

Messengers from the Stars: On Science Fiction and Fantasy

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Photo: João Paulo Serafim

**Arda Re-made: Finding Meaning in a Pandemic Through the Works of Tolkien,
Sapkowski, and Straczynski**

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Abstract | This essay examines the author's three favorite Secondary Worlds of science fiction/fantasy: J. Michael Straczynski's American tv series *Babylon 5* (1993-98) and various spinoffs, the *Witcher* Saga of novels and short stories by Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski (English trans. 2007-18), and Brit J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) and other tales set in his fictional Middle-earth. The author reflects on her

revisiting of these beloved works as a source of comfort during the time of COVID-19 and draws connections between human (and extraterrestrial) responses to pandemics described in these fictional worlds and numerous missteps and complications witnessed in the global response to our current pandemic. The essay argues that many of our hard-won lessons from COVID-19 were previously reflected in these fictional worlds, lessons we forget only at our own peril in our return to the so-called “New Normal”.

Keywords | COVID-19; science fiction; secondary worlds; racism; conspiracy theories.



1. The Fellowship of the Pandemic

In the uncertainty of the emerging pandemic we turned to comfort foods, familiar hobbies, and favorite mass media. Binge-watching TV series and rereading beloved novels became the norm as we safely hunkered down at home. Among the popular works that many people turned to for strength and solace was J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (Chua n.pg; Cooper n.pg; Zama n.pg). Not only did its central message of hope against seemingly unsurmountable odds resonate with many people, but its author’s experiences with disease provided a sense of comradery. Although Tolkien apparently avoided contracting the 1918 H1N1 “Spanish” flu, he fell ill with trench fever while serving in World War I. As Zama (n.pg) notes, “He certainly knew what it meant to look ahead and see only desperation and death. He certainly knew what it felt to be trapped in a dangerous place”. Frodo’s plaintive refrain “I wish it need not have happened in my time” became an internet mantra, along with Gandalf’s sage reply: “so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 60). Sakar reflects that “literature in its multifarious forms – print, film, graphic/ text, audio, visual – provides several resources that help us cope with and comprehend these dark times: a bedrock of past histories of pandemics that we can turn to for learning and for reassurance that this, too, shall pass” (11-2).

Similarly, scholars turned their pens toward re-analyzing plague media in light of the current pandemic. Examples range from Daniel Dafoe’s 1722 novel *A Journal of the Plague Year* (Danesi), Jack London’s 1912 novel *The Scarlet Plague* (Riva et al.), Sinclair Lewis’ 1925 novel *Arrowsmith* (Eisenmann), and Albert Camus’ 1947 *The*

Plague (Romero), to the films *Contagion* (Crewe, 2011) and *I Am Legend* (Elidrissi, 2007). Comparisons have been made between COVID-19, *Contagion* and *The Andromeda Strain* (O’Brocháin and Brereton, 1971) or COVID-19, *Contagion*, and *Blindness* (2008) and *The Painted Veil* (2006) (Han and Curtis “Suspicious”). Although I am continuously rereading portions of Tolkien’s works as part of my scholarly activity, I took advantage of COVID-era projects to binge watch one of my favorite tv series, *Babylon 5* (1993-98), and reread the six novels and two short story collections that comprise Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski’s *Witcher* saga (English trans. 2007-18). As was the case of the scholars previously mentioned, I discovered that, in many ways, fiction presaged fact, not only in the circumstances surrounding the imagined pandemics in these works, but the societal responses to them (for good or ill). My comfort-seeking recreation thus provided a valuable opportunity to reflect on important lessons of the pandemic.

