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Exploring Science-Fantasy, Gender, and Postcolonial Issues
in Netflix's Disenchantment

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Introduction

After decades worth of writing and drawing, culminating into two critically acclaimed animated television series, Matt Groening returned to form with the 2018 release of his third series, *Disenchantment*. Created exclusively for Netflix, *Disenchantment* departs from the largely episodic narrative structure familiar to both of his previous shows, *The Simpsons* and *Futurama*, and instead hinges its fantasy makeup on the continuity provided by a serial narrative. Such a narrative choice allows the series different staying powers than either of the other two shows: while *The Simpsons* and *Futurama* may carry continuity among certain episodes, *Disenchantment's* serial narrative assures that each episode contributes in some capacity to continuing the plotline at large. To understand how *Disenchantment* realizes its serial narrative, it first must be explored how visual narratives have progressed onto the streaming platform, what serial narratives allow for in the context of streaming platforms that episodic narratives do not, and how speculative fiction as a comprehensive genre is expressed as a streamed serial.

In order to understand the unique place of *Disenchantment* among contemporary visual narratives, I first explore the progression of television shows from their original broadcast format to the platform of internet streaming services. From there, I consider the ways in which shows produced solely for streaming platforms differ in narrative structure from shows originally produced for broadcast television and the implications this raises for close reading analysis. While there are nuances in the ways arguments and studies about television history are constructed, authors of media studies generally agree that the internet's ability to provide on-demand access to content (either of previously televised or created solely for digital distribution) has fundamentally restructured the way television shows are watched, created, and understood. In addition to providing background context on streaming content, I also contextualize how *Disenchantment* aligns with scholarly discussion of speculative fiction and its various sub-

genres. Specifically, I am interested in how science-fiction (SF) differs from fantasy, and the hybrid genres between the two, to ultimately explore how *Disenchantment*'s position as science fantasy upholds stereotypes of race, class, and gender found within the crossing of these genres. SF and fantasy theorists establish that the cross-section of science-fantasy is one of various complexities, dealing not only with the issues of establishing logical plausibility within a created reality but also with allowing unfiltered imagination into a world without diluting its resemblance to the author's own reality. Considering such allows for a better understanding of how *Disenchantment* world builds its numerous regions and represents the various human and nonhuman inhabitants living within them.

Broadcast to Streaming Services

Lotz (2018) argues that the idea of television changed after 1996, going from a platform with mass-audience appeal to one structured on seeking out individual audiences with niche interests. After this time, new types of television shows that were aired on broadcast networks began evolving past the traditional episodic structure and paved the way for shows like *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, which focus on serial narrative arcs, to rise in prominence. Lotz also argues that, in part, the amount of channel choices contributed to a wider array of television shows being produced. This variety of television shows, coupled with the advancement of content-centric technologies, lead to what Jenner (2016) calls the fourth age of television (TVIV). TVIV, which Jenner defines as the current age of television, separates and restructures the idea of television away from the confines of its traditional, physical counterpart. In the space of TVIV, television becomes a broader term that encompasses the distribution of content in formats of televised broadcasts and on-demand internet streaming.

While cable networks are nowhere near extinction in the age of TVIV, Lotz (2018) notes that the internet changed the standard for television shows not only from its ability to reach wider audiences than traditional cable networking but also from its offer of on-demand access of content over time-sensitive broadcasts. In an ever advancing, technologically driven world, on-demand functionality of watchable television shows and movies also becomes more important. Baker (2017) argues that this on-demand space is responsible for the growth of bingeing, the consecutive and relatively uninterrupted viewing of shows within a television series. While the concept of bingeing has been somewhat prevalent since the advent of the VHS and the DVD, on-demand internet content streaming providers allow users access to a wider variety of content in a more easily accessible form. Baker also adds that such services, namely Netflix, capitalize on the concept of bingeing and advertise this convenience to keep audiences within their platform. Gray and Lotz (2019) argue this notion of bingeing is a direct result of the innate structure of streaming services. Unlike broadcast television, which relies on viewership during specific times to view content, streaming services allow for flexibility in scheduling. Gray and Lotz note that websites build-in buttons and prompts that allow individuals the ability to continue watching subsequent episodes or to resume viewing a previously stopped episode all in an attempt to encourage viewer continuity.

Wayne (2018) takes this concept a step further when arguing the specific ways these content platforms sell their binge-able image and overall brand to consumers. When viewing content in any capacity on a streaming service, traditional network logos are absent from the picture. This means that shows produced outside of the streaming services studio can become indistinguishable from those produced by and solely for the online streaming service. Rather than associating a television show with the television network it was originally broadcasted on,

streaming services are able to maintain an association of shows within and outside of their studio's creation.

Understanding discussions about the progression of television onto the internet also helps when considering the specific progression of animated cartoons. Hilton-Morrow and McMahan (2003) argue that distinct “booms” of primetime animation exist: the first happening in the 1960s and the second in the 1990s. Initially, these booms signified competition among networks: animated cartoons were used to draw in viewership from competing networks. Hilton-Morrow and McMahan argue that this leverage worked by shifting themes away from younger audiences and instead focusing on humor and satire directed toward adult audiences. Their conclusion confirms Lotz's (2018) and Jenner's (2016) assessments about variety, arguing that the emergence of and competition among network stations created an environment where television shows—specifically animated cartoons—could develop content for individual audiences, rather than a singular, broad audience.

Serial Narratives

Considering Lotz's (2018) original argument that television shows generally shifted from an episodic to serialized narrative after the 1990s, it is important to note that not all forms of contemporary television break from the episodic structure—under the right conditions, episodic narratives can even be understood as a type of serial. Metcalf (2012) argues that the DVD, fundamentally being an object that allows for consecutive viewing and bingeing of a television show, created a means for television episodes to become chapters, akin to those in a book, when viewed sequentially. This means that shows with no constant narrative carried between episodes,

such as sitcoms, can still be understood as one cohesive story comprised of multiple different stories.

Hagedorn (1995) compares and contrasts the nuances between serial and classical (episodic) narratives to express the amount of control that consumers have when digesting content in either of these two narrative forms. He ultimately concludes that the inherent construct of serial narratives—being a device used “to promote continued consumption”—delegates the control of consumption away from consumers and onto the platform that is providing the content. Hagedorn’s assessment of the function of serial narratives upholds and lends credibility toward Lotz’s (2018) description of TVIV, because in the age of TVIV, content is no longer produced with solely physical televisions and broadcast times as a standard; rather, with multiple modes of engaging with content existing, television production now first considers the platform of viewership and distribution because that platform dictates the type of narrative structure needed. In prior ages of television, viewers were at the mercy of broadcast networks—they controlled the speed at which viewers were able to consume television narratives. On many streaming services, consumers often have direct control over how and when they choose to engage with shows with serial narratives.

Mittell (2015) looks closely on the transformation of television shows from this episodic structure into those that attend to the continuation of a singular narrative by discussing the various complexities of serialized narratives, such as the way that a complex narrative can contain qualities of both episodic and serial narratives. Despite a television show following a general, linear progression of a serial narrative, that same show can also contain standalone episodes with individual plotlines that are both started and concluded within the confines of a single episode. Matthees (2005) expands this idea by using *Twin Peaks* to argue the existence of

embedded narratives within serial narratives. These embedded narratives can be employed to both further worldbuilding efforts and deepen individual character traits without completely derailing the trajectory of the overall narrative arc. Episodes that focus on embedded narratives can also overshadow the main plot of the serial narrative and create filler episodes that again contribute more to the overall world and characters than the ongoing plot.

Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Science-Fantasy

With streaming services offering a means to provide audiences with individualized engagements, fans of particular genres can readily find suitable shows through personalized suggestions found on most major streaming platforms. This means that certain content creation studios, such as Netflix, can gauge audience reception to specific genres and create content for genres that are in high demand. *Disenchantment*, being a show made specifically for the streaming services provided by Netflix, is shoehorned into the fantasy genre and therefore must be understood as relating to—in some capacity—the other shows occupying the same category. Looking at elements of speculative fiction (specifically fantasy and science-fiction as relating to *Disenchantment*) helps in understanding why the series has earned a spot within that category.

In his book *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979), Darko Suvin notes that a distinct mode of science fiction is its usage of estrangement to construct worlds, characters, and plots. He describes the process of estrangement in the context of science fiction as the taking of an author's recognizable reality, introducing outside elements to alter that reality, and resituating the altered reality to readers so that it hides its altered nature and convincingly presents itself as the original reality. To further illustrate how science fiction utilizes estrangement, Suvin proposes the idea of "the novum," being the "new thing" that is introduced as a process of estrangement.

The novum presents fictitious objects, characters, and/or ideas in a logical and plausible way, making it something distinct to the science-fiction genre, for other sub-genres of speculative fiction are not fixated on crafting a logically convincing reality like science fiction.

