

The Alchemy of History: Balancing Alteration and Retention in *A Master of Djinn*



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It will surprise no one when I say that fantasy fiction—indeed, all fiction—is fundamentally, to some degree, a reflection of our primary reality. As Tolkien notes, if a fairy story is not actually about people, it is “as a rule not very interesting. [...] for if elves are true, and really exist independently of our tales about them, then this also is certainly true: elves are not primarily concerned with us, nor we with them” (“On Fairy-Stories” 113). No matter how foreign the storyworld may feel, it is made up of references to our own: Ursula K. Le Guin’s Earthsea series is shot through with a cosmology pulled from Taoism and populated with people as familiar as ourselves; epic fantasies by Brandon Sanderson are rife with bits of various cultures scrambled together to generate in-world identities. Alternate history fictions operate differently because they openly proclaim their referential time and space. They retain a recognizable historicity while simultaneously upending that history. I will use P. Djèlí Clark’s 2021 Nebula Award-winning novel, *A Master of Djinn*, to examine the rhetorical work found when an alternate history fantasy balances elements of retention and alteration to generate a storyworld that is both recognizable history and fantastical otherworld.

First, though, to clarify the issue of genre. When written as science fiction, alternate history normally presents a thought-experiment concerned with questions of causation: add Divergence A to Historical Moment B and generate Alternate Reality C. In this type of story, historical moments are the materials that an author adjusts and shuffles around to achieve an end, with an emphasis on plausibility. But when the divergence is fantastical and not debatable, we must turn away from causation and focus more on how the world and the historical record are altered and how they remain the same. After all, there is only so much insight into causation we might glean from a world wherein the Nazis won thanks to an alliance with Cthulhu. But we can track how certain historical markers, such as the Nazis themselves, remain in a non-historical world and are recontextualized in a space where historical icons transform into powerful narrative symbols. In this way, alternate history fantasies do not ask us to seriously think about how to plausibly change history, but rather to meditate upon how we imagine impossible changes might comment upon the historical record.

A Master of Djinn is set in 1912 in a version of Cairo that, forty years earlier, was flooded by magic and magical creatures: djinn appeared in Egypt; goblins in Germany; we might presume that the fae now inhabit Ireland, and Baba Yaga is likely traipsing about Russia. Armed with supernatural powers and wondrous machines built by the djinn, Egypt preempts British colonization (which would have begun in 1882) and becomes a world power, with Cairo now a

rival to London and Paris as major global metropolises (2). There is a doubling effect here. As readers we feel historically situated thanks to surface details that signal the early twentieth century (unprecedented urban sprawl and industrialization); greater international interconnectedness; jazz music; a proliferation of technology throughout society; there's even talk about European powers on the brink of war. However, the historical record is upset by the presence of magic and djinn, a government agency that specializes in supernatural matters, airships, and, of course, Egypt's position in global politics.

The decision to use the strategies of fantasy rather than science fiction here speaks to one of fantasy's virtues, namely the ability to make the impossible cogently believable. Or, as Tolkien puts it, "Fairy-stories were plainly not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability" ("On Fairy-Stories" 134). It is difficult to imagine a rational version of the nineteenth century, with the imperial rat-race driven by industrialization and facilitated by new technologies, in which Britain did not colonize Egypt. To overturn colonialism, and specifically by the colonized, requires the irrationality of fantasy. The Maxim gun gave Western powers the ability to so thoroughly overwhelm the peoples of Africa and elsewhere that magic is the only means available to flip the script. Clark hijacks an era that Eric Hobsbawm calls the "Age of Empire," referring to the decades leading up to World War I. This era was marked by a rapid spread of Western powers across the globe in a mad dash to control the resources necessary for rapid industrialization. Clark subverts this, first by empowering nations that have been subjugated in our timeline to overturn colonization on their own terms, and second, by changing the parameters of industrialization, with djinn who can produce magical machines. Yet these intrusions are a complication, not necessarily a solution to the problems of history. The intervention has enabled colonized nations to throw off their oppressors, but the human tendencies that underpin imperialism remain and must still be confronted.