It also gave me cause to investigate little-explored plagues mentioned mostly as asides in Middle-earth. In the First Age of Middle-earth, more than a thousand years before the One Ring was forged by the evil lord Sauron, a “pestilence... borne on an evil wind out of Angband” killed an unknown number of humans (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 198). The reference to Angband, the stronghold of the malevolent Melkor, Sauron’s mentor and the chief villain of Middle-earth, directly connects the plague with evil, and perhaps even an intentional origin, reminiscent of conspiracy theories concerning the origin of COVID-19. Nearly 1400 years before the destruction of the One Ring, in the Year 1636 of the Third Age, a so-called “Great Plague” spread across much of Middle-earth, like COVID-19 showing no respect for political or geographical boundaries as humans and hobbits alike suffered “great loss” (Tolkien, *Return* 367). Devastating plagues can be found throughout Sapkowski’s saga, including smallpox outbreaks. In one vignette in the novel *Baptism of Fire*, smallpox kills all but a single immune member of a family. The Witcher and his company protect the survivor from a band of marauders, taking care to not infect themselves in the process (Sapkowski, *Baptism* 95 and 101). The need to protect oneself while aiding others was certainly central to the public health response to COVID-19, especially among the heroic health professionals working in the trenches.

In the *Babylon 5* episode “Confessions and Lamentations” the deaths of all 203 souls aboard a transport ship forces Markab physician Dr. Lazarenn to reluctantly admit

to his old friend, station medical officer Dr. Stephen Franklin, that it is the Drafa plague, “100% terminal and 100% contagious” (“Confessions and Lamentations”). Over the course of the episode characters make numerous mistakes in fighting the disease, paralleling the uneven real-world response to COVID-19. Indeed, *Reddit* user PerryProjects terms his first viewing of this episode in 2020 “Very uncomfortable”. The 1999 TV movie *Babylon 5: A Call to Arms* forms a bridge between *Babylon 5* and the unsuccessful spinoff, *Crusade* (1999). Set a few years after the main events in the original series, the Drakh attack Earth using advanced Planet Killer technology inherited from their former allies, the Shadows. Former *Babylon 5* station Captain John Sheridan (now President of the Interstellar Alliance) thwarts their attack, so the Drakh instead infect our atmosphere with a bio-engineered Shadow nano-virus. The genetic editing mechanism of the disease will adapt to terrestrial biology and kill all humans within five years. Sheridan immediately quarantines Earth in order to protect humans on other worlds, and believing that since advanced extraterrestrial technology was used to make the disease, it can be used to cure it, sends the research ship *Excalibur* across the galaxy in search of a cure (the basic premise of *Crusade*). As in our real world, humanity likewise put its trust in scientific exploration to save them from a deadly invisible enemy, a central theme to what Priscilla Wald terms the “outbreak narrative” (3).

Babylon 5 is undoubtedly science fiction; therefore, a connection to Tolkien’s and Sapkowski’s fantasy worlds might seem little more than a vagary of personal taste. However, Sapkowski has explained that his “vision of Fantasy is almost real. You have to believe that which occurs in the stories... you have to feel it, to believe all. It is not the typical fairy tale” (Lsrry “Part I”). This process of detailed mythmaking was more poetically termed *sub-creation* by J.R.R. Tolkien in his classic essay “On Fairy-stories” (Flieger and Anderson 11). As Tolkien explains, a true Secondary World is one “which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he [the author] relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside” (Flieger and Anderson 52). While J.R.R. Tolkien’s classic sub-creation, Middle-earth, is often held up as the example par excellence of a Secondary World, Sapkowski’s *Witcher* series is also a Secondary World, in the Tolkienian sense (Larsen “A Mythology” 389), as is Straczynski’s *Babylon 5* universe. In addition, both Tolkien’s world and Sapkowski’s heavily utilize science in their worldbuilding (e.g., Gee; Larsen

“Mutant”). Indeed, Sapkowski’s world, with its use of magic as applied science, genetic engineering, and space-time travel, qualifies as a “science-fantasy world” (Malmgren, 261).