Suvin's thoughts on estrangement within science fiction can be better understood when combined with a further discussion of the author's reality as proposed by Ursula K. Le Guin (1986) in her carrier bag theory of fiction. This theory, which analogizes a resituating of human history away from the myth of the weapon and onto the carrier bag (an object other objects are put into) as the first creation of humankind, explains how a novel (or a container of words, as she puts it) is a collection of historical and cultural experiences. Science fiction can be further understood as a carrier bag, containing its own historical elements from the combining of both "science" and "fiction" carrier bags added throughout its inception as a genre. Suvin's novum, then, not only attempts to estrange the rules of an author's recognizable reality but also estranges the contents of that author's carrier bag. Both Suvin and Le Guin ultimately see SF as a genre that presents readers/viewers with unfamiliar elements to in-turn question familiar elements of the physical world. In *Disenchantment*, SF elements resituate the familiar view of fantasy by making Bean question the legitimacy of the show's world she—and viewers—understand through a fantasy context.

In *Science Fiction Cinema* (2007), Christine Cornea dissects science fiction's evolution from a literary genre to blockbuster films. She notes that science fiction is less rigid as a film genre and more easily allows other genres (such as fantasy) to seep into and contaminate its overarching rules. Using *Star Wars* as an example of SF films that have shaped the genre's acceptance in mainstream American society, Cornea argues films of this nature showcase a convergence of recognizable genres beneath the mask of science fiction to reach a wider target

audience. *Star Wars* essentially sold science-fiction as a popular genre due to its multi-genre composition. Suvin (1979) astutely argues that simply invoking “science” does not innately qualify a text as science fiction—science is oftentimes used a blanket for covering narrative inconsistencies (noting specifically the logistics of the Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde transformation) rather than as a concept that introduces new considerations about particular topics and issues. While fluidity does exist within the genre of science fiction, Suvin feels that such fluidity necessitates apt labels for the newly created sub-genres, with one possibility being science-fantasy.

T.E. Apter (1982) argues that fantasy literature, while largely misattributed as solely a literary mode for generating allegories, primarily “investigates” the author’s known world. She explains, much like science fiction theorists, that fantasy worlds remain recognizable to the writer/reader’s lived world; however, she argues using a psychoanalytic approach to the genre that the fictional fantasy world presented halts immediate questions about logic to instead supplement audience understandings about the world with ideas filtered through the unconscious. Danielle Forest, in the compilation *Fantasy Literature: Challenging Genres* (2016), looks at the ways in which social class is depicted in popular contemporary fantasy literature and the impressionable effects these depictions have on readers. Namely, Forest discusses the tendency within high fantasy literature to depict wealthy individuals as being considerably more important and desirable than lower to middle class peoples. Forest finds these depictions problematic for young and impressionable readers due to fantasy literature’s applicability to reality, as noted by T.E. Apter. Adding to the discussion, Le Guin (1979), in “Why Are Americans Afraid of Dragons?” addresses how the un/conscious imagination used to inform the differences between fantasy and reality, and how fantasy has the ability to entwine truth and imagination. She argues

that male-oriented and masculinity-obsessed American culture sees the imagination that fuels fantasy (and the broader speculative literature to an extent) as purely fictitious and distinctly childish. Le Guin disagrees with this societal outlook and believes that maturity can only be reached through healthily engaging with the imaginative.

Chapter Breakdown

At its core, *Disenchantment* is a made-for-streaming animated television show that follows a long-form serial narrative and sits beneath the larger genre umbrella of speculative fiction. Understanding the progression of television studies into stream services helps me in identifying how *Disenchantment*'s usage of a serial narrative is apart of a larger trend toward solidifying viewer engagement with streaming platforms through incentivized bingeing. The serial narrative, while not invented by streaming services, allows for the show to tackle certain narrative complexities—such as continually developing dynamic characters between episodes and seasons—that episodic narratives cannot. Using a serial narrative, then, allows *Disenchantment*'s science-fiction and fantasy elements to unfold and mature alongside its changing characters, revealing more about the nature of the world with each passing episode.

In Chapter One, “From Princess to Female Hero,” I look at how main character Princess Bean’s navigation through a coming-of-age journey frames her as a budding female hero. In doing such, I define what constitutes a “female hero” from the likes of a “heroine” while simultaneously posing that definition against classical models of the hero figure, which traditionally reserve the title of hero for male characters. The figure of the female hero becomes paramount to my ongoing discussions about *Disenchantment*'s narrative dependency on posing specific encounters with sex differences, which allots opportunities for Bean to encounter and

subsequentially subvert gendered expectations of the patriarchal society she lives within. Throughout the chapter, I also look at the ways in which female characters are topically positioned as empowered yet are continually represented as upholding gendered stereotypes found within SF and fantasy.

In Chapter 2, “Dreamland’s Exotic and Othering Perspective,” I assess the show’s legitimacy of being categorized solely within the fantasy genre and suggest an alternative lens that poses *Disenchantment* as a hybridized show containing combined elements of fantasy and science-fiction. Defining the show’s hybridity allows me to look closely at the ways in which the show positions the Kingdom of Dreamland as containing a dominant perspective of fantasy normalcy and how that sense of normalcy systematically creates an exoticized and Othering gaze onto lands and peoples existing physically outside of Dreamland. Starting such a discussion allows me to apply postcolonial theory to analyze how *Disenchantment* builds its world through acts of dominance and oppression.

Chapter One

From Princess to Female Hero: Bean there, done that

Disenchantment follows the adventures of main character Princess Tiabeanie of Dreamland, known more commonly as “Bean.” She can be read as a character attempting to grow into what Pearson and Pope (1981) frame as the female hero, being a figure that can only exist when situated within a patriarchally created gender binary. Despite the series attempting to be critical of patriarchal genre conventions found within fantasy and science-fiction, *Disenchantment* never allows Bean to fully grow into the role of a female hero. The narrative of the show hinges upon her transformative journey and subsequent intellectual growth, meaning that achieving such a heroic status would signal an end to her journey and the narrative as a whole. Bean’s primary mode of growth comes through a process of subverting traditionally male-dominated norms within the science-fantasy genre and the show’s larger serialized narrative. While *Disenchantment* uses Bean’s progression into a female hero as an attempt to defy the gendered genre-conventions of science fiction and fantasy, the show’s holistic depiction of female characters suggests that *Disenchantment* still inadvertently subscribes to the very conventions it is attempting to oppose.

Before diving directly into how *Disenchantment* attempts to utilize the female hero, it is first important to understand what the female hero is and how it differs from other heroic titles. After being questioned about the nature of male-dominance over the title of hero, Joseph Campbell states “the male usually has the more conspicuous role, just because of the conditions of life. He is out there in the world, and the woman is in the home...Giving birth is definitely a heroic deed, in that it is the giving over of oneself to the life of another” (158). While he does permit women can be “heroic,” their entry to the term is barred by gendered expectations (tending the domestic sphere while the men are away), implying that the classical mode of the

hero functions by merits that are distinctly different for men and women. Essentially, while Campbell suggests that women can be considered heroes, they cannot be constituted as “heroic” in the same way men can. Pearson and Pope challenge Joseph Campbell’s male-oriented outline of a hero by asserting that, regardless of gender, “the archetypal hero masters the world by understanding it, not by dominating, controlling, or owning the world or other people” (5). They refute the idea of situating women as objects in male stories, being domineered characters with no real control or agency, and seek to situate a female inclusive term for hero—this gives way to the female hero. On defining the challenges of a female assuming the otherwise male-dominated title of a hero, Pearson and Pope note:

The enemies [of the female hero]...are the myth of sex differences; the myth of virginity; the myth of romantic love; and the myth of maternal self-sacrifice. These conspire to leave the potential hero content with being a heroine only—that is, a secondary, supporting character in a man's story, who is unworthy and unable to do anything other than self-destruct for the sake of others. (18)

They note a blunt difference between a female hero and heroine: the heroine can be understood as a character that despite any adventures and newfound growth, ultimately loses herself to a patriarchally informed sense of womanhood imposed by “sex differences.”¹ At its core, the heroine embodies Campbell’s view of a female as a hero. She is granted agency not by her own means, but only after obliging the societally imposed expectations of a woman. A female hero, then, starkly avoids the pitfalls of a heroine by denying and subverting the gendered caveats reserved for the male the hero. Specifically, a female hero is posed with a unique challenge at the

¹ It is important to note that Pearson and Pope generate their analysis about these differences by looking at female characters specifically within texts featuring patriarchal worlds.

beginning of her journey, which Pearson and Pope call the “mirror and the cage,” where “she focuses not what she sees, but on how she is seen” (23). A female character wanting to reach a point of heroism must grapple with gendered expectations—which are reflected to her by the metaphorical mirror—that are absent for male heroes. She must confront this reflected patriarchally informed sense of self in order to break free from the “cage” that otherwise seeks to keep her from operating outside of gender expectations.

Pearson and Pope’s outline of a female hero can be used to understand how the series forces Bean into situations that seek to define her solely by gender. Due to her living within a patriarchal structure, which houses oppressive rules about gender roles, she must face the extra challenges required of a female hero—this necessitates a subscription to the male-female heroism binary posed by Pearson and Pope. While a topical analysis of Bean does reveal that she embodies some traits indicative of a mere heroine—being that each episode presents her in conflict with at least one of the aforementioned enemies—*Disenchantment’s* first two episodes, “A Princess, an Elf, and a Demon Walk into a Bar” and “For Whom the Pig Oinks” offer a structure in which Bean can be viewed as trending toward a female hero that has to confront and break from the mirror and cage.

