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Give Me Bread and Salt: Transformation and Transgression from Food in Fantasy Literature

Introduction

To fans of the genre, one of the most appealing aspects of fantasy is the recurring use of magic: an innate force that allows characters to move beyond the laws of nature to transform people, places, and objects according to their desires. Often this magic will come in the form of words, items, mythical creatures, or required circumstances set out by the authors in their created worlds. For example, in J.R.R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring, the wizard Gandalf stops a monster, known as the Balrog, from passing by using his magic staff and uttering the words “you cannot pass” (344). In this instance, because he is a wizard Gandalf can use magic aided by a magic staff, and speaks specific words. The implication is that if a non-magical being were to do the same, the results would be vastly different. The use of magic is transformative and sometimes transgressive. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines transformation as “the action of changing in form, shape, or appearance; metamorphosis” ("Transformation, n1"). Tzetz Todorov, a leading scholar in the genre, puts forth that within fantasy there are two thematic categories to classify its elements: the first is themes of the self, and the second themes of the other (93). On themes of the self, he states, “the principle… [is] designated as the fragility between matter and mind… [which] engenders several fundamental themes: a special causality, pan-determinism; multiplication of the personality; collapse of the
limit between subject and object; and lastly, the transformation of time and space” (120). He refers to the causes of these transformations as being, in a general sense, from magic. His 1975 book *The fantastic: A structural approach to a literary genre* is one of the pioneering texts on analysis of the fantastic in literature. Since then analysis of the transformative aspect of magic has evolved from being simply for fantastic beings, into more mundane things such as food. On themes of the other he utilizes a psychoanalytic approach to speak of desire, stating, “the fantastic is concerned to describe desire in its excessive forms as well as its various transformations or, one may say, its perversions” (139). The perversion is of interest, as magical food often appears as, or is surrounding, a transgression. The OED defines transgression as “the action of transgressing or passing beyond the bounds of legality or right; a violation of law, duty, or command; disobedience, trespass, sin” (“Transgression, n1”). In this paper, I analyze the use of food in three contemporary and widely varying fantasy texts to demonstrate why something so mundane is integral to a genre concerned with the fantastic.

To situate food within the genre, I use three texts in which fantasy is presented in different forms: *Spirited Away* by Hayao Miyazaki, *Storm of Swords* by George R. R. Martin, and *Pan’s Labyrinth* by Guillermo Del Toro; the use of food in such varying texts suggest that it is a significant aspect of the genre, and not simply an element of individual stories. In her book, *The Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Farah Mendelsohn puts forth four categories of the fantastic: the portal-quest, the liminal, the intrusion fantasy, and the immersion fantasy. These three texts fit into three distinct categories within these, and are created by people from different parts of the world. *A Storm of Swords* is an epic novel written by an American author, and is the third volume in a

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1 See prominent fantasy critics such as Farah Mendelsohn, Rosemary Jackson, and E.S. Rabkin; Todorov’s text appears in the bibliographies of their work, and many more scholarly works on the genre.
high fantasy series called *A Song of Ice and Fire*. This text exemplifies what Mendelsohn refers to as the immersive fantasy, which “presents the fantastic without comment as the norm both for the protagonist and for the reader: we sit on the protagonist’s shoulder and while we have access to his eyes and ears, we are not provided with an explanatory narrative” (introduction xx). The second text I analyze is *Pan’s Labyrinth* by Mexican filmmaker Guillermo Del Toro. It is important to note that while this film was created by a Hispanic filmmaker, it is very much a story of Spain and Spanish history; the film crosses borders in its authority, and, as we will see later in this essay, moving over borders is a key component of supernatural food. *Pan’s Labyrinth* presents a curious problem when trying to fit within the four categories: namely, it fits into both an intrusion fantasy and a portal-quest fantasy. While it could be argued that because the protagonist, Ofelia, is on a quest to enter a portal into a magical realm throughout the film, I submit that it is an intrusion fantasy due to several factors. Per Mendelsohn, “the intrusion fantasy is the bringer of chaos… [it] takes us out of safety without taking us from our place…[and] has as its base the assumption that normality is organized, and that when the fantastic retreats the world, while not necessarily unchanged, returns to predictability” (introduction xxii). The magical realm enters ours in the character of the Faun, who subsequently creates havoc in the world of organized, fascist Spain. Though it is desirable from the guerillas’ point of view, and from Ofelia’s, it nonetheless changes the world the story is situated in. The third text I analyze is *Spirited Away* by Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki, which fits perfectly into the portal-quest definition: “a fantastic world entered through a portal… requir[ing] that we learn from a point of entry” (Mendelsohn, introduction xix). Each of these texts utilizes food as a plot device extensively, which we will see later in the introduction. The way in which the fantastic appears in each of the texts differs greatly, and fits within the categories Mendelsohn
puts forth; food is not fantastic, however it appears to the same degree and in the same driving manner that other fantastic elements do, which we will see later in the essay.