It is true that these three works span two types of media (novels and television) and the better part of the 20th century. As previously noted, Tolkien’s experiences in World War I (contemporaneous with the 1918 Flu Pandemic) would have shaped his thoughts on pandemics, and historical events such as the Black Death would have been a part of his education as a medieval scholar. While many *B5* fans and critics have read the 1995 episode “Confessions and Lamentations” as a metaphor for HIV/AIDS, especially the stigmatization of those infected (e.g., Oshiro n.pg; Rosner n.pg), Straczynski himself draws a closer connection with the Black Death (“Guide” n.pg). Sapkowski’s *Catriona Plague* is described as a “viral haemorrhagic fever” (Sapkowski, *Lady* 336), similar to the fictional Motaba virus of the 1995 film *Outbreak* and perhaps pays homage to the 1995 Ebola outbreak in Zaire as well as the Black Death in its spreading through fleas. It should also be noted that the titular space station *Babylon 5* is a “highly multicultural environment, making it a relatable setting to present-day pluralistic societies” (Pruski 267), as is Middle-earth and the Continent of Sapkowski’s novels.

Three storylines given birth in the fertile imaginations of three men from different countries resonate in curious synchronicity with our experiences during this global plague. Here I reflect upon the myriad ways in which I have discovered this to be true, as well as point out valuable lessons from these fictional worlds that I sincerely hope we have learned in preparation for the inevitable next pandemic.

2. Ill Winds and Quarantines

Freelance writer Gael Cooper (n.pg) admits of the early days of the pandemic “Every time I step outside my home in Seattle, ... I think of a line from *The Fellowship of the Ring*: ‘It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out [of] your door’”. Indeed, in the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic scientists and public health specialists were wisely focused on understanding the mode of transmission and trying to slow the spread of the disease. In the First Age of Middle-earth it is noted that the “Evil Breath” came on an “ill wind from the North under leaden skies”, the airborne nature clear, even in its name (Tolkien, *Unfinished* 58).

COVID-19 was not as obvious. Which posed the greatest threat, touching grocery bags or being in the company of someone coughing? A seminal moment in the *Babylon 5* episode “Confessions and Lamentations” occurs when Dr. Franklin discovers that the Drafa plague is airborne and therefore threatens the station’s ventilation system. The Catriona plague of the *Witcher* saga and related computer games is brought to the unnamed Continent when the space-time traveling Ciri passes through a plague-invested world on her trip through the multiverse and a plague-carrying flea hitches a ride in her clothes. Once on her world, the flea infects a rat, and then a cat, and finally a human (Sapkowski, *Lady* 276-78; 446-47). The resulting pandemic subsequently spreads around the Continent as there is little natural human immunity (reasonable for a novel disease, such as COVID-19).

Throughout our pandemic scientists searched for the specific origin near Wuhan, China, hoping to understand the virus and its modes of transmission, and ultimately lead us to be much better prepared for the next pandemic (Bloom et al. 694). Although animal vectors, especially bats, are the leading suspects, food and food packaging as well as a potential “laboratory incident” (either accidental or intentional) are also considered (Mallapaty 26; “WHO-convened Global Study” 112). The multiple suggested modes bring to mind the fictional meningoencephalitis virus one (MEV-1) of *Contagion*, which originated in bats but could also be transmitted though touching infected surfaces (Burns and Bhella 164).

A major turning point in the Drafa plague is the discovery that it can infect multiple species. Similarly, the Great Plague of Middle-earth takes the lives of “more than half of the folk of Rhovanion... and of their horses, too” (Tolkien, *Unfinished* 289). While transmission from animals to humans soon became the leading hypothesis for the origin of COVID-19, the discovery that the virus can be transferred from humans to animals – including pets, zoo animals, and farm species – is concerning, because such animals could pass the disease back to humans at some point in the future, perhaps in a mutated form that might elude extant vaccines. The ability of infected farmed mink to transmit the virus back to humans led to the mass destruction of mink colonies (Mallapaty 26-7).

Over the course of March 2020, the borders of our world began to close around us, international travel becoming much more difficult and often involving testing and mandatory quarantines. American states began refusing admission to other American

citizens based on their state or even county of origin. Some locales instituted draconian home lockdowns, but even in these cases there were exceptions (for example to acquire groceries or medicine). Aboard the *Babylon 5* station a more air-tight quarantine was issued by Captain Sheridan in the face of the Drafa plague even before its mode of transmission was discovered. But as in the case of our own world, the damage had already been done, the disease spreading from planet to planet through the 23rd century equivalent of air travel, spaceships.