To situate her as a female hero in the beginning of the series, the show positions Bean against a made-to-fail hero, Prince Merkimer of Bentwood, the second man to whom Bean is arranged to marry. When viewing this opening plot through the perspective of Merkimer and his knights, Merkimer is presented as undergoing Campbell’s classical heroic journey: he is a man following a quest through a magical world, facing monsters and dangers along the way, all in pursuit of rescuing a princess in assumed danger. With Merkimer as the hero, Bean—despite her best exploits to garner control over her quest—is left positioned as a secondary character who

serves only a supporting role in the hero's story: a hindering roadblock in Merkimer's quest. In this way, Merkimer acts as a character foil to Bean, creating a dynamic that situates himself as a male hero and Bean as a heroine. He embarks on an adventure to "rescue" and return Bean, his princess in peril, to the safety of Dreamland. Merkimer's transformation at the end of his quest, however, is more physical than spiritual. Although he technically succeeds in returning the princess, Merkimer ultimately fails to complete his quest, because he is unable to withstand the temptations of the opposite sex, causing his body to permanently transform into a pig. From this transformation, he loses all semblance of his former royal persona, finally forcing him to become a supporting character in Bean's narrative. During these two episodes, Bean, inversely to Merkimer, not only overcomes the obstacles reserved for a heroine, but also manages to succeed where Merkimer failed. The end of Merkimer's heroism marks a confrontation with the first obstacle within Bean's journey and consequentially signals the start of her transformative journey into a female hero. Without Merkimer directly imposing gendered expectations onto Bean and distorting her reflection within the mirror, Bean has nothing discouraging her from breaking her cage to begin her journey.

It is not until facing the physical realities of her arranged marriage to Merkimer that audiences are presented with Bean's intrinsic motives surrounding personal destiny and her subsequent shift into a recognizable female hero. The show opens with what Lee R. Edwards refers to as "the motif of the deadly marriage," which he partially describes as "[m]arking an end to maidenhood and female innocence" (110). From the series' beginning, the arranged wedding forces Bean into a situation where she must decide between subservience to or rebellion against patriarchal power—either fate ensuring a coming-of-age at the cost of a loss of innocence. Applied to the figure of the female hero, a marriage is "deadly" as it relinquishes agency and

submits the potential hero to the aforementioned myth of sex differences, which would leave the aspiring female hero subsumed beneath male control. Bean fights these oppressive powers of marriage that otherwise seek to control her life not in an attempt to preserve her maidenhood or innocence, but to stride closer toward her goal of living a life independent of male control. Through this fighting, Bean discovers that she wishes to be “in charge of [her] own destiny” (S1E1 29:40 – 29:45). This suggests that the arranged marriage to Merkimer acts as a catalyst for Bean’s personal growth, which the show’s overarching plot hinges upon, and establishes certain expectations for Bean’s eventual character progression: as she grows into the figure of a female hero and navigates through the show’s world, her ideals of self-autonomy and opposition to patriarchal control are expected to be tried and challenged, much like they were during the wedding conflict.

Bean’s obsession with personal destiny and her overall rejection of the kingdom’s gender expectations ultimately leads her to reject class-based societal boundaries. While Bean does carry certain powers and statuses linked to her identity as the kingdom’s princess, she regularly engages in activities that are outside the normative expectations that others in the kingdom project onto the role of princess. By routinely partaking in activities outside of her socio-economic class, Bean effectively embodies a slum tourist, a person who is “accused of engaging in ‘poverty porn’ ...transforming the plight of other people into a spectacle” (Frenzel 57). Bean utilizes the peasants of Dreamland and their occupying spaces as a form of escapism where she can momentarily cast away the duties of her crown, without suffering a complete loss of support that crown provides, in pursuit of challenging the kingdom’s gendered expectations imposed on female characters. Although Bean finds it difficult to completely abandon her princess persona, she routinely finds success acting outside of her crown. The episode “Faster, Princess! Kill!

Kill!” heavily relies on a slum tourism plot that sees Bean, after an argument with her father Zøg, attempting to perform jobs held by the kingdom’s commoners. After a series of trial and error, Bean eventually lands a job as an executioner. Here, Bean occupies two opposing roles, noblewoman and commoner, yet is simultaneously acknowledged as both. Those around her still comment on her being a princess but do not treat her as such. The peasants are represented as accepting Bean, primarily noted through the way in which they speak to her with less formality than other royal members of the kingdom, which suggests a degree of fluidity to Bean’s social status that allows her the luxuries of both classes. This idea of touring activities outside of social class is not entirely unique to Bean’s character, but her employment specifically of slum tourism is entwined alongside her progression into a female hero, because slum touring allows Bean the opportunity to partake in explorations that permit her the experiences needed to continue growing into the female hero. Coincidentally, Bean, in wanting to break away from her personal instances of control, ends up utilizing slumming as a similar mode of dominance against those situated as socially beneath her. While these slumming explorations do grant her a degree of agency, it comes at the problematic expense of further exploiting the peasant class within Dreamland.

These modes of growth provided by slumming enable Bean’s character to continually change and develop. During season two’s “In Her Own Write,” Bean’s slumming unexpectedly leads to her becoming a writer. While exploring the Dreamland slums in the late hours of the night, Bean stumbles upon The Jittery, a café she momentarily mistakes for a pub. When acting upon her previously mentioned class fluidity, Bean is openly accepted into the commoners’ space and receives advice from Miri, one of the café’s workers. For the remainder of the episode, Bean utilizes writing as a means to express her parental frustrations, which have been slowly

brewing throughout the season. During a closing speech, Bean notes “My whole life, I just wanted [my mom] to be there, but it turns out the best mothering I ever got was from a fat guy with a red mustache” (S2E8 20:20 – 20:27). In this episode, writing not only functions as an emotional outlet for Bean, but allows her to come to realizations about herself, her situation, and the world surrounding her. It operates as a small-scale mode of control where Bean can express her emotions in an unfiltered manner free from outside influence. Juxtaposing the exploration enabled through slumming in “Faster, Princess! Kill! Kill!” against the character growth provided in “In Her Own Write” reveals that *Disenchantment’s* construction of the female hero is largely rooted within the act of slum tourism, for removing the slum tourist persona from Bean effectively removes her ability to navigate through the world by her own accord. It should be noted, however, that wealth is the enabling factor for Bean’s privilege of societal traversal—a peasant character attempting the same traversal would not be successful for they would have neither sufficient wealth nor social status to mingle with the kingdom’s elites. This one-sided traversal ultimately suggests that the female hero can only exist if she holds privileging qualities above another set group.

While both seasons establish Bean as a hero through a series of journeys that allow for her to recognize her intrinsically heroic traits, many points of these journeys are mediated through the relationships Bean shares with her male sidekicks, Elfo the elf and Luci the demon. Every adventure of Bean’s involves Elfo and Luci tagging along (with the exception of “The Electric Princess,” which sees a different male character accompanying her) and altering the course of her journey in some way. Elfo and Luci are also the most prominent male characters within the show, meaning that they serve two primary functions in relation to Bean as a female hero: they act as seducers throughout her exploits while also furthering the defiance against

Campbell's ideas about male and female characters. Essentially, Elfo and Luci allow for Bean, the female hero, to become the subject of the narrative by delegating themselves as objects of assistance. Despite any of their individual actions, the male duo acts more akin to the heroine figure, offering only supporting roles within the female hero's story. Their support, however, poses a roadblock for the show's overall attempt at representing Bean as a female hero, for Elfo and Luci are representative of seducers in Bean's journey, "symbolically awaken[ing her] into the world of experience" and simultaneously acting as "another captor" (Pearson and Pope 68). Using Elfo and Luci's temptations to alter Bean's course into a female hero suggests that male accompaniment is necessary for that progression. Elfo, with his insistence for rule following, represents an alignment with complacency and generally nudges Bean toward nonconfrontational solutions to her patriarchal problems. Luci, a literal demon, pushes Bean toward rash, self-serving solutions. While represented with distinctly different traits, both Elfo and Luci serve the same function: to inform, influence, and ultimately cloud Bean's situational judgment in lieu of their own wants.

These influences are seen most prominently with the duo's pivotal role in "For Whom the Pig Oinks," where the two inadvertently help Bean recognize the lack of self-control plaguing her life—the metaphorical dragon to be slain—and offer her a means of overcoming it. During the episode, Bean is challenged with a decision: to continue on her path toward ownership of her destiny, she must remove Merkimer, her arranged fiancé, from the equation. Although she makes her intentions about the situation clear, plainly stating "I'm not comfortable with murder," Luci ultimately convinces her that killing Merkimer is the only way to reach her goal (S1E2 07:12 – 07:16). While on the party barge to what they believe to be Mermaid Island, Elfo attempts to sabotage Bean and Luci's plan by ensuring Merkimer's restraints remain safely tied. With Luci

advocating to kill Merkimer and Elfo for saving, Bean is again confronted with a pivotal decision: pushing forward with Luci's plan or abandoning it to follow along with Elfo's morals. This constant clash of ideals and subsequent barrage of decision making can be found in abundance throughout the show, with Bean always being placed into an either/or situation, ultimately suggesting that despite appearing strong-willed and working toward a self-defined destiny, the female hero, who is structurally in a position of power over males, is not automatically free from male mediation.