The tension between recorded and counterfactual history means the narrative structure of an alternate history is intrusion fantasy, since something supernatural has inserted itself into a recognizable world. According to Farah Mendlesohn, the intrusion fantasy resolves by either repelling or integrating the foreign element (115). While some alternate histories do end by restoring the original course of events, the majority of alternate histories negotiate and integrate to produce a fully counterfactual world. In Clark's *Dead Djinn Universe*, the alternate history is already the new normal for the characters. The heroine, Agent Fatma of the Ministry of Alchemy, Enchantments, and Supernatural Entities, reflects how she "was born into the world al-Jahiz left behind: a world transformed by magic and the supernatural" ("A Dead Djinn in Cairo"). The intrusion means that we can both recognize the historical storyworld for what it is while also recognizing its ability to signify its differentness. We dwell upon how Fatma's world improves upon our own, with women enabled to work in professions such as magical law enforcement, more national autonomy, and so forth. And yet, this world means more to us because it is directly referencing a recognizable past.

FEATURES

The Alchemy of History

History itself becomes a major source of myth for alternate history fantasies. From postmodern historiography we recognize that history cannot be truly apprehended and we only know it through texts (Hutcheon 16). However, much of history becomes mythic in our cultural consciousness as we rehash stories in an effort to explain how we have arrived at our current moment, and certain events loom so enormously in our collective imagination, similar to how Rome and Camelot are often used to signify a Golden Age, historical evidence notwithstanding. In *Stories About Stories*, Brian Attebery argues that fantasy finds its roots in mythology, reimagining and updating myths to speak to our sensibilities and our cultural moment. Alternate history fantasies signify the recognizable past while introducing any number of mystical novum. In so doing, the altered past can embody and explore the story we have told about it, questioning the permanence of that story and introducing useful complications. This carries us beyond questions of causation and dwells upon the matter of history as a story, something we can interrogate.

The doubling of canonical and counterfactual history is an essential ingredient to alternate history. The storyworld must achieve “a ‘Goldilocks’ zone” between the historical and the counterfactual, according to Catherine Gallagher, which “is neither too close nor too far for comparison” (73). Within this zone, historical actors (whether human characters or larger, metonymic entities) are always charged with a doubled meaning; the reader must track when history maintains itself and when it deviates, and the resulting dialogue carries the rhetorical meaning of the utterance. The author must decide what to retain and what to alter. Some of these choices naturally follow as consequences of the text’s ontological divergence, and others perform the wish fulfillment described by Tolkien. Reorganizing early twentieth-century geopolitics directly stems from imbuing Egypt with supernatural powers; filling Cairo’s airspace with steampunk airships is a fun affectation that directly reflects Clark’s own preferences.

Important to an alternate history is the way the text engages with the historical process, by which I mean how the text represents historical developments. The intrusive element might cause significant changes in the course pursued by time’s arrow, but historical events have a degree of momentum. However, that momentum is still subject to a slightly different course and impact. Rather than simply wipe away the intervening events, alternate histories hypothesize how certain changes to the timeline could conceivably play out, retaining events that get reimagined in the new timeline. The result is that the zone of historical narrative is opened up to a complex game of reversals and distortions. In *A Master of Djinn*, we read that, thanks to magic and technology granted by the djinn, the Egyptians routed the British at Tell El Kebir in 1882. In our history, this was a decisive moment when the British broke Egyptian resistance to colonial rule, but in the Dead Djinn Universe, it signifies the beginning of postcolonialism as Egypt begins to reclaim itself. Similarly, the Battle of Adwa in 1896 did result in a European defeat in our history, but that same Ethiopian victory is recontextualized as a part of a larger anti-colonial campaign rather than an anomaly. Both events serve the rhetorical work of reclaiming African independence and reshaping the historical world.