In Spring 2020, even those not on official lockdown were told to remain home and practice “social distancing”, a seeming oxymoron. However, this tool in our arsenal against the disease was not equally available to everyone, especially those in congregate living situations. Looking back to the initial spread of the pandemic, Wong and Yi (1) found that “population density is an effective predictor of cumulative infection cases in the U.S. at the county level”. Likewise, the severe winter spike in COVID cases in the U.S. was largely driven by human behavior, including the need to gather inside during cold weather. Plague media frequently make note of this connection between infection rates and population density, including Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* and Camus’ *The Plague* (Danesi 2-3; Camus 152), as well as Tolkien himself. In the Great Plague the Dundlendings suffered “less than most, since they dwelt apart and had few dealings with other men” (Tolkien, *Unfinished* 370). In contrast, the death toll was high in Gondor, “especially among those who dwelt in cities. It was greater in Rhovanion, for though its people lived mostly in the open and had no great cities, the Plague came with a cold winter when horses and men were driven into shelter” (Tolkien, *Unfinished* 288-89). A similar lack of “social distancing” helped to spread the Drafa plague on *Babylon 5*. The station medical staff unwisely required all Markab to submit to blood tests in Med Lab, which brought them into contact with others of their kind. But worst of all, 4/5 of the station’s Markab population packed together in a voluntary isolation zone, hoping that their moral purity would protect them from the infection.

It did not.

3. Science to the Rescue

In the world of *Babylon 5*, as in our own, science rises to the challenge in times of pandemic, in ways few outside of the scientific establishment can truly appreciate. Prior to COVID-19 the shortest time between isolating a virus and the approval of an

effective vaccine was four years (Ball n.pg). When Chinese scientists published the genetic sequence for the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus in January 2020 scientists around the world raced to develop effective vaccines, many relying on cutting-edge biological delivery systems. Less than a year later, on December 2, 2020, the Pfizer-BioNTech mRNA vaccine was authorized for emergency use in the U.K., and nine days later in the U.S., with several other vaccines (using a variety of biological platforms) following suit in the intervening months.

Simultaneously a different variety of scientific heroes raced to find treatments, many of these health care workers, like Tolkien in World War I, literally fighting in the trenches, surrounded by death on a daily basis. Faced with a lack of personal protective equipment, bed space, respirators, and even knowledge about the virus they were fighting, doctors, nurses, technicians, facilities and maintenance workers, and untold others held the line against the disease, often at the expense of their own physical, mental, and emotional health. Many other essential workers (people too-often devalued by modern society) proved themselves to be heroes as well, as they kept society from collapsing by delivering food, fuel, energy, and other essentials, again at significant risk to themselves and their families. As the great lord Elrond notes in Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring* "such is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere" (283).

In the medievalist universe of the *Witcher* saga first responders and other volunteers die in plagues caring for others. The teenaged princess Adela dies from a plague, disobeying her step-father King Goidemar by aiding priests in caring for sick children outside of the relative safety of the castle (Sapkowski, *Baptism* 268). Halfling surgeon Milo "Rusty" Vanderbeck and his assistant, the priestess Iola, survive the dangers of their battlefield hospital only to die in the outbreak of the Catriona plague. While their colleagues abandoned their posts, these two remained, treating "the sick, because they were doctors. The fact that there was no cure for the Red Death was unimportant to them" (Sapkowski, *Lady* 336).