Elfo's and Luci's distinct character elements also contribute toward Bean's overall character growth. During the first season, Elfo and Luci play specific roles within Bean's narrative, with Elfo standing as a voice of good-natured morality and Luci aptly representing mischievous, chaotic intentions. Essentially, these two create a binary of good vs. evil for Bean to traverse. Generally situated in the middle of the conflict, Bean's inability to completely side with either character demonstrates the multifaceted nature of Bean's character development. With Bean's inability to her control her own life throughout the first season, her only means of goal-oriented progression into becoming a female hero is through an understanding of the oppressive, patriarchal construct that she lives within. The Elfo-Luci binary works to highlight that oppressive construct by offering Bean variable solutions as how to navigate through her challenges. Looking again at "For Whom the Pig Oinks," it is clear where each of the two character's morals fall: Elfo on the side of good with wanting to take the pacifist route in solving the Merkimer-marriage conundrum, and Luci on the side of evil with generating creative ways to murder Merkimer. Season two signifies a significant shift with the Elfo-Luci dynamic. Where Elfo once stood for morality and Luci for evil, a subtle swap occurs. During season two, Elfo acts as a representation of Bean's faults and shortcomings, while Luci acts as the "emotional

support demon” that helps Bean progress toward a positive self. Regardless of their value inversion, Elfo and Luci’s heavy involvement within Bean’s decision making and its overreaching effects onto her character development suggests her efforts of casting aside male influence to claim the title of female hero as an ironic pursuit. Bean cannot claim her life free from male control when the male-powers embodied by Elfo and Luci still conspire to steer the progression of her life toward a submission into the myths of sex differences, which attest women need constant guidance and control from male figures.

Elfo discovering that Bean chooses to rescue her mother over him serves as a catalyst for the role reversal between him and Luci. As a result, Elfo increasingly resents and more closely questions Bean’s actions throughout the remainder of the season. During a hiccup in ransacking Dreamland’s treasury, which resulted in the untimely death of Slappo, Elfo, monotone and void of emotion, responds to Bean “Everything’s fine—it’s fine... This is who I am now. This is who you’ve made me. You’ve gotten us into so many life-threatening scenarios, my body no longer registers fear” (S2E6 12:18 – 12:46). Here, rather than offering Bean the same type of supporting role he did in the first season, Elfo subscribes judgmental blame directly onto Bean, causing his character to become more akin to the originating sources of male oppression that Bean fought to free herself from in the first season. Much like *Zøg*, season two Elfo overlooks his own role in situations and instead finds fault in Bean’s attempts at heroism—her grand robbery caper was to help the Elves after all. As a tiny *Zøg*, Elfo conspires to fit Bean back within the confines of sex differences that would allow him to assume a degree of control over the decisions within her life. Specifically, self-serving Elfo, due to his obvious sexual attraction to her, wants Bean to succumb to the myth of romantic love. With Elfo standing as a new figurehead for male-power with vested reward for keeping Bean from growing into a female hero and subsequently

holding a patriarchally informed gaze, Bean's progression into heroism is stifled through her immediate—yet narratively necessary—mediation through him.

Elfo's shift into this mode of patriarchal mediation and Luci's transition into a beacon of support are both fully realized during "Our Bodies, Our Elves," where Bean and Elfo travel into Ogre territory to collect magical berries needed to save the lives of sick Elves. After being captured by the Ogres, Bean finds herself in need of Elfo's rescuing. While attempting to free Bean from Ogre-prison, Elfo kills upwards of a dozen or more Ogres, prompting Bean to state: "Wow, Elfo. You're kinda scary when you're in a blood rage" (18:16 – 18:20). All the while, Luci tends to the sick Elves—albeit not incredibly well—back in Dreamland. Here, both characters are operating in direct defiance to their previous roles. Elfo, the same character who did everything in his power to oppose murdering Merkimer back in "For Whom the Pig Oinks," now mounts a remorseless "blood rage" assault, while Luci, the demon bent on instigating chaos, finds himself occupying a caretaker role. This swap in core values is significant when considering their previously mentioned roles as mediators in Bean's progression. When looking at his transition into a patriarchal force and coupling it with a newly acquired sense of violence, Elfo's mediation of Bean's actions suggests that in order for Bean to continue her trend of rejecting oppressive male powers, she must in-turn reject the notions of violence now embodied by Elfo. From that rejection of violence comes an alignment with the nurturing qualities informing Luci's mediation of Bean, which in-turn aligns Bean with a more traditional view of femininity that the female hero typically casts aside.

While Elfo and Luci are male characters who mediate Bean's journey, the main narrative action that sets the series into motion stems from King Zøg's desires, which ultimately raises questions about the degree of agency female characters truly have within the series. Despite

actively working toward an eventual goal of self-freedom, the entirety of Bean's formative quest occurs through the lens of Zøg's desire for the elixir of life. From the first season onward, Bean is shown as living a conflicted life, for she is presented as vocally opposed to yet physically complacent with the oppressive, patriarchal control enacted by her father. In one instance, Bean admits to her father: "I've become less and less important to you...I'd like to have a role to play; in your life; in the kingdom. I'm tired of feeling useless" (S1E6 04:34 – 04:48). Bean finds herself unable to feel whole while living under the thumb of a father who makes her feel insignificant. In part, her lack of a solid position within the kingdom and Zøg's "new family" contributes to her ability to leisurely traverse the aforementioned social spaces but comes at the cost of emotional dissatisfaction and incompleteness. This feeling of incompleteness, however, is a necessary hump within her transformative journey to traverse and is a fundamental part for the beginning of her progression into the female hero, because it offers her a definite framework of oppression to oppose. Bean, however, cannot rebel against and defy a patriarchal establishment (embodied by Zøg) without the existence of such establishment.

Alongside her issues with an unhelpful and overbearing father, Bean's growth into a female hero is hindered from a lack of deep connections with other female characters who could act as points of reference for female heroism². Her mother, Queen Dagmar, is absent for almost the entirety of the first season, meaning that Bean's only other two immediate and significant sources of female companionship are found with Queen Oona, her reluctant and somewhat distant stepmother, and Bunty, Bean's peasant handmaiden. While the two seasons currently only present Bunty as serving a minor own role within both the show's unfolding narrative and

² Despite presenting female characters in possession of certain degrees of agency, it is important to consider that nowhere in the series do these female characters have the opportunity of speaking with one-another without an immediate connection to another male character. *Disenchantment*, then, does not pass the Bechdel test.

Bean's character development, her overall involvement in and impact on the show's largescale narrative is trivialized by her construct as a tertiary character. Focusing solely on the roles of the mother and stepmother provides rich commentary about the mother's involvement in the female hero's construction. Both Dagmar and Oona play key roles in Bean's progression throughout the two seasons, acting as alternate depictions of the female hero and the varying outcomes these depictions suggest. When taken together, both characters offer nuanced commentary about the degrees to which a female character hero is constructed, viewed, and either accepted or rejected by a set social order.

As previously explained, Bean's dominant goal throughout the first season is to attain a sense of personal independence and control over her own destiny—with that goal slightly shifting after discovering the possibility of reuniting with her mother, Queen Dagmar. Pearson and Pope note that a “[r]econciliation with the mother...is crucial to the female hero. It is both a way of discovering her true identity and heritage and a means of achieving not only a higher mode of consciousness but a new society as well” (184). The mother is sorely needed for the female hero's journey, because she offers the female hero identity, which in turn offers progressive guidance. Without her mother, Bean has no comparable figure to model exactly how a female hero should operate—not even the stepmother can act as a substitute, for alongside their distant relationship, Bean and Oona are of distinctly different species. When they finally reconnect at the end of season one, Bean quickly discovers that she and Dagmar share an obsession with destiny yet have markedly different definitions for the word. In season two's opening episode, “The Disenchantress,” Dagmar reveals to Bean: “there's a prophecy to be fulfilled, our fame and fortune to be restored, a debt to Hell we're really overdue on” (23:18 – 23:25). Where Bean sees destiny as a personalized journey of self-direction, Dagmar sees it as

another form of captive control. While not directly a part of that structure, Dagmar's attempts at controlling Bean's future parallels the patriarchal structure of oppression that has been forced upon her throughout the entirety of the series. For Bean, the reconciliation with the mother establishes the groundwork for her journey throughout season two: navigating the two modes of control imposed by both parental figures in an attempt at reaching her own goal of a chosen destiny.

Dagmar is the first female character represented in the show that appears to be free of man's control and as a result acts by her own will, which is usually in direct defiance to Zøg's own wants. She is presented as the female antagonist of season two, being the cause behind many of the larger issues Bean faces within the narrative; however, her status as both female and sole villain of the narrative (used loosely, as her siblings hardly play roles beyond helpers in Dagmar's scheming) suggests that a woman holding power outside of patriarchal society cannot be a positive force in the narrative. Amplified with her title of "disenchantress" and her seemingly supernatural abilities (seen clearly in the visions she forces onto Bean in S2E4), Dagmar adopts a witchlike persona. According to Barbra Creed, "the witch is defined as an abject figure in that she is represented within patriarchal discourses as an implacable enemy of the symbolic order" (76). Her status as a witch, a character type that already assumes a threat against social order, amplifies the degree at which her supposed agency is perceived as a villainous threat to Dreamland's society. Dagmar, then, as a holder of physical and intellectual powers outside of male guidance, threatens the status quo of patriarchal order with her innate abjectness. She is directly responsible for the societally destructive events and apt titling of season one's finale "Dreamland Falls," where she makes her exit from the season as unwed and

without male regulation. Despite abandoning her marriage and position at Dreamland, Dagmar, however, still retains her crown at Maru—remaining a queen with no king.

