Stories of initiation for the modern age: explorations of textual and theatrical fantasy in Jules Verne’s Voyage à travers l’impossible and Philip Pullman’s His Dark Materials

Abstract
While the theatrical works of Jules Verne have gathered some critical attention over recent years, the text of the Voyage à travers l’impossible has remained an obscure space in the author’s oeuvre or deemed unworthy by Vernian scholars. Jules Verne has predominantly been seen as a writer of adventure novels whereas the fantastic elements in his work have commonly been overlooked by critics. This thesis examines the ways in which the Voyage à travers l’impossible amalgamates ideas that are representative not only of the Vernian work in general but also of the pre-freudian spirit of the nineteenth century. By viewing the play within the context of theatrical fantasy, this thesis opens up new paths of analysis in the genre. Part of this endeavour consists of a comparison with a seemingly disparate text: Philip Pullman’s His Dark Materials, which, similarly to Verne’s play, facilitates an exploration of the function of fantasy both in literary and theatrical terms as it was first adapted for the stage in 2003. During the course of this thesis I offer an analysis of the trilogy and proceed to cover new ground by comparing this to an analysis of the adapted text. For the purpose of my examination I establish a connection between the two texts by regarding the Voyage à travers l’impossible and His Dark Materials as dominated by the literary motif of initiation according to the model introduced by Vernian specialist Simone Vierne. I subsequently interweave an array of theories on fantasy, psychoanalysis, topography and the body as part of my analysis of the literary fantastic. Texts by Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Tzvetan Todorov, Irène Bessière, Mircea Eliade, Judith Butler and Vernian critics such as William Butcher are amply used in my readings of Verne and Pullman before I proceed to examine their relevance to the theatrical experience of the fantastic. An analysis of the adaptation of His Dark Materials offers the opportunity for fresh critical insights by creating new perspectives on the function of fantasy in its fluctuation from page to stage and vice-versa. It is through these different perspectives that I revisit old questions and introduce new ones such as the difference between fantasy and the fantastic, their regressive or progressive character, the modification of fantastic elements on the passage from the literary to the theatrical and from pre-modernism to post-modernism. Basing my analysis on stories of initiation, I suggest that fantasy evades exclusive association with either progress or regress and only remains faithful to the notions of passage and blurring of frontiers.

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During his lifetime, Jules Verne had only one publisher for his novels, Pierre-Jules Hetzel (1814-1886). Verne’s theatrical productions can be divided into three categories: the plays he wrote during his youth (before he met Hetzel), his operas and operettas, and the pièces à grand spectacle (great spectacle plays) inspired by his novels. Plays written before 1863. For once in Jules Verne’s works, however, all the travelers of Journey through the Impossible reach their goals. Between the prologue and the epilogue, the hero goes to the center of the Earth in the first act, to the bottom of the seas in the second act, and to the Planet Altor in the third. As such, this play stands in stark contrast to everything Verne represents in terms of his legendary attention to scientific verisimilitude.