In our Primary World, Joseph B. McCormick, then CDC infectious disease researcher, once found a single doctor left at a Sudanese hospital during an Ebola outbreak. "They are all gone. The patients, the nurses, all of them are running away.... They see what has happened to others here. So many deaths, so quickly. They think

they will die, too. So they run away. I can't blame them[,]” the remaining physician explained. When asked why he alone stayed, he offered “I am the doctor. Where else would I go?” McCormick reflects that he felt that he was “talking to a captain who was prepared to go down with his ship” (McCormick and Fisher-Hoch 65). While such actions seem utterly heroic to those not in the medical profession, as Camus’ fictional Dr. Bernard Rieux explains in *The Plague*, “there’s no question of heroism in all this. It’s a matter of common decency.... I don’t know what it means for other people. But in my case I know that it consists in doing my job” (Camus 150). Physician Barry R. Meisenberg echoes this sentiment:

I hear Rieux’s voice as I visit COVID patients for extended discussions of clinical trials through doubled face masks (mine) and over the noise of high-flow oxygen machines (theirs). It is a job I have trained for and needs doing. I think too of Rieux when I observe other clinicians supplying COVID care. It is common decency delivered every day and every night. (Meisenberg 2)

Such common decency is highlighted aboard *Babylon 5*, as Minbari ambassador Delenn and her assistant Lennier volunteer to go into the Markab isolation zone despite not knowing if their species can be infected. Captain Sheridan questions this request to offer aid to an alien species, but Delenn sharply rebukes him: “I didn’t know that similarity was required for the exercise of compassion. They are afraid. We wish to do what little we can” (“Confessions and Lamentations”). Nurses who held I-pads so that dying COVID-19 patients could say good-bye to their loved ones, or held the hands of the scared and dying, did this, and far, far more. As Jennifer Stolzer (n.pg) notes of her COVID-19 rewatch of “Confessions and Lamentations”, “A more fitting episode to be watching in March of 2020 I could not ask for”.

While scientists raced to find vaccines for COVID-19, others searched for treatments that would prevent serious illness and death. *Babylon 5*’s Stephen Franklin develops a cutting-edge treatment too late to save his friend Dr. Lazarenn but hoping it might save other Markab, he rushes all 500 doses to the isolation zone, despite not having had time to test it (a type of emergency use very different from that of the well-tested COVID-19 vaccines). Unfortunately, it is too late for the Markab – both on the station and across the galaxy – but it is suggested that Franklin’s treatment will aid the other species that the Drafa virus has crossed over into (“Confessions and Lamentations”). The heart wrenching image of Delenn and Lennier surrounded by

hundreds of dead Markabs was particularly poignant and powerful for the viewer, and reinforced the lesson that the victims of pandemics are individuals, not merely casualty figures.

In the spinoff *Crusade* the Drakh Plague infecting Earth is accidentally spread to an off-world colony of non-humans who represent the last remaining population of their kind, upping the stakes in the race to find a cure (“Patterns of the Soul”). Dr. Sarah Chambers of the science vessel *Excalibur* is able to reverse engineer another artificial nano-virus to temporarily block infection from the Drakh plague for up to 48 hours of exposure (“The Memory of War”), and commentary by series creator J. Michael Straczynski confirms that a cure would have been found during the series’ second season (“Crusade”). As we approach the secondary anniversary of COVID-19, we are still searching for our own real-world cure (monoclonal antibody treatment offering limited success and promising antivirals either in late-phase clinical trials or still awaiting approval), making the swift development of vaccines that much more remarkable.

The Drakh nano-virus is able to infect multiple species because it mutates in an intelligent way, specifically targeting the biology of any species. In the real world, mutations arise by a natural “hit-or-miss” process during the viral replication process. As the pandemic moves from victim to victim, each replication creates an opportunity to roll the dice of evolution, leading to the emergence of more contagious, and sometimes even more lethal, variants. The fear is that variants will arise that will “out-smart” our vaccines. We, like the various intelligent species of the *Babylon 5* universe, are therefore in an arms race against the virus, our chief weapons being vaccines and human behavior, the latter being largely outside of the control of science.