While sounding oxymoronic when given to a villainous character, the oppositional space Dagmar occupies is inherently emblematic of the female hero. Over the course of the series, Dagmar broke free from the same forces entrapping Bean—primarily Zøg’s rule—to achieve a life of self-autonomy free from patriarchal ruling. Reading Dagmar as a female character who possesses agency perceived as a threat to patriarchal social norms and is anything but heroic offers insight as to one potential avenue for Bean’s fight against patriarchy. Dagmar’s earlier story implies that Bean’s present quest against patriarchy runs of the risk of going off its heroic rails. As a female opposing patriarchal power, Bean for all her heroic motivations, shares much in common with her villainous mother Dagmar—a fear that Bean herself articulates. During “The Dreamland Job,” Bean teams up with a band of trolls disguised as elves while attempting to steal and return gold from the castle’s treasury to the poverty-stricken elves. Her learning of the elves’ situation occurs after an initial encounter with Zøg that sees him again enacting further control over her by attempting to “shame her into sobriety” (00:58). This angers Bean and delivers her a personal motive for wanting to help the elves that evidently clouds her judgements surrounding the heist situation. While her overall intentions for the heist align as heroic for the less fortunate elves, Bean is ultimately more concerned with using the heist as a means of physically defying an area within her father’s immediate control than she is with actually returning the wealth to the elves, which ultimately leads her to assisting the villainous trolls who seek to further the economic struggles of the elves. Had Luci not intervened, Bean, akin to Dagmar, would have used her grasps for agency in a transgressive, villainous manner.

Oona, the assumed evil stepmother, undergoes similar transformations to Bean: she, too, lives a life largely controlled by the male-forces that surround her. She is married into a life that forces her out of her home kingdom and into a foreign land; she is constantly reminded that her position as queen is purely a business formality for her husband; most importantly, she is constantly othered for her nonhuman body. These transgressions against Oona's body go largely unnoticed and are primarily utilized for quick jokes that ultimately serve as a reminder for just how different she is than Dreamland's other occupants. It is not until the end of season two's episode "The Very Thing" where Oona finally finds a means to control her own life. She comes to the realization that the "backwards kingdom full of moron, they all imprison[ed her]" both in a physical and metaphorical sense (07:44 – 07:48). Queen-turned-pirate Oona subverts the patriarchal structure which initially kept her oppressed and assumes a matriarchal position as captain over a crew of men. In doing so, Oona abandons her statuses as a wife, mother, and queen to become her own version of the female hero—cementing her decision to abandon her old way of life, Oona exclaims "I am crazy lizard queen of no land!" (08:17 – 08:22). These actions, however, carry antagonistic effects against Oona. Much like Dagmar the witch, Oona is situated as an abject figure whose primary function is to symbolically defile the patriarchal social order of Dreamland by crossing gendered boundaries. This defilement, while necessary for her growth into a female hero, ultimately casts her out of the narrative. Much like the mythic cowboy of the western who has no place in the domestic sphere and homestead, Oona now occupies a liminal space and new position outside of society's structure. Oona commands her ship towards the horizon behind Dreamland, suggesting two pivotal ideas about the end of a female character's journey: dominance and control over oneself can be achieved, but achieving said control forces the female out of the show's operating space.

Juxtaposing Dagmar, the witchlike figure whose primary goal is to rebel against the patriarchal structure within the show and hinder the development of the protagonist, against Oona, a nonhuman female character whose only crimes were gaining self-autonomy away from patriarchal confinement and possessing a monstrous body, suggests that a strong woman, defined as free from patriarchal grasps, can either be: distinctly evil or noticeably nonhuman and perversely othered. When taken together, both women suggest that a female holding power in any capacity cannot successfully live within or be accepted by the society whose values she is subverting. Bean operates within the middle of both characters: she wants the same freedoms allotted to Oona, but her human body suggests a trend toward the villainous nature encapsulated by Dagmar. In either case, both characters propose a need to leave the physical space of Dreamland to complete their transformations into their heroic statures. While Bean displays obvious degrees of heroism that would otherwise aid in her growth into a female hero, her journeys always end within Dreamland. Where Dagmar can fade into Maru and Oona sail beyond the horizon, Bean is left in the same space that provides her structure of oppression. Without the ability to leave Dreamland by her own means—the show’s final qualifier for becoming the female hero—Bean is caught in a cycle that continually repositions her against the same patriarchal powers to oppose. The narrative reliance on trying to establish a female hero ensures this perpetual cycle will continue until the series’ eventual conclusion—Bean can make realizations about the world and her sense of self but cannot fully embody them, as doing such would signal an end to her growth and a subsequent end to the narrative following her journey.

While *Disenchantment* actively creates opportunities for its female lead to reject and oftentimes subvert notions of male heroism in an effort to construct a female hero, the show’s overall portrayal of female characters unwinds more progressive discourse than it fabricates.

That is not to claim the show completely falls flat with its female representative efforts—Bean definitely has her shining moments of female positivity entwined with her budding heroism—but the majority of female representation within the series commits to an idea that a female character cannot peacefully exist within a narrative after fully transforming into a female hero. The show is not entirely fixated on the idea of a completed female hero: this is Princess Tiabeanie’s coming of age story, after all. *Disenchantment’s* heavy reliance on Bean’s journey of ongoing transformation to carry the narrative amplifies this idea and begs the question as to what happens to the narrative after Bean finally becomes a full-fledged female hero. The following chapter will use this breakdown of Bean’s growth as a foundation to better help explain *Disenchantment’s* targeted usage of genre hybridity.

Chapter Two

Beware of Racist Antelope: Dreamland's Exotic and Othering Perspective

At a topical glance, *Disenchantment* exudes elements that indicate it attempting to be nothing more than generic high fantasy: having a medieval setting, concepts of magic and mysticism, and a plethora of mythical creatures. A closer analysis, however, reveals that the show distinguishes itself from being categorized as merely high fantasy by subtly injecting some elements of its overarching narrative with components of science-fiction. Effectively, *Disenchantment* simultaneously adopts both genres to make use of the hybridity found within science-fantasy. This genre hybridity occurs as an overt byproduct of the show's active worldbuilding, which oftentimes showcases new characters and lands alike through a clashing and converging of both science-fiction and fantasy elements. As a primary result of this worldbuilding, the show exoticizes any and all lands, peoples, and ideas existing outside of its focal area of Dreamland and Dreamland's perspective of normalcy. This suggests that *Disenchantment's* efforts of worldbuilding are essential functions for creating and claiming title to the genre of science-fantasy, which allows for a complex view of "otherness" within the series to be observed. The hybrid-genre worldbuilding of the show introduces a wide range of "others" for Bean to encounter and ultimately upholds stereotypes about othering within science-fiction, fantasy, and science-fantasy as a whole.

In order to best identify how *Disenchantment* constructs its exoticized views and othering gaze, it must first be made clear exactly what purpose the show's usage of genre hybridity serves. Simply put, within *Disenchantment* the hybridized genre and Bean's journey towards becoming the female hero are entwined concepts that cannot properly function without the existence of the other. As discussed in the previous chapter, the serial narrative of the show follows Bean and her growth into a female hero. This results in the show's narrative filtering its

various depictions through Bean's perspective, which at the start of the show lacks an understanding of ideas outside of her understood fantasy elements. Using her perspective, viewers are offered fantasy elements as the primary mode of understanding for the series. It is not until the second season—the ninth episode “The Electric Princess,” in particular—where Bean faces science-fiction elements that fundamentally oppose and subsequently reshape her understanding of the show's universe. “The Electric Princess” brings science-fiction elements that conflate Bean's, and by extension the viewers', understanding of the previously assumed fantasy-exclusive world³. After this pivotal moment, Bean becomes inquisitive as to the legitimacy of the fantasy elements she has believed to be true thus far. The introduction of science-fiction elements, while not entirely free from harboring Othering depictions, acts as a catalyst for enlightenment within Bean's journey by opposing the dominant fantasy view of the world that her perspective touts as “normal,” which inadvertently brings the issue of Othering to the forefront of viewer attention and allows them an opportunity to question the effects of the Othering gaze found so prevalently within the fantasy genre.

Bean's constitution of normal within the fantasy genre can be traced to the larger kingdom in which she lives. From the opening of the show to the end of season two, the Kingdom of Dreamland stands as a touchstone for easily recognizing and understanding the fantasy elements found within the series. Within Dreamland's walls, *Disenchantment* houses the beginnings and endpoints to major and minor plotlines alike where individual characters' stories can start, end, or converge with one-another. The narrative dependency to always start and end with Dreamland suggests an importance of the show returning to a state of consistency: a

³ SF elements are subtly foreshadowed with quick glimpses in the first season. S1E1 shows an airship akin to ones seen in Steamland (Figure 1), while characters from *Futurama* briefly appear in a time machine during S1E10 (Figure 2).

concept that ultimately works to ground and define the show's fantasy elements by offering viewers a standardized view of "normal" fantasy. By doing such, *Disenchantment* not only asserts that Dreamland operates as the core for the show's fantasy genre roots but also stands emblematic of what defines normalcy within the show's created universe. Compared to other significant lands, Dreamland has the most recognizably "human" characters, which provides a familiar lens for viewers to connect with and mediate the fantasy elements of magic and otherness throughout the series. As a result, Dreamland subscribes to an anthropocentric ideology, asserting humans to be the focal point of the show with non-human species delegated to a position of less importance. Effectively, otherness is revealed through positioning the narrative dominance of Dreamland's anthropocentric normalcy against lands that fundamentally oppose a human-centric social structure.