Alternate histories must perform a delicate balancing act. Ahistorical interventions typically

FEATURES
The Alchemy of History

signify a utopian impulse, stemming from a desire for justice to be applied to history's wrongs. However, alternate histories cannot automatically fix human history: in adjusting one system, the rest will reorganize. The novel must account for the consistencies and foibles of human behavior. Moreover, historical processes must be allowed to work out in a believable manner. It would be too easy to say that by breaking colonialism in the nineteenth century, Clark has created a world with a trajectory toward world peace. However, not only would this not make for a particularly interesting novel, it would also not be very convincing to anyone familiar with history. To suggest that resolving one systemic problem can fix humanity is naive, and alternate histories are a sociologically-focused genre, attempting to understand human behavior when operating outside of the set narrative of recorded history. Or, as Gallagher puts it, writers of alternate history:

prefer agents with consciousness, subjectivity, and some ability to make decisions and take unpredictable actions. Whether they are individuals, political parties, corporations, cities, governments, races, armies, or nations, they have their "own" ambitions and emotions, strengths and weaknesses, cultural constraints and opportunities; most importantly for alternate-history writers, they have good and bad luck, and they can foresee multiple future options. (145)

This is the work of literary psychological realism. The characters are shaken out of a preexisting narrative (recorded history) and must act in a new context. But they carry with them their old qualities. While alternate history can upset the context of systems that resulted in past oppressions, humanity still needs to work through its foibles, its prejudices, its yearnings to dominate and control. In Clark's novel, when it is revealed that Abigail Wellington is the mastermind behind her father's murder, we learn that she wants to wrench history back to its old trajectory. She plans to subjugate the djinn and use them to reassert British dominance over the globe. In other words, Abigail seeks to fend off the intrusion because it serves her well, while integration may pose the best opportunity to improve our world for everyone. She signifies reactionary attitudes that bristle at history's tendency to change, as signified when, with MAGA-like enthusiasm, she declares she "will make Britannia rule again" (331). Because she signifies so much of what is troubling in our own time, we are most relieved to see Abigail's plans defeated, even if as a character she devolves into a Saturday-morning cartoon. She signifies that, while we can imagine a change of circumstances in history to redress historical injustices, we cannot resolve these problems with mere wishing.

Even as Clark shatters colonialism and complicates the complex web of narrative nodes from our historical record, there looms over the novel a shadow of another significant historical myth: World War I. For all the disruption Clark introduces into the storyworld, the threat of global conflict is noted at the novel's opening, when Lord Wellington argues that his secret society should spearhead efforts to defuse war. Those anxieties carry over to the end: after the spectacle-laden, city-leveling climactic battle against the Nine Ifrit Lords, Kaiser Wilhelm II jovially remarks to other European leaders that "If we ever do have a war, I only hope it is as glorious" (371). The fact that such a war remains feasible within the Dead Djinn Universe is telling of a few things. It

affirms that World War I resulted from such a complex series of causes that it would be difficult to prevent, at least through the intrusive means Clark employs. This is similar to 2012's *Sherlock Holmes: Game of Shadows*, when Moriarty muses that "You see, hidden within the unconscious is an insatiable desire for conflict. So you're not fighting me so much as you are the human condition. [...] War, on an industrial scale, is inevitable. They'll do it themselves, within a few years. All I have to do is wait." And with the potential for such an international war, we must wonder how it would play out in a world with the magic of djinn and goblins contributing.

This question of magic contributing to an alternate World War I indicates a potential failing of the human societies within the Dead Djinn Universe, namely a lack of receptivity to broader metaphysical principles and an ethics of magic. This goes beyond the idea that "With great power comes great responsibility" of Spider-Man lore. In the *Earthsea* books, Ged learns that magic alters the Equilibrium of the world, and only by cautious expressions of power have wizards kept themselves from breaking the planet and cosmos. In Clark's novel, because magic is still new to a world that carries with it the social complexities of our own history, these lessons have not fully integrated into society.

Too often, history is a comforting story-space, since it already happened and we have pulled through. The causation debates of science fiction tend to ask questions about how history could be changed, whether for good or bad, in an effort to inspire political action. Fantasy, however, questions the stories we tell ourselves about the past, how it happened, and what are essential events of that past. Fantasy provides a meditative space to explore what has gone before, to question how we understand it, and to rethink the past in the context of our own present.

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FEATURES
The Alchemy of History

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