4. Roadblocks: Religion, Politics, and Conspiracy Theories

The war against the pandemic has certainly been hampered by politics and blatant misinformation. A careful deconstruction of the failure of the U.S. to meet the challenge of COVID-19 is certainly far beyond the purview of this short essay; however, it is fair to say that the world at large is deserving of a general reprimand. The Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response of the World Health Organization concluded that the:

initial outbreak became a pandemic as a result of gaps and failings at every critical juncture of preparedness for, and response to, COVID-19... too many countries took a ‘wait and see’ approach rather than enacting an aggressive containment strategy that could have forestalled the global pandemic. (“COVID-19: Make it the Last Pandemic, a Summary” 2)

In December 2019, the Chinese government “downplayed the pandemic threat for several critical weeks”, and by censoring information and “silencing doctors” who tried to raise the alarm about the novel disease delayed the response of the World Health Organization (Sparrow n.pg). *Babylon 5*’s Dr. Franklin chastises Lazarenn about his silence about a disease that had been slowly burning through the Markab home world for a year. Lazarenn reluctantly admits that their doctors, like those in China, were “ordered to remain silent. Our leaders were afraid the people would take the disease as a sign from the gods that we had fallen from grace. They were afraid they would be voted out for attacking the public good” (“Confessions and Lamentations”).

Not only do we see political pressures at work in the Markab non-response to the Drafa virus, but misconceptions as well. Lazarenn explains that the disease’s previous outbreak had only occurred on the island of Drafa, known for its moral laxity. Only the island’s isolated geography avoided a broader pandemic at the time. When the disease reappeared, the shame associated with it prevented a proper medical response. Family members who considered themselves ethically above reproach instead spread the disease before dying themselves. Some feared divine retribution and tried to flee their planet, distributing it to all pockets of their population across the galaxy, including the space station, with disastrous results. This presumed connection with supernatural causes and religious retribution mirrors common superstitions surrounding terrestrial epidemics (Riva et al. 1753; Snowden 62). As Camus’ Father Paneloux admonished his quarantined parishioners, “Calamity has come upon you, my brethren, and, my brethren, you deserved it.... For plague is the flail of God and the world His threshing-floor, and implacably He will thresh out His harvest until the wheat is separated from the chaff” (Camus 87).

The religious aspect of the Drafa plague response also mirrors some segments of modern human society. An American poll found that 44% of respondents felt that COVID-19 was a “sign of Christ’s ‘coming judgment’ or a ‘call to faith’ or ‘both’” (Sturm and Albrecht, 128-9). In earlier centuries, the Black Death of the 14th century was likewise connected with sin in the eyes of some, as was the 1918 flu epidemic

(Dein 6). But this is the first pandemic to have widespread misinformation spread at nearly the speed of light, thanks to the Internet. Hashtags such as #Jesusiscoming and online discussions of COVID-19 as one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse reflect a fundamentalist Christian mindset concerning the disease (Dein 9; Kettley n.pg). Similarly, a fundamentalist priest in Sapkowski's novel *Blood of Elves* (22) warns that the military campaigns of the Nilfgaard empire are one of the prophesied plagues heralding the coming Ice Age central to the prophecies of the seeress Ithlinne. The symbolism of the Catriona plague certainly fits this apocalyptic mindset as well. Extremists could be motivated to go a step further, attempting to prevent anyone from interfering with this divine decision to bring about the apocalypse. For example, in the *Crusade* episode "Ruling from the Tomb" members of the Sacred Omega cult plot to blow up a scientific conference on the Drakh plague because they believe the disease to be sent by God in response to humanity's evil nature and therefore do not want a cure to be found. To prevent such extremist actions in our real world, the early shipments of the precious vaccines were transported across the U.S. under the watchful eye of law enforcement.

But religious ideology has also proven a roadblock in raising vaccination numbers among certain populations around the world. Polls of American evangelicals consistently show a strong belief that God will provide protection against the disease, paralleling a strong lingering vaccine hesitancy among this population (Schor and Fingerhut n.pg). President John Magufuli of Tanzania not only rejects the need for vaccines, but openly flaunts standard precautions such as masks and social distancing, believing "God would protect his people" (Cawthorne n.pg). The late spring 2021 surge in India was exacerbated by folk-beliefs that the disease simply did not exist or that God would watch over believers (Cohen 900). But as the Markab learn, religion offers no protection against a virus. Ambassador Fashar blames the station's outbreak on a human conspiracy to wipe out his people, spread through food or drinking water, or even the taint of human immorality. This paranoia leads the Markab to self-isolate "Away from outsiders. We will stay, and pray, and repent" ("Confessions and Lamentations"). What they do is die *en masse*.