Using its main character as a vessel of projection, Dreamland's engagements with outside lands occur through its anthropocentric definition of normalcy, which functions as the backbone for worldbuilding within the series. In "American SF and the Other," Le Guin notes how science-fiction—and by extension speculative fiction as a whole—repaints real world issues of society, culture, and race with elements of science-fiction (93). She further argues humans within the genre to be stand-ins for Western/European dominance, therefore mimicking the same modes of imperialism and colonialization ushered throughout history, and leaving their nonhuman counterparts as stand-ins for the traditionally Othered that need to be controlled and dominated. The anthropocentric dominance of the humans within Dreamland, then, can be understood as containers for Western ideologies surrounding imperialism and colonialism. As the human main character, the show positions Bean as carrying this imperialist mentality throughout her adventures into what Mary Louise Pratt refers to as contact zones, being "the space of colonial

encounters, the space which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (6). As mentioned during Chapter One, whether or not she chooses to invoke her privileges, Bean is a powerful figurehead within Dreamland’s and to a lesser degree Maru’s royal family and has the potential to one day inherit the crown to either kingdom. This means that when Bean encounters new peoples and lands within these contact zones she is always perceived as a future political power capable of enacting the same modes of colonial oppression done by the likes her father’s or mother’s family.

To again draw upon her perspective with more specificity, Bean is a wealthy white human female character whose entire understanding about the universe is informed by Dreamland’s perspective of normalcy. The kingdom’s wealth, which allots Bean her high economic and social statuses, derives from being built atop an imperialist regime that fixates on keeping the upper class (Bean’s family) in power at the cost of suppressing lower class peasants. This imperialist system also acts as the backbone for Dreamland’s colonialist efforts against its neighboring lands (more on this later). By positioning *Disenchantment’s* worldbuilding through an imperialistic Dreamland perspective filtered by Princess Tiabeanie, one of the series most privileged inhabitants, against the differing peoples, lands, and ideas existing outside of Dreamland, the series creates spaces where interactions with the Other are clearly defined as exotic departures. Here, exoticism can be defined as “a process of dismemberment and fragmentation in which objects stand for images that stand for a culture or a sensibility as a whole. Exoticism is synecdochal, and fragments of culture work to exemplify a larger whole” (Root 42). With no land outside of Dreamland being visited more than twice, the components of each land that are presented to viewers—being singular characters or isolated sections of the

land—fundamentally create a broad understanding of and become emblematic for the entirety of their originating land. These snippets effectively create lasting stereotypes of each region, which are used to further highlight the differences between those lands and Dreamland. As Bean navigates through these contact zones and encounters these fabricated stereotypes with her imperial eyes, the show contrasts newly presented genre elements to either stress and amplify the inherent fantasy nature of the show or to starkly exaggerate and draw attention to how it blatantly differs from Dreamland’s familiar elements of fantasy. Although her initial understanding of the world is rooted within Dreamland, her growth into a female hero ensures that each encounter with the Other—even if in an exoticized form—works to expand Bean’s personal, dynamic definition of what constitutes “normal” within the world. Of all the narratively significant lands visited, Elfwood, Maru, and Dankmire—while all satisfying baseline fantasy elements—fall victim to Dreamland’s exoticized gaze.

The show first presents the issue of exoticism by situating Elfwood and its elf inhabitants as Othered, both geographically and as a species, through the gaze of Dreamland. In a stark contrast to Bean’s bleak introduction of Dreamland, the elves of Elfwood are brought into the narrative happily singing their song: “*We’re as happy as we can be / Elfwood is the place we’ll never flee / Our minds are blank but our hearts are free / We work all day and we sing with glee / We drink all night, uncontrollably*” (S1E1 06:49 – 07:02). Where Bean sees Dreamland’s structure of control as something to rebel against, the elves revel under the control of their own monotonous and synchronized assembly work. Here, the elves are exoticized as being a species built entirely around complacently working into an indoctrinated sensation of happiness—to the point where expressing emotions outside of happiness are foreign and break the “jolly code.” The entirety of Elfwood’s structures are shown to be one of two things: living spaces or work-

related machinery. The two structure types, however, blend together, having no clear separations between zones for living or working (Figure 3). As opposed to Dreamland, which has clearly defined neighborhoods and marketplaces, this suggests that alongside being constantly happy the elves are only capable of performing their work-related tasks. Pairing the workaholic elves of Elfwood against the multifaceted characters and overall setting of Dreamland—especially so soon in the beginning of the series—presents Elfwood and its elves as relatively one-dimensional. Introducing the entirety of a land and its inhabiting species in this way works to establish an initial foundation of Othering that clearly defines for viewers what the “Other” is and how it is fundamentally different than what is found in the show’s dominant view of normalcy. Before any human characters within the series have the opportunity to engage in any physical encounters with the elves, *Disenchantment* outright tells its viewers that elves are a lesser species when compared to humans.

The workaholic nature of the elves and their resulting wealth is a major incentive behind Dreamland’s colonialist efforts enacted against them. Within Dreamland, the elves are not part of a serfdom, rather they operate within an imperial realm bent on exploiting them for monetary gain. They are initially taken into Dreamland because they possess something the kingdom needs: during “The Very Thing,” elf bodies are used to restore the lives of human bodies. This means that the elves’ primary function in the narrative is to provide an assisting role to the more important human characters. Dreamland is able to unquestionably exploit elf bodies for the benefit of the humans within the kingdom by casting an Othered gaze onto the elves that views them as objects to be used and discarded rather than equal beings. In “Our Bodies, Our Elves,” this gaze is amplified after King Rulo reveals that they do not care about gold coins because they “don’t even have chocolate in them” and that the elves have so many they “can’t even keep

track” (05:51 - 05:58). In the following episode, “The Dreamland Job,” King Zøg begins exploiting the clueless elves by enforcing high taxes that slowly drain their wealth “to the point they’re starving to death” (02:59 – 03:06). Instances like this reinforce two overt ideas about the elves: they’re only useful to their colonizing power because they possess easily conquered wealth and, more importantly, have an overt perception of being an innocent, childlike species—with Bean even noting their “childish booing” in the same episode—which allows them to be easily subsumed by the larger Kingdom of Dreamland. Their innocence, which is also a large part of Elfo’s personality within the first season, is largely rooted within their previous isolation within Elfwood and demonstrates a lack of understanding with the larger world outside. This fundamentally allows Dreamland the opportunity to fill their void understanding of their world with the Dreamland sense of normalcy—the perception that asserts humans to be the apex species—without the elves being able to question it while subsequently profiting off that same lack of understanding.

The Othering of the elves is further solidified after their direct introduction to Dreamland with the formation of Elf Alley. After helping restore the kingdom from Dagmar’s concrete-curse in season two’s “The Very Thing,” the elves remain within Dreamland’s walls under King Rulo’s direction. They are not, however, openly welcomed guests. With the exception of Elfo, who possesses a degree of class-mobility linked directly to his connection with Bean, all of the elves live segregated from the larger kingdom within Elf Alley. The mere existence of Elf Alley and its subsequent space for segregation suggests that elves do not fit within Dreamland’s definition of normalcy and therefore must be cast into a space that physically separates the Othered from the ruling structure. During Dreamland’s annual washday, Elf Alley is formally introduced as being “THREE FEET BELOW SEWER LEVEL” (S2E5 02:05 – 02:08). Here, the

elves are depicted to be living physically lower than Dreamland's disposed waste. Hierarchically speaking, their lower elevation stands metaphorical for their lower status within Dreamland. This lower elevation is also the direct reason for the elves becoming deathly ill—their tiny bodies becoming pus-filled houses for the grotesque and abject. The elves are offered no direct aid from King Zøg to correct the mistakes his kingdom created, with the only “solution” being to establish a quarantine. The main trio's entry and departure from Elf Alley during this time reveals a one-sidedness to the quarantine: if the disease was at risk of spreading, then the trio would not be able to leave the alley. Rather, the quarantine seeks to keep the elves contained to stop them from defiling the purity of Dreamland. The quarantine, disguised as an act of helpful assistance for the elves, works as another means of colonial control that ensures the profitable elves are unable to leave Dreamland's oppressive rule. Ultimately, Dreamland's colonialist Othering of the elves works to normalize the perception of elves as being less important creatures than humans: an idea that is indirectly filtered to viewers through Bean. While Bean does carry the dominance of Dreamland's perspective, her constant indulgence with assisting the elves works to highlight the prevalence of Dreamland's Othering efforts rather than furthering it.

