necessary, it goes out. If only it could teach us, while it burns, to remember correctly” (2). This is an underlying idea in *Tigana*. Apart from being a talented singer,

Devin has a gift of extraordinarily accurate memory, which stands in contrast with the brutality done to his people. The novel also deals with side-effects of having remarkable memory because Devin is forced to relive all negative experiences, such as losing a friend due to plague. Cobb claims that *Tigana* is “a meditation on the psychological importance of remembered and shared history” (n.p.). It contemplates the line dividing history from the past. The difference between the two, according to Cobb, is that “the past cannot be changed, but history—the memory and the record of the past—can most definitely and most destructively be changed” (n.p.). *Tigana*'s protagonists are set on a quest of making the past that they remember equal to history. The enemy sorcerer's action can be read as an extreme version of something that historians do all the time—recording a history different from the past.

The second thematic sphere of the novel exemplifies the question of how immoral a person can be in order to do the right thing. The ‘villain’ and the ‘hero’ in the novel are not complete opposites. Other than being a tyrant who erases an entire community, Brandin is a human being, observed from the point of view of his sworn enemy who falls in love with him. His actions can be justified by the profound grief he feels for the loss of his son. The fact that he is a sorcerer and that he can wield great power enables him to express his sorrow and have his vengeance. On the other hand, Alessan, the Prince of Tigana, uses his power to bind a wizard to himself, practically making him a slave, because he can be useful to him in the fight against Brandin. He shows no remorse for making that decision, but he explains his reasons to the wizard: “only because I have no home. Because Tigana is dying and will be lost if I do not do something” (Kay 252). Those who have power are faced with more difficult moral dilemmas and forced to make choices, and both Brandin and Alessan use the power at hand to achieve their personal goals. In the first epigraph of the novel, Kay quotes

Dante Alighieri's words about exile from *Paradiso*, which signals his adapting of "the idea that a rational person may make a conscious choice that will make a difference for all eternity" (Webb n.p.). The motif of magic makes the theme of power even more pronounced in the novel because the repercussions of moral choices are more far-reaching than in reality.

The theme of power is connected with the question of gender. This can be observed in Dianora's chapters, and it is even more articulated in a dialogue between her and Brandin, after she claims that a powerful woman is only complimented for her beauty: "'Do you think you have power, my Dianora?' She'd expected that. 'Only through you, and for the little time remaining before I grow old and you cease to grant me access to you'" (Kay 137). In the harem, which is called *saishan* in Kay's world and which Dianora describes as an "enclosed, over-intense, incense-laden world of idle, frustrated women, and half-men" (146), Dianora is one of the most powerful people whom everyone turns to when they want something from Brandin. This raises the question of whether she actually has the power over Brandin (and, through him, over half of the Palm) or only as much he allows it. According to Webb, "[a]lthough *Tigana* is not specifically feminist, it is certainly pro-female: its female characters are active, taking the initiative, and determining the course of events" (Webb n.p.). These women have agency, but they are still confined within the borders of a male-governed world. Dianora's actions mostly consist of using sex to manipulate Brandin. Similarly, Catriana, another strong female character in *Tigana* and a member of Alessan's group of rebels, seduces Devin so that he would not hear some secret information. In the end, both of these women die, the first one committing a suicide, and the second one fighting for her province. However, their deaths are not in vain; the quest for Tigana ends successfully and its name can be

heard again because both sorcerers are killed and the identity of the Tiganians is reconquered. This happy ending is highly unrealistic, which is certainly not a flaw, since fantasy does not aspire to conform to the rules of the extraliterary world.

## Conclusion

The novel *Tigana* is an example of how post-Tolkien high fantasy continues to set the story in an alternative and distant history, but does not fail to portray themes and characters relatable to the contemporary readership. This particular novel is set in an 'Italy' of the late Middle Ages, called the peninsula of the Palm, and its plot revolves around a group of rebels trying to reconquer their province, Tigana, and to defeat a mighty magician who erased the name of the province from history. Supernatural elements, beings like the *riselka* and extraordinary humans like sorcerers and wizards, intertwined with the elements of mythology and religion, create a magical atmosphere. This enables the marvellous to depict a world abundant of elements that can function only there, contrasting the real world and the phenomena which cannot exist in it and challenging the reader's beliefs and attitudes. Set in an alternative world of the marvellous, fantasy can detach itself from the particular and talk about universal matters. In *Tigana*, such an issue is the question of name, gender, power and memory, which is observed in parallel with history. Apart from raising universal issues, Kay's novel reflects Canadian cultural identity and the contemporary world characterized by individuals unsatisfied with their lives, experiencing loss of innocence.

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