In our real-world religious ideology combines with politically-motivated conspiracy theories to drive the virulent spread of misconceptions and bald-faced lies about both the disease and vaccines. According to the misinformed the disease was

created by Bill Gates to spread 5G internet or by the U.S. government to cull the American minority population or as a bioweapon against China. Vaccines contain microchips or fetal tissue, alter a recipient's genetics, turn your body into a giant magnet, or cause the disease in the first place. The vaccine might even be the dreaded mark of the beast created by the Antichrist and forewarned in the Book of Revelation (Dwoskin n.pg; Islam et al. 9-10; Lynas n.pg). Wisconsin pharmacist Steven Brandenburg intentionally spoiled 500 doses of the temperature-sensitive Moderna vaccine, motivated by his conspiracy-theory belief that the vaccine would change a recipient's DNA (Li n.pg). It is important to note that "Confessions and Lamentations" was not the first *Babylon 5* episode universe to draw upon tensions between religion and science. The Season 1 episode "Believers" pits Dr. Franklin against parents who refuse to save their son through a simple operation because they believe that any incision would allow the soul to leave their son's body. Instead, they kill the child themselves according to their tradition. Pruski uses the episode to argue that, in the case of COVID-19, "safety and ethical concerns regarding specific vaccines should, as such, not be lumped together with anti-vaxxer objections" and unfounded conspiracy theories but rather dealt with respectfully (278).

One of the most tenacious conspiracy theories is that the SARS-CoV-2 virus was intentionally created in a laboratory, despite genomic analysis to the contrary (Andersen et al. 450). Such hypothetical events are certainly legion in science fiction. For example, the nano-virus of the Drakh plague is not only intentionally engineered, but specifically used against humanity. Fans of *Babylon 5* have debated in online venues if the resurgence of Drafa is orchestrated, or if the disease itself had started as a biological weapon created by the Shadows or their allies ("Guide: Confessions and Lamentations" n.pg). The introduction of the Catriona plague into the main world of the Witcherverse is an accident, caused by Ciri's unrestricted jumping from place to place, time to time, within the multiverse, without any thought of potential contamination. As previously mentioned, the First Age plague of Middle-earth is described as connected to the evil Dark Lord Morgoth and his stronghold of Angband. The Great Plague of the Third Age, carried "with dark winds out of the East", is connected in retrospect with other contemporaneous events in Middle-earth, especially "signs of the arising of Sauron" (Tolkien, *Return* 328). Therefore, even Middle-earth is prone to conspiracy theories, in this case that the plague is contrived by Sauron in order

to decimate his enemies and facilitate his return to Mordor (despite the fact that Sauron's allies suffer losses in the plague as well).

5. Us vs. Them: Prejudice

Babylon 5 Chief of Security Michael Garibaldi sagely warns very early in the Drafa outbreak that “when people get scared they start looking for scapegoats... trust me, this will get real ugly, real fast” (“Confessions and Lamentations”). It does not take long for Garibaldi's prediction to come true, as we see him breaking up assaults on Markab citizens who are blamed for the station quarantine. Bias and blame are dangerous partners in a time of pandemic. For example, outbreaks of smallpox and typhus in the late 1800s led to increases in anti-Chinese and anti-Semitic prejudice, as these groups were blamed for the contagions (Wald 115). The so-called “Spanish” Flu of 1918 most likely originated in either France or the U.S., the connection with Spain in the popular imagination due to the early reports appearing in a Madrid newspaper on May 22, 1918 (Liang et al. 273). The origination of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in China quickly led to discrimination against Chinese-owned and Chinese-connected businesses in the West, for example precipitous drops in patronage of Chinese restaurants (Reny and Barreto 2). Casual statements by politicians using racist terms such as “Wuhan virus”, “Chinese virus”, and “Kung Flu”, along with appeals to “racist tropes about Chinese eating bats, snakes, and dogs” added fuel to the fire of anger, resentment, and fear (Reny and Barreto 1