In a stark contrast to Dreamland's colonizing and Othering of another species, Maru, presented as Dreamland's antithesis, directly challenges Dreamland's view of normalcy by showcasing human and non-human characters living fully integrated with one-another. Considering its relative proximity to Dreamland as an Eastern land, Dreamland subscribes to an orientalist approach with its relations to Maru through efforts of Othering and dehumanizing. Speaking in terms outlined within Said's *Orientalism*, Dreamland positions Maru and its differing society as fundamentally lower than Dreamland. Said notes that “The West is the actor, the Orient a passive reactor. The West is the spectator, the judge and jury, of every facet of

Oriental behavior” (109). Dreamland, depicted as being a dominant force with powers of commanding change within the series, can be contextually read as the Occident attempting to impose its Western thought, which positions Maru, both physically (Figure 4) and symbolically, as the Orient of the East, readily judged and Othered. While the land is heavily alluded to throughout the first season, not much is revealed about Maru until season one’s finale “Dreamland Falls.” At the end of the episode, after being hoisted onto a Maruvian boat, Dagmar and Bean are greeted to a mixed ensemble of human and non-human characters. While Bean is visibly apprehensive at her first sight of the nonhuman characters, Dagmar gestures at the ensemble and proclaims that Bean has “many wonderful things to see” (25:10 – 25:23), insinuating that she is going to expose Bean to aspects of Maru that are not only fundamentally different than what she is accustomed to in Dreamland but are going to be introduced in a positive light. Although a considerably small encounter, it nevertheless creates expectations about Maru being a space that overtly opposes the ideologies of Dreamland

While Maru does allow for a space of interspecies coexistence that fundamentally opposes Dreamland’s colonialist structure, both lands ultimately uphold the same idea of anthropocentrism. Where Dreamland upholds this ideology by casting its nonhuman characters into a physically separate space from its human characters, Maru subjugates its nonhuman inhabitants to roles of subservience. During Maru’s introduction in “The Disenchantress,” nonhuman characters are seen assisting human characters—most notably the royal family—with service roles, such as holding umbrellas and opening doors. With nonhuman characters being the only visible characters performing such tasks, this subjugation suggests that nonhuman characters are not automatically socially equal to human characters despite their coexistence. Where Dreamland occupies a colonizing title with its treatment of nonhuman characters, Maru

and its depictions of human and nonhuman coexistence is more akin to a postcolonial space where its inhabitants are left to grapple with the contorted effects colonialization leaves on a group's culture. In this case, human dominance has persevered and become the standard within the land. To keep from entering the same postcolonial space, Dreamland uses Maru to justify its own misdeeds against nonhuman characters by reinforcing the binary of "good" and "evil" established within the narrative, which ultimately mirrors modes of colonialism that seek to position the ideal self away from the flawed Other⁴. Positioning Maru as the narrative's recognizable source of evil while simultaneously showcasing its culture as one that cohabitates human and nonhuman characters in a postcolonial setting suggests a connection between interspecies mingling and evil attributes. Dreamland uses its colonialist ruling over the elves to starkly define itself from the Eastern land—the West has to villainize the East in an attempt to separate itself and dominate it.

Dreamland's exoticized gaze of Maru is necessary for viewers, because having a diametrically opposed space solidifies Dreamland's position as being the recognizable basis of understanding for what constitutes normal within the series. When exploring Maru, Bean carries her Dreamland notions of normalcy, claiming that "Maru is so exotic. It's a whole different type of bleak and desperate than Dreamland" (S2E1 07:51 – 07:56). In this small snippet, Bean is directly telling audiences that Maru is literally an exotic space in relation to Dreamland. The rest of her time spent in Maru only furthers her exoticized view of the land, such as her encounter with the snake messenger (09:09). The episode culminates with her ultimate rejection of her mother, which in turn represents an entire rejection of Maruvian culture. By doing such, Bean never sees past her initial exoticization of the land and leaves Maru having experienced a starkly

⁴ Maru shares a visual parallel to Meereen, a location in HBO's *Game of Thrones* series widely discussed as utilizing an Orientalist narrative perspective (Figure 5).

different culture in a completely negative light. Framing a particular culture in a negative way through the main character further emphasizes the series' overall depiction of Dreamland being comparatively superior in culture and ideology. After her departure, Maru is never returned to and is sparsely mentioned until the series finale, suggesting that an exotic land, if found to be physically unhelpful to and ideologically different from the dominant Western culture, can still be intangibly helpful by merely standing as a comparative point for justifying Western colonialist efforts.

Where Elfwood can be understood as the nonhuman Other and Maru as the cultural Other, the Dankmarians of Dankmire, representing an ongoing threat against Dreamland's anthropocentrism, embody the perceptions of both lands. They are nonhuman yet can accomplish the same feats as humans; they live in a land that is physically and culturally different than Dreamland; they are, simply put, non-Western and distinctly stereotypical of real-world Eastern provinces (echoing even clearer sentiments of Orientalism). During season one's "Swamp and Circumstance," Bean and Zøg in particular come in conflict with Dankmarian customs they deem as exotic: eating live leech-like creatures, succumbing to a culture of bowing, and—most importantly—having to acknowledge a differing perspective of history to be true. During the boat ride to Dankmire, Elfo, reading from Dankmarian history book, learns the polarizing history surrounding both provinces: "Did you know Dreamland forced Dankmire to build this canal? Then, they fought a 100-year war over who owns the canal, and the war only ended when a certain King Zøg of Dreamland...married Princess Oona of Dankmire" (S1E6 06:26 – 06:40). Dreamland, in an act of dominance, "forced" a foreign land to extraneously create something for the benefit of Dreamland then enacted violence against that land to secure ownership over it. This is a prototypical colonial mindset, where the "white middle-class Westerner believes it his

human prerogative not only to manage the nonwhite world but also to own it, just because by definition ‘it’ is not quite as human as ‘we’ are” (Said 108). By controlling the physical canal and the history surrounding its creation, Dreamland seeks to keep the nonhuman (nonwhite) Dankmarians positioned in a place of lesser power. Acknowledging their history—whether truthful or not—means admitting an ideological defeat against a land perceived to be unequal to the human supremacy embodied by Dreamland. Essentially, Dreamland’s social and cultural Othering of Dankmire keeps the province oppressed, thus ensuring that it cannot further threaten the normality previously set in place by Dreamland.

It is not until the introduction of *Disenchantment*’s science-fiction elements that Dreamland’s colonialist supremacy is directly challenged. These science-fiction elements can best be understood when first considering Darko Suvin’s idea of the novum. In describing the concept, Suvin notes: “a novum of cognitive innovation is a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author’s and implied reader’s norm of reality” (64). Essentially, the novum introduces a new element into a structure that conflicts with the structure’s preestablished rules of understanding. For *Disenchantment*, the novum inhabits the form electric machinery brought by industrialization. While electric powered machinery does not directly conflict with an authorial understanding of the universe, these ideas do pose disruptions to the show’s created universe and Dreamland’s outline of normalcy, which subsequently breaks down the show’s previously fabricated fantasy guise. While season one works to create a foundation of fantasy elements through a series of worldbuilding, season two challenges that foundation by introducing the “electric novum” in its own worldbuilding efforts; namely, season two asserts its science-fiction elements with the introductions of Hell and Steamland. These science-fiction elements challenge the previously established rules of normalcy outlined by

Dreamland's fantasy-centric perspective, which fundamentally subverts and reshapes Bean's understanding of othered peoples and lands.

Season two's second episode, "Stairway to Hell," offers the first glimpses of some of these science-fiction elements in action. After being cast from Heaven into Hell, Elfo finds himself dropped directly into the "processing center," an assembly line contraption that receives and processes all newly entered souls into Hell. While there is no overt mention of electricity at this stage of the show, from its very design this contraption suggests ideas outside the show's established rules. The lighting found throughout various overhead sections within the machine, moving boxing gloves, and the entire portion that crushes Elfo (9:50 – 9:58) all suggest a stage of industrialization that neither Dreamland nor any of its surrounding lands have yet to achieve. The most significant novum-intrusion happens with the use of film projectors within Elfo and Bean's personalized Hell. Here, the introduction of a science-fiction element not only breaks the established functions of the universe but does so in an effort to push the narrative forward. Without utilizing the film projectors to show Elfo the "worst moment of [his] existence," Elfo would have never seen Bean choosing to save Dagmar's life over his own—the event that fundamentally reshaped the trajectory of his character for the remainder of the season. By doing such, the entry of science-fiction technologies signals an undermining of Bean's fantasy understanding of the world—she becomes powerless beneath the intrusion of elements that do not exist outside of her normal world. This paves the foundation for future instances of growth to occur at the dismantling of her fantasy informed reality and ultimately asserts that science-fiction elements serve to break down and reformat fantasy elements within the series.

Using the location of Hell, a place of misery and torment, as an entry point for the novum frames those ideas under the same light—the main trio's first encounter with science-fiction

occurring in the depths of Hell sets a precedent that all science-fiction elements going forward are going to encapsulate similar challenges and negativities needing to be traversed as found in Hell. Effectively, these events foreshadow the narrative's eventual confrontation with science-fantasy elements.