I use key critical concepts such as Roland Barthes food as a form of communication, J.L. Austin’s concept of performative words, Derrida’s deconstruction as a response to Austin, and Todorov’s ideas of pan-determinism and pan-signification to discuss the transgressive aspects of food in fantasy. French linguist Roland Barthes put forth that “[food]…is…a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior…[i]nformation about food must be gathered wherever it can be found: by direct observation in the economy, in techniques, usages, and advertising; and by indirect observation in the mental life of a given society” (21). He argued that when one consumes, buys, distributes, or advertises food, one is communicating messages and signifying meaning, much in the same way that written or verbal systems of communication will do. Taking something traditional words do, and mapping it on to food, presents an interesting twist to linguistic philosophy that applies to food in fantasy texts.

The use of traditional words was significantly analyzed by J.L. Austin in his 1975 text *How To Do Things With Words*. Austin puts forth that certain words said, in specific contexts, have a driving force in them not unlike magic. He refers to these as performative words. Jacques Derrida, in his later essay titled “Signature Event Context”, questions Austin’s notion of a perfect context, arguing that because of the ability to mimic, forge, quote, and otherwise corrupt words through both speech and text, the presupposed notion of a perfect context is nonexistent (3). In this sense, our ability to communicate is almost magic in and of itself. This brings us to Todorov’s idea that the fantastic in literature introduces both pan-determinism and pan-signification. It is the idea that fantasy creates a deterministic world in which everything is
related, and because of this the world is more significant than our primary world (112). These are the concepts I use when analyzing the fantastic.

Historically, food analysis in fantasy has been largely framed through the guise of children’s literature; this genre of literature is also a widely-discussed topic amongst critics of the genre generally, specifically with regards to the acquisition of agency from the transition of childhood to adolescence. J.R.R. Tolkien, himself both a critic and writer of fantasy, discusses the presupposed natural connection between children and the fantastic in his essay “On Fairy-Stories”, arguing that this stems from the fact that children are more willing to believe in magic, but adult readers must suspend their disbelief. In her book titled *Diana Wynne Jones: Children’s Literature and the Fantastic Tradition*, Farah Mendelsohn discusses the systems of magic used in fantasy texts, and demonstrates that disruptive fantastic events serve to give children agency (21). We see both Chihiro and Ofelia acquiring agency throughout their given texts, all stemming from magical food. Children’s acquisition of agency is natural: we expect over time that our young will be able to make conscious choices of their own, to learn to navigate systems of power and structure. Chihiro actively chooses not to eat the food her parents eat, and is not turned into a pig; however, she later learns that she must eat food to stay in the world of the spirits. Ofelia, on the other hand, disobeys her command to eat food, and yet is still able to navigate her way through tasks to make her final decision to not kill her brother to move to the magical realm. Once again, we see a direct relationship between food in the fantastic and borders, boundaries and restrictions, and then the acquisition of agency. These children’s texts use the acquisition of agency to show that transgressing over boundaries is essential to the process of learning right from wrong, and being able to make conscious choices at the individual level.

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2 This will be discussed in greater detail in the section for children’s literature.
The three texts feature food events with familial relations; these relations present questions of authoritarian relationships when we examine them through speech acts, and further complicate the idea of agency when examined using Todorov’s idea of pan-determinism. In *A Storm of Swords*, King Robb Stark attends his uncle’s wedding to a lady of House Frey; a House that subsequently transgresses host laws that guarantee safety for guests after eating food under one’s roof, and murders the Stark family. The betrayal is unexpected: not only is it extremely taboo to kill guests, but it is done after the wedding ceremony, meaning that by marriage Robb Stark and the House Frey are kin. This puts to question the nature of performativ speech, as presented by J.L. Austin. If we examine the act of eating using Roland Barthes idea of food as a system of communication, then transmit this onto Austin’s concept of performative utterances, then the act of eating should have protected the Stark family. However, when considering the events leading up to their death, including Robb Stark’s betrayal in marriage, Walder Frey’s large family and immense pride, and Catelyn’s act of defiance against the crown, we see a delineation that suggests these events were pre-determined inevitable outcome. Their ignorance of guest rights is an example of infelicities, or when something goes wrong in the utterance—or consumption of food as a language—and is not false (Austin 14). Catelyn Stark relies on guest rights, without any verbal or written promise from the Freys for their protection; for Jacques Derrida, all communication is subject to iterability, mimicry, and quotation. Because none of these things can occur with food consumption we have a context uncorrupted, meaning that the death of the Starks is the result of more broken boundaries. In *Pan’s Labyrinth*, Ofelia’s stepfather acts as authority over citizens, and regulates the consumption of food while eating extravagant meals with his guests. This lavish dinner scene is telling: while he indulges, Ofelia disobeys his and her mother’s request to be present at dinner to do a task set out for her by the Faun. Familial
authority is undermined by her transgression, and the food she is offered is not enough to tempt her to obey. The act of eating is a form of communication in these texts, and this shows familial authority being subverted, perverted, and otherwise ignored in a juxtaposed acquisition of agency that is somehow pre-determined, creating a binary of intentional opposition.