Where Hell's science-fiction intrusion happens subtly, the series' science-fantasy elements are fully realized with season two's ninth episode, "The Electric Princess," which formally introduces Steamland and brings the novum directly into the spotlight to challenge and ultimately subvert Dreamland's dominant view of fantasy normalcy. During the episode, Princess Bean travels to Steamland, a steampunk infused society filled with various steam and electric powered machinery. Bean's transformative time within Steamland echoes Sky Gunderson's statement from the opening of the episode: "Your so-called magic does nothing. Science makes the world go round" (07:30 – 07:37). Steamland's advanced technological progressions, being the result of its embodiment of science-fiction elements, dethrones Dreamland's dominant view of normalcy by overtaking and reshaping Bean's—the gatekeeper of the show's narrative perspective—ways of thinking and subsequent engagements with the world. This gives Bean the foundation of reasoning to reject her Dreamland perspective in lieu of one informed by Steamland's truths. When compared to Steamland, Bean begins to view Dreamland similarly to Elfwood, Maru, and Dankmire: an Othered land in need of some degree of enlightenment and salvation. Effectively, Steamland and Dreamland embody both sides of the science-fantasy binary. Bean's declining perception of Dreamland in favor of the information provided by Steamland's science-fiction elements suggests a subsequent decline in fantasy elements as a positive view of normalcy and a trend toward science-fiction elements as the dominate way to engage with the world.

While Steamland does not directly partake in colonial exploits against Dreamland,⁵ it does use its comparatively advanced technologies to assume cultural dominance over Dreamland. By doing such, Steamland highlights the exploitative and prejudicial behaviors of Dreamland (enacted onto its aforementioned neighboring lands) and puts Dreamland into a newfound space where it cannot seemingly find superiority over Steamland. Throughout the entirety of “The Electric Princess,” the series uses Sky as an embodiment of Steamland to frame Dreamland as unintelligent and nonreceptive to new ideas, calling its residents “dimwits” (10:42) on one occasion, while subsequently asserting Steamland as superior by holding solutions to Dreamland’s shortcomings, such as using antibiotics rather than amputations for medical solutions (13:11). Here, the show directly frames Dreamland in a negative light by presenting Steamland society as overcoming what Bean perceives as overt flaws within Dreamland society—this act also furthers Bean’s rejection of Dreamland’s perspective for an understanding of the world fueled by science-fiction. Where Dreamland once found itself as the superior fantasy land compared to its neighbors, Steamland’s introduction of science-fiction offers audiences a means of dethroning Dreamland as the supreme and dominant colonizing power. Due to the series wanting to frame science-fiction as the positive alternative to Dreamland’s fantasy mentality, *Disenchantment* does not directly invite viewers to be critical of Steamland’s power dynamics in the same way it does to Dreamland. Rather, all the SF elements within Steamland are situated as being one-dimensional solutions to Bean’s—and Dreamland’s—problems.

⁵ Although the plot of “The Electric Princess” does revolve around Sky Gunderson delivering a mysterious weapon to dismantle the power structure of Dreamland, not much is currently known about Steamland’s incentive. As it stands, such an act cannot currently be analyzed as a colonist effort against Dreamland.

The differences in fantasy and science-fiction ideology are further exemplified during season two's finale "Tiabeanie Falls," where Sorcerio turns a blind eye to Bean's insistence on using "stience" to cure Zøg and instead fails to treat him using solely his "magical" cures. In the episode's opening, Bean states that "[t]hese fools don't know anything about stience or medicine. I gotta help my dad before they cure him to death" (02:49 – 02:54). Returned from her Steamland venture, Bean finds herself carrying new ideas that directly oppose her previous understandings about the functions of the world. At this point, Steamland has effectively broken-down Bean's carried perspective relating to fantasy as the dominate view of normalcy and instead has transformed her understanding of the world to view fantasy elements as negatives through a science-fiction gaze. While simultaneously possessing newfound information from Steamland and a reshaped perception about the knowledge of her old society within Dreamland, Bean embodies the role of a colonial go-between who is responsible for mediating the conflicting truths presented within the combining of science-fantasy (Cachey); however, Bean ultimately sides with Steamland and its science-fiction elements. Audiences, receiving their understanding of the world through Bean, are in-turn offered science-fiction elements as the new normal. To further the vilification and break-down of fantasy, Dreamland tries to punish Bean for claiming different knowledge than that found within Dreamland. By the end of the episode, she is tried and found guilty of being a witch and is sentenced to a public burning. The series makes a clear distinction of Bean being in the right, for she is the only character that is actively trying to save Zøg without worsening his condition. While SF as the new normal occurs at the end of the current season and thus cannot be further analyzed, "The Electric Princess" and "Tiabeanie Falls" lay a clear foundation for the trajectory of the next season: science-fiction elements will be

at the forefront of the narrative with Bean's continued growth into a female hero constantly presenting her opportunities to reject fantasy in lieu of SF.

With a baseline understanding of the series, *Disenchantment* aptly fits to be sorted into Netflix's fantasy category—after all, it is plenty filled with magic, elves, and the like. Similar to many other fantasy shows within that category, *Disenchantment* finds itself partaking in various modes of Othering with the ways in which it represents its nonhuman and non-Dreamland characters. As the series world builds new provinces outside of Dreamland, it becomes evidently clearer that the series has a preference for distinctly white human characters to field the show's definition of normal. What sets this series apart from others, however, is the way in which it inadvertently brings these issues of Othering to the forefront of the narrative by introducing science-fiction elements to juxtapose against its fantasy elements. While SF does not rid the series of partaking in colonial depictions of the Other—as SF brings its own representational issues to the table—it does ask viewers to question the nature of representation presented so far. Unfortunately, questioning does little to fix these issues, leaving *Disenchantment* as a science-fantasy hybrid series which fails to remedy representational issues found with either genre.



Figure 1: *Airship foreshadowing SF elements. “A Princess, an Elf, and a Demon Walk into a Bar” (27:51).*



Figure 2: *Fry, Bender, and Professor Farnsworth as they appear in Futurama’s “The Late Philip J. Fry.” “Dreamland Falls” (20:56).*



Figure 3: *First glimpse of Elfwood and its work-centric society. “A Princess, an Elf, and a Demon Walk into a Bar” (06:46).*



Figure 4: *Map depicting Dreamland, Maru, and Dankmire. “The Lonely Heart is a Hunter” (17:31 – 17:34)*



Figure 5: *Maru's structural similarity to Meereen. "This Disenchantress" (03:36).*

Conclusion – “Kill him before we understand!”

The entirety of *Disenchantment* hinges on Bean’s continued growth into a female hero and its allowance for the show to integrate and fully realize its science-fantasy elements. Bean’s reaches toward heroism create opportunities for her and the world surrounding her to dynamically change—where Bean does it in the traditional sense, the world’s “coming-of-age” occurs as a transformation from medieval fantasy to technologically informed science-fiction.

The ongoing construction of a female hero is undeniably the most important aspect of the show. While certain female characters of the series, such as Dagmar and Oona, offer their own mixed array of positive and negative commentary about the nature of female characters within the science-fantasy genre, Bean offers a consistent source of positive representation. From the start of season one to the end of season two, Bean never waivers in her demanding ideologies for equality. Her arc between both seasons, which hinges upon the idea of wanting to gain control over her own destiny, may yet to be fully realized, but her specific encounters with and avoidance of the myth of sex differences suggests an ongoing trajectory toward becoming a female hero.

Understanding Bean’s specific representation as a female lead working into a female hero helps in understanding how the show holistically represents and misrepresents the various peoples and lands outside of Dreamland she encounters. In a press-release interview with NPR, series co-creator Matt Groening states “[t]he nature of the history of fantasy...is, it's always: things are not what they seem to be.” Despite attempting to break away from high fantasy norms by introducing elements of science-fiction, the show fails to fix the most persistent issue plaguing both genres: paralleling modes of Othering and exoticization found in the physical world. While the show world builds in an overtly lighthearted manner—with every land, character, or species becoming the butt of a joke at some point—questions are still raised

concerning the degree at which consistently establishing and perpetuating power dynamics of Occident vs. Oriental is acceptable for either fantasy or science-fiction. Does merely the existence of having such ideas rooted in genre history excuse a continual subscription to these ongoing representations? For *Disenchantment*, that seems to be the case; however, that's where the female hero returns as the show's saving grace.

Bean proves time and time again, whether by creating an unofficial treaty with the elves while her father mounts an assault against Elfwood or by trying to take newfound knowledge of “science” back to Dreamland despite the province's stubbornness to anything new, that breaking down these representations of the Other are possible. Albeit Bean is presented as being prone to initial bouts of exoticization that can categorize her within the white-savior role, her willingness to engage with Othered peoples and lands—boots on the ground—offers them an otherwise absent platform on which to express themselves. This suggests that *Disenchantment's* interpretation of heroism valorizes intellectual and empathetical growth above a subscription to following a set destiny. At its core, *Disenchantment* simply follows the adventures of a young girl who, in an attempt to find her own voice in an imperial world controlled by patriarchal forces, finds meaning among the oppressed, voiceless masses under similar modes of tyranny. In such a space, the female hero fights not just for her own freedom but becomes a champion for helping multitudes of peoples break free from their constrictive restraints.

In the end, Groening's *Disenchantment* fits nicely into his portfolio of animated works. Ideas of gendered heroism, genre placement, and presentation aside, the show hits its mark at being entertaining. To quote Luci: “Entertainment is just a tool that pacifies the masses and leads to the decay and ultimate collapse of civilization—let's clap along!”

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