After we move from acquisition of individual agency, to the undermining of authoritarian leadership through familial bonds in a deterministic manner, I will then analyze food events as political tools to show transgressions in societal context. Political food events are most prevalent in *A Storm of Swords*, specifically in relation to Joffrey (Lannister) Baratheon’s marriage to Margaery Tyrell. This relationship is mostly seen through Sansa Stark, Robb’s sister and former betrothed to Joffrey. It is interesting to see through Sansa’s eyes, as the wedding is based solely on political gain, but she is very much concerned for her own well-being and interests. This comes in full-circle to the section on children’s literature and individual agency, but we see through her what occurs when the individual is lost in the turn of political dealings. Sansa learns that Lady Olenna, Margaery Tyrell’s grandmother, kills Joffrey, and she might have contributed to her choice to do so. This notion of the individual amongst the masses comes into play with how killing is described by Petyr Baelish, advisor to the throne in *A Storm of Swords*, and by General Vidal’s treatment of Spanish citizens in *Pan’s Labyrinth*. Death and destruction are themes Todorov refers to in his analysis of desire in fantastic texts (139). Lady Olenna expresses no desire to kill, but rather wants her granddaughter to survive and be happy; General Vidal, in contrast, shows a clear desire to kill. In this way, the individual set against political unrest can be much more significant than originally thought; food events show us how one can transgress, and then set to motion large political events that impact all of society.
From the individual, to familial, and then to societal, I will analyze magic’s ability to transform in the context of magical food in these texts, and show how this transformation leads to disruption. In Spirited Away, consumption of food leads to bodily transformation, while in A Storm of Swords and Pan’s Labyrinth the transformation is within the mind. Chihiro and her parents stumble upon a magical realm where they find mountains of food. Her parents begin to eat, and while she wanders off to explore they turn into pigs. The OED definition of transformation works well in this scenario: their bodies transform, rendering their personhood obsolete in favour of the form of animals. It is not anything fantastic or magical that transforms them: it is something trusted, mundane, and otherwise seemingly harmless that causes the transformation. In contrast, Pan’s Labyrinth features Ofelia entering a magical sub-realm of her own, in which magical food tempts her into eating it, which wakes a seemingly dormant beast. Her body is not changed; her personhood remains intact. However, in this scene, there is a very deliberate moment in which she looks up as though having an epiphany, and we see her then reach for the food in a transformation of mind. If we go by Todorov’s themes of fantasy, in which the barrier between the mind and matter is made fragile, or disappears entirely, this fragility stems from food itself, meaning the matter is what influences the mind in this scenario. In a genre that relies heavily on the supernatural and magic, it is one of the few items that seems ordinary that causes such change.

If we look closely at these transformations from food, we see that they are often due to transgressions on the part of one or more characters in the texts. Chihiro’s parents steal from spirits, despite multiple pleas from her to stop. Their intent was harmless; her father says he “has credit cards and cash”, and can pay for whatever they take. This suggests that the act of stealing is not the transgression, but rather blind consumer nature and gluttonous consumption are the
problems at play. When Ofelia eats the food from the table of the beast, she does so despite the Faun expressly telling her not to. She nearly reaps the consequences of this: after she returns from her second task and tells the Faun her transgression, he says her spirit is impure and that she will never return to the magical realm she so desperately wants to escape to. The transgressions that occur in *A Storm of Swords* are not from the act of eating, but rather from disregarding host and guest rights that are sealed from eating under one’s roof. The transgression is in societal taboos, rather than overconsumption and indulgence. The distinction is that while in the other texts consumption of food harms, in the world of *A Storm of Swords* it is meant to protect. However, the difference in transgressing act does not matter in this context: in each of the worlds, it is the act of consuming food that marks and changes the individual, and though the transgressions come in different forms they all involve the consumption of food.

Using the definitions from the Oxford English Dictionary, the important distinction between the transformation and transgression from food within the genre is thus: transformation suggests a morphing of form; transgression is the act of crossing over borders or laws. Food in these texts is used as a lens to show transgressions, all stemming from the ordinary, the mundane, and the most trusted items within a genre filled with the unreal, the supernatural, and the uncanny. This corruption of something so arbitrary is the core purpose of fantasy as a genre: its central goal is to move beyond boundaries, break rules and expectations, and corrupt even the most everyday things.

**Children’s Fantasy, Food, and the Acquisition of Agency**

Much of the scholarship done on food in fantasy literature is often, but not wholly, framed through the lens of children’s literature instead of the genre in general; scholars note that the magic in these texts symbolize adolescence and learning to navigate the world by acquiring
agency. Mary Werner examines Christina Rosetti’s *The Goblin Market* and C.S. Lewis’s *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, arguing that consumption of food acts as a sort of sexual sin in each text (20). She states that “the conflicting desires [of the authors] are thus explored vicariously in the world of the fantastic, enabling them to sample prurient delights through their fictional creations, subsequently purifying the characters so that the transgression leaves only a heightened wisdom” (21). Rather than looking at authorial issues coming through fantastic works, Lynne Vallone argues “that within children’s fantasy, the activities surrounding food are particularly fruitful for tracing changing notions of childhood through history” (47). She also examines texts by Christina Rosetti and C.S. Lewis, and uses their work as a framework to show that, to the Victorians, food was something to abstain from to remain pure, but to Lewis and contemporaries in post-war England it was a child-like indulgence that should be encouraged. Both submit that food is used as a means of giving direction and setting up rules. Anca Rosu examines food in George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*, concluding that Martin’s omission of medieval dietary restrictions polarizes food consumption between boundless frivolity and dire circumstances caused by hunger (466). Contemporary children’s fantasy texts suggest that food is not used to show morality in its consumption—or lack thereof—but rather is used as a lens to show that fantastic texts are concerned with how children navigate adolescence, break the boundaries set up for them, and acquire agency.

In his essay “On Fairy-Stories”, J.R.R. Tolkien addresses the relationship with children and the fantastic, and how suspension of disbelief is required to digest fairy-stories. He suggests that the common opinion that there is a natural connection between children and fairy-stories is wrong, and that the only reason this is suggested is because children are readier to believe these tales could happen within the real world (58-60). Certainly Ofelia, when the fairy realm is first
introduced to her in *Pan’s Labyrinth*, is only willing to continue her tasks because of her love for, and belief in, fairy stories. In this case it would be what Tolkien refers to as an “appetite for marvels” (60) that drives her to follow the fairy into the middle of the labyrinth, where she meets the faun and launches into her quest. Note the diction: Tolkien uses the word appetite, as though the act of consuming unbelievable literature is an act of consuming food itself.

This appetite does not appear to be a universal quality with children, as we see with Chihiro in *Spirited Away*. When her parents and she discover a tunnel, her parents decide to explore it, and she clearly expresses a desire to continue on their way. In contrast to Ofelia, Chihiro does not have an appetite for marvels, and looks at this exploration with fear. When they get into the spirit realm, Chihiro’s father smells food, and decides to follow it. It is his appetite that pulls them forward, where they discover what they believe to be an abandoned theme park. As they explore the village in the park, Chihiro’s mother notes, “how strange; they’re all restaurants”. Had the stalls in the park been a variety of different places, there would be nothing of note, nor of concern. What draws hers, and subsequently our, attention is the fact that they are all places of food service. Once her parents are turned into pigs, Chihiro runs away and repeats the words, “go away, go away, disappear” until her body very literally begins to disappear. Haku appears and offers her food, stating, “you have to eat some food from this world or you’ll disappear”, and then confirms, “don’t worry, it won’t turn you into a pig”. Within five minutes Chihiro learns not to trust food from the world of the spirits, and then that this same food is required for her to remain corporeal. These rules set out by the world of the spirits are broken without any reason or explanation on the part of characters of the world; we are asked to suspend our disbelief in them to believe the story.
Food adds a certain dimension of believability to any text, as well as elements of desire. Peter Hunt, an expert in children’s literature, suggests that “food is central to the fantasy world of nostalgia... because it is central to children’s behaviour, and to adults in retreat” (9). Hunt argues that the use of food in children’s literature is to show desire where no sexuality or violence can be shown. While this may be the case for children’s literature, it is certainly applicable for the presence of food in texts beyond children’s literature as well, as food is central to all people’s behaviour. Hunt’s remark about “adults in retreat” fits well with Tolkien’s notion of fantasy being used for escapism in adulthood. Tolkien also equates escapism with a form of nostalgia, stating, “this...is the modern and special... ‘escapist’ aspect of fairy-stories, which...out of the past have only become ‘escapist’ in their appeal through surviving from a time when men were...delighted with the work of their hands into our time, when many men feel disgust with man-made things” (83). He gives other escapist aspects of fantasy, such as the ability to escape to a world where humans can talk to beasts, or a world in which we can escape from death (84-85). This idea of escape implies an actual displacement from one place to another, either from our world into the world of fantasy, or from our time into a time in the past. If fantasy is escapist, then food is used as a tool to make the world’s they are situated in believable; to orient the reader using something tangible, familiar, and necessary to our world.

This realistic aspect of food is used to stand in stark contrast with the systems of magic featured in fantasy texts; for many children’s fantasy books, the negotiation of magic is used to show a transitory phase. Farah Mendelsohn observes that, in children’s literature, “magical events and intrusions...are a common metaphor for the state of uncertainty that exists on the threshold of adulthood and for the disruptions of the every day: divorce, death, and poverty”
Chihiro encounters her magical experience on the backdrop of a big move: her family is being displaced because of her father’s work, and she is forced to leave her friends behind to move to a new location. Pan’s Labyrinth, though not considered a children’s movie due to graphic violence, also occurs during a time of great transition for Ofelia, the child protagonist. Her pregnant mother moves her to the countryside to be closer with Ofelia’s stepfather, the baby’s father. It is interesting that both these texts take place during familial displacement, suggesting that the linear transition of one place to the next should be disrupted.

Mendelsohn analyzes Diana Wynne Jones as having children negotiate magic differently than in most other children’s texts, stating “that power is a direct consequence of the acquisition of agency…the ability to make conscious choices—the realization that one obeys because it is the wise thing to do, rather than because an order has been given by an authority figure—[which] cannot be acquired solely with the conferring of power” (DWJ 21). Both Chihiro and Ofelia acquire more agency throughout the texts, with different consequences. Chihiro begins by choosing not to eat the food, despite her parents telling her to do so. She navigates the world and gains agency in other parts: she chooses to feed the medicinal ball to No Face, which saves the bath house; she uses train tickets to visit Zeniba to save Haku; finally, she is set with the task of choosing which pigs are her parents amongst many. Her final and defining act is a choice, and one which is developed throughout the storyline. Ofelia, in contrast, begins by following orders set out by the Faun. She completes the first task under his direction, then moves on to the second. The Faun expressly tells her not to eat food from the table of the monster, but she does. It is of interest that despite no verbal statement given, there is a very deliberate and clear moment when we see Ofelia show interest in the food, which suggests that she does not make the conscious

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3 Will be referred to as DWJ further.
choice to eat, but rather that she could not resist the food. After disobeying the Faun and escaping the monster, Ofelia expresses remorse, but learns that she can make these mistakes and still reach her goal. It is this realization that leads her to her final acquisition of agency, when the Faun tells her she must kill her brother to enter the magical realm, and she refuses. It is through these moments of magical negotiation with food, in a time of transition and disruption for these young girls, that we see them acquire agency through the breaking of rules and requests set out by the adults or adult figures in their lives.

It is of note that Pan’s Labyrinth is not considered a children’s film, despite using many tropes familiar with children’s stories, food being one of them. It features themes of extreme violence and destitution, on the backdrop of fairy-tales and fables. The recurring use of a lullaby as the theme song, coupled with princesses, fairies, and magical creatures all appear in timeless children’s stories, but the rating of the movie is 14A because of violence and gory scenes. Del Toro does this deliberately: he tells a children’s story in the same way they would have been told in the past, from such writers as the Grimm’s brothers and Perrault. On the back cover of the film is a quote by film critic Richard Roeper, saying, “one of the most exciting and visually impressive adult-audience fables since The Lord of the Rings movies” (italics added). If we return to the idea Peter Hunt suggested about food being a feature in children’s texts because it is a central behaviour of children, in Pan’s Labyrinth we have a realistic connection between the world of adults and children. However, not only is it a connecting text between children’s literature and adult literature, it is also a text that crosses boundaries: it uses transcends temporal limits by using old-fashioned storytelling, and it breaks boundaries of audience by being a fairytale about a child, told for adults.
Returning to Tolkien’s argument about the relationship between children and the fantastic, we see that this idea of trust and believability is something he posits as essential to creators of the fantastic; when we see magical food, it demonstrates that corruption of this trust and believability is the primary concern of the genre. Tolkien argues thus:

“what…happens is that the story-maker proves a successful ‘sub-creator’…[who] makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are…inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic…has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from the outside. If you are obliged…to stay, then belief must be suspended…But this suspension of disbelief is a substitute for the genuine thing, a subterfuge we use when condescending to games or make-believe, or when trying…to find what virtue we can in the work of an art that has for us failed” (60).

Food, and other tangible aspects of the Secondary World, all contribute to this suspension of disbelief. While the authors create fantastic worlds that seem realistic to suspend disbelief, they also create rules surrounding the world to make readers feel a certain safety within the confines of something so foreign to their own world. However, in each instance where they introduce food, something considerably safe and trustworthy, characters such as Ofelia and Chihiro’s parents transgress over rules. This safety created by familiar things is corrupted; borders are crossed, and rules are broken, demonstrating the main concern of children’s fantasy literature is to corrupt childhood, and this notion of corruption and transgressions crosses into adult fantasy texts as well.

**Family Ties and Corrupted Authority**

As we have already established that fantastic texts are used to show a delineation of children acquiring agency, it is important to analyze how food is used to show familial relationships within each text, and how this acquisition of agency is further complicated with the deterministic nature of the fantastic in texts: it suggests that agency is nonexistent, and presents a
notable opposition. As we recall from the introduction, Tvetzan Todorov put forth the idea that
tFantastic texts were subject to both pan-determinism and pan-signification. Determinism
undermines the notion that fantasy is about being able to make free choices for oneself, which
creates an opposition similar to the concept Derrida puts forth about undecided meaning. Pan-
signification also links to Derrida, with the idea that simply because of the interplay between
things in the world of the fantastic means each has significance. To Derrida the signifier is
inessential, opposing the idea that everything is significant simply because of its relationship.
This interplay of oppositions between agency and determinism and signification of something
that is insignificant shows that fantasy is concerned with breaking the boundaries of meaning and
context for while complicating character relationships.

In *A Storm of Swords*, we see Robb Stark’s death through a third person focal perspective
of his mother, Catelyn, and come to understand her misgiving with the entire scenario from
beginning to end. Her hesitation with Robb’s decisions begin when he returns to Riverrun with a
wife of a lesser house, despite being promised to a woman of House Frey. “The first thought that
flew through Catelyn’s mind was, *No, that cannot be, you are only a child,*” (Martin 194) it says,
and then goes on to state: “The second was, *[a]nd besides, you have pledged another... The third
was, *Mother have mercy, Robb, what have you done*” (ibid.). Catelyn’s reaction begins with
viewing him as a child, too young to marry, despite having promised him to another woman in
the previous book⁴. Her instinct begins with age and his agency, rather than the pact that she had
made for him. In this instance, Robb makes a choice that inevitably ends with his betrayal, in
part because he did not heed his mother’s direction. Alternately, Catelyn urges him to eat upon
their arrival, and Robb mocks her.

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Catelyn shifted in her seat uncomfortably. “If we are offered refreshment when we arrive, on no account refuse. Take what is offered, and eat and drink where all can see. If nothing is offered, ask for bread and cheese and a cup of wine.”
“I’m more wet than hungry…”
“Robb, listen to me. Once you have eaten of his bread and salt, you have the guest right, and the laws of hospitality protect you beneath his roof.
Robb looked more amused than afraid. “I have an army to protect me, Mother, I don’t need to trust in bread and salt. But if it please Lord Walder to serve me stewed brow smothered in maggots, I’ll eat it and ask for a second bowl,” (671).
Robb does not trust in guest rights the way his mother does, and puts his faith in his army. In this instance, he is correct, and yet his army is not present when needed. Neither is Grey Wind, his direwolf, which Catelyn laments as well: “[t]he sight of the dogs made Catelyn wish once more for Grey Wind, but Robb’s direwolf was nowhere to be seen[,] [as] Lord Walder had refused to allow him in the hall” (696). Robb, only a boy of 16 but made out to be so much older than he is, believes he is acquiring agency through his kingship and inspiration of men. As we see with his relationship with Catelyn, his mother, the context of his acquisition of agency is corrupted, and it is this same acquisition that leads to the many transgressions that both he and the Frey’s perpetrate through these food events.

If we examine this acquisition of agency, it’s corruptibility, and Todorov’s idea of pan-determinism, we see a correlation that holds that fantasy relies on both the fantastic and the mundane to break boundaries: this can be seen in the willful ignorance of parental guidance, and the corruptibility of food events in *A Storm of Swords*. Todorov states that “Pan-determinism has…a natural consequence [of]… ‘pan-signification’: since relations exist on all levels, among all elements of the world, this world becomes highly significant… beyond the primary, obvious meaning, one can always discover a deeper meaning” (112). “Pan-determinism” seems to be a creation of Todorovs: the combination of “pan” as a combining form and “determinism”. Pan as a combining form is defined as “forming terms relating to the whole of the universe or mankind, or denoting that the second element exists or operates at a universal level” (OED “Pan-” 1). The
definition of determinism is, “the philosophical doctrine that human action is not free but necessarily determined by motives, which are regarded as external forces acting upon the will” (OED “determinism” 1). There is almost a magical quality of “external forces”, but a juxtaposition in that these forces create each action we do, without being able to avoid it. It is of interest that in a genre concerned with power, the suggestion of “pan” and “determinism” combined is that universally there is no acquisition of agency, or autonomous power. This presents opposition to the acquisition of agency, creating two ends of a binary in one genre: on the one hand, navigation of magic leads to the ability to make free choices, and on the other these choices are pre-determined by unnamed and unspecified forces.

We see another duality when Robb acts both as a king and brother, and when Catelyn asserts authority both as a parent and a political advisor. Catelyn first suggests Robb leave his clandestine bride at home while they travel to the wedding (Martin 621). “Robb could not deny the sense of that[,] yet all the same, he resents me for it, Catelyn thought wearily[, ] he misses Jeyne already, and some part of him blames me for her absence, even though he knows it was good counsel” (ibid.). She treats their relationship formally, considering her motherly advice as counsel, but senses his feelings towards it. In this juxtaposition of soft, motherly feelings, and hard, political counsel, we see a boundary crossed in their relationship. On their journey to the wedding, Robb suggests legitimizing his bastard brother, Jon Snow, and Catelyn advises him not to. On that same journey, Robb creates a battle plan with his other advisors, and leaves Catelyn out of both the planning and the battle. Catelyn’s role is questioned and undermined because she frees Jamie Lannister, enemy to Robb and killer of many of his men, days before. However, when she is left out this does not come to mind. “Is this my punishment for opposing him about Jon Snow [,] or for being a woman, and worse, a mother” (635) Catelyn thinks. We once
again see her train of thought, this time putting the familial bond (that of Jon Snow turning from a bastard child into a legitimate one) first next to her concerns about her relationship to Robb. The dual relationship of brother versus king layered with legitimate brother versus illegitimate creates borders that can be crossed, but only with the right words and specific contexts.

This conversion into an illegitimate brother into a legitimate one, and therefore a potential successor for Robb's throne, is an interesting fantastic take on J.L. Austin's concept of perlocutionary words; Ofelia has a similar instance where her words put to question her familial relationship. Robb decides not to heed his mother, and chooses to legitimize his brother, stating, "I command you now as my true and loyal lords to fix your seals to this document as witnesses to my decision" (Martin 636). Robb's use of a written document aligns itself with Derrida's concept of corrupted context in the form of written communication versus spoken. Derrida states, "by virtue of its essential iterability, a written syntagma can always be detached from the chain in which it is inserted or given without causing it to lose all possibility of functioning, if not all possibility of 'communicating,'" (9). This broken chain of communication is only possible with written communication, but it does not negate the fact that context can be corrupted for methods of communication separate from words, such as communication through food. Derrida uses written communication to demonstrate the idea of corruptible context; food consumption is also a lens to show corruptible communication systems as well. Like written text, food is consumed separate from the person who gives the meal; one cannot eat for another person, therefore the act of consuming food relies on the same absence required for written words. Derrida relies on this absence to illustrate what he means, however spoken language also involves corruption of context because of its ability to be mimicked or quoted. In Pan's Labyrinth Ofelia's mother asks her to call the general father, saying, "it's just a word, Ofelia...just a word". Ofelia does not
respond at this time, but later in the film adamantly insists that “he is not [her] father” to Mercedes, to the point that she responds to the girl by saying, “you’ve made that quite clear”.

Though the act of saying it does not make General Vidal her father, Ofelia believes speaking the words have more meaning than they do. Like Robb, Ofelia does not put her trust in her mother, undermining their relationship and corrupting familial ties.

Ofelia’s relationship with her stepfather, General Vidal, posits another corrupt relationship both within the family, and within the larger sociopolitical context of fascist Spain. We have already seen that she does not consider him a father, despite pleas from her mother, but she also resists his authority in ways similar to the guerrilla fighters in the woods surrounding the mill.

Her first task is given to her through a picture that appears in a magical book, and she must complete it during a dinner hosted by her stepfather and mother. Ofelia’s mother tries to sway her with a beautiful dress and new shoes, and reminds the little girl how important the dinner is. It is of note, however, that this extravagant dinner takes place in the context of a country starving because of rations enforced by General Vidal. Not only does Ofelia disobey her mother and stepfather by not attending the dinner, but she does so by also relinquishing food in a time of hunger. This is done deliberately: the first task involves climbing into a starving tree to kill a greedy toad that sucks the nourishment away from it. The two parallel contexts set up a complimentary route to where the rest of the story will go: fascist Spain will be broken, and Ofelia will complete her tasks and join the realm without hunger or pain. What these scenario’s do not demonstrate, however, is the boundaries and borders transgressed that are required to achieve these things, and how it is this transgression that is integral to fantasy.

The binary oppositions of agency and determinism, coupled with the duality of relationships for the characters, and their relationships creating a signification that both means
nothing and yet is highly important shows a corruptibility and complication in the ways family and community is portrayed in the fantastic. This complication demonstrates that fantasy’s primary concern is the disruption, corruption, and breaking of boundaries.

**Food Events, Political Drive, and the Individual in Society**

The food events shown in the texts are often under the guise of political gain, be they for weddings of major figures, or set on the backdrop of a starving society; the way we see these larger events is through individuals, showing that in a larger society they can have a major impact. Using Todorov’s idea of desire in the fantastic, we see death and destruction at food events being both condemned and welcome in *A Storm of Swords*, depending on the context and the situation. Desire is significant: some characters’ motivation is for a personal family relationship, while others it is for simple destruction. This notion of mixed messages occurs in *Pan’s Labyrinth* as well, but through the guise of two different monsters. Seeing characters navigate political happenings at the individual level brings us back to personal agency, and this full-circle movement allows us to see the impact directly.

Dinners such as the one general Vidal host are commonly used as a tool for political gain, and overindulgence of food is the mark of them; we see similar situations with political corruptibility and transgressions with dinner events in *A Storm of Swords*. Sansa, sister to Robb Stark and captive of the Lannisters, is invited to a meal with Joffrey [Lannister] Baratheon’s new bride, Margaery Tyrell. “*And sup with my replacement,*” (Martin 76), Sansa thinks, then continues: “[p]erhaps she was doing Margaery Tyrell an injustice[,] [p]erhaps the invitation was no more than a simple kindness…*it might just be a supper[,] but this was the Red Keep, this was King’s Landing, this was the court of King Joffrey Baratheon…and if there was one thing that Sansa Stark had learned here, it was mistrust” (ibid.). The dinner is a political ploy set up by
Margaery Tyrell’s grandmother, Lady Olenna, to better learn of Joffrey through Sansa, and even features all of Sansa’s favourite food. “Sansa’s fingers tightened around her spoon[,] the truth? I can’t. Don’t ask it, please, I can’t” (84). We see through her free-indirect discourse that despite being wooed by music and delicious food, Sansa still feels the heavy burden of political ties, and only after more coercion does she tell the Tyrell women surrounding her the truth about Joffrey’s violence.

This reason for Lady Olenna’s interest in Joffrey manifests later in the text, when she winds up being the perpetrator of his poisoning at his wedding to her granddaughter. As the Tyrells are wealthy, the marriage between Margaery and Joffrey is a politically savvy one. The ceremony is marked entirely by overindulgence: Lady Olenna notes on page 817, “77 courses, I daresay[,] don’t you find that a bit excessive, my lord?” (Martin’s italics). On the following page Tyrion, known for his gluttonous consumption of food and drink, thinks to himself “one done, seventy-six to come. Seventy-seven dishes while there are still starving children in this city, and men who would kill for a radish. They might not love the Tyrell’s half so well if they could see us now” (818). The Tyrells are beloved for their abundant harvest, and yet did not oppose fiercely against such an extravagant wedding. Later, after Joffrey is poisoned and Sansa escapes with Peter Baelish, she learns the truth of who killed the young king. “Lady Olenna was not about to let Joff harm her precious darling granddaughter, but unlike her son she also realized that under all his flowers and finery, Ser Loras is as hot-tempered as Jamie Lannister,” (Martin 936) Petyr explains, “[t]oss Joffrey, Margaery, and Loras in a pot, and you’ve got the makings for kingslayer stew[,] her son was determined to make Margaery a queen, and for that he needed a king…but he did not need Joffrey” (Martin’s italics). Petyr, also known for his political cunning, understands the motives behind Lady Olenna killing Joffrey, and knows that the Tyrell
political gain can still happen without the brutal young king marrying her granddaughter. Note the use of stew as a metaphor: Petyr equates the violent potential slaying of a king to a common meal, yet does not equate the poisoning as equally violent, even though it also is a slaying of the king. This contradiction is of interest, as it appears the act of murder is only deemed negatively when it involves passionate anger rather than political gain.

Murder through reserved passionate anger is something we see in General Vidal as well, specifically targeting average citizens surrounding the mill, and without any concern for how he is viewed. About 17 minutes into the movie, he is alerted to people in the woods. The people turn out to be farmers living around the mill out hunting rabbits. General Vidal rigorously questions the men, which the son responds with “if my father says so, he was hunting rabbits” (Del Toro). This suggests that by nature of the fact that he spoke means the father speaks the truth. Vidal does not listen, and proceeds to beat the son to death, and then shoots the father. He then explores what the men were carrying, and finds rabbits in their bag. Vidal asks Mercedes to prepare the rabbits in a stew, despite the fact that she says “they’re too young”. His concern is not for the life he wasted by killing humans, but by the food he might waste even. His politics rely heavily on food; one of the claims made by the fascists is that in Franco’s Spain there is bread for every family. For Vidal, the act of wasting food is more of a transgression than killing innocent men, because politically it would be bad to waste his party’s main platform.

This brings us back to Todorov’s idea that fantasy is concerned with desire, especially sexual and violent desires; fantasy is concerned with transgressing over boundaries to pervert and distort our base human desires. Todorov discusses desire as part of “themes of the other”, or the second main theme of the fantastic. He states: “[t]he supernatural does not manifest itself with equal intensity in each of these cases: it makes its appearance in order to give the measure
of sexual desires which are especially powerful and in order to introduce us into life after death[;] in the other hand, cruelty or human perversions generally do no surpass the limits of the possible, and we are here concerned with what we might call the socially uncanny and improbable” (139). General Vidal kills the two men, and belongs to a political group that slowly starves a whole nation, showing us his deepest desire for violence. Lady Olenna, with the help of Petyr Baelish, expresses no desire for violence, but kills out of necessity for her granddaughter. This manipulation of food shows what Todorov expresses in regard to the fantastic and its concern for desire; however, it is not a fantastic thing that drives this. The use of food suggests that his idea of expressed desire in fantasy goes beyond the fantastic and into the mundane, meaning the breaking of boundaries transcends only those fantastic things into every aspect of each text.

Food is used as a tool for commentary on the politics of hunger and gluttony in each text, but the relationship between the two opposing forces is strongest in both Pan’s Labyrinth and Spirited Away. In her paper titled “Matter out of Place”, Susan Napier examines Spirited Away as a tool to cultural recovery in an increasingly globalized Japanese society. She says, “not only does Spirited Away... bring up issues of cultural identity and...cultural collapse, [but] it does so on a far more idiosyncratic and...more imaginative and more disturbing level than...previous work, highlighting certain problematic issues, including toxicity between generations, environmental pollution, and the waning of traditional mores and customs, that are central to modern Japanese society” (291). This list encompasses many things that break boundaries and borders, transgressing through political commentary on modern Japanese society. According to Napier, “the liminal condition of the young girl may be seen as a metaphor for Japanese society which, over the last decade, seems to be increasingly in limbo, drifting uneasily away from the
values and ideological framework of the immediate postwar era” (297). Chihiro is seen as a political figure, and her navigation throughout the world of the bathhouse brings her into contact with many symbols of overconsumption, first with her parents eating gluttonous amounts of food, then with the monster No Face eating anything and everything within the setting. The solution for No Face, however, is to give it medicine from the River Spirit, suggesting that while overconsumption is a transgression, consuming specific foods (the River Spirit’s medicine in particular) results in fixing the problem. Ofelia experiences a similar solution when completing her first task against the toad, in which she must feed it medicine to have it regurgitate everything it has eaten. Her next monster juxtaposes this. The monster for the second task is in front of a lavish meal, and yet is completely still and dormant in front of it. It is tall, and slim, with loose skin similar to what happens when one loses a large amount of weight, suggesting that this creature once was very fat. It’s appearance and lack of eating the gluttonous meal presents an opposition to the political commentary previously given about overindulgence: it suggests that too much abstinence from food leads to madness. These two texts take deliberately juxtaposing viewpoints on food consumption throughout their narratives.

When we see the individual navigate multiple motivations politically, along with two separate messages given in their quests, we see personal agency coming to work in a larger context. On the one hand we have a pre-determined set of actions that give individuals agency, while on the other we have that agency exerted in a larger societal context. The fantastic texts offer this on a backdrop of political commentary on modern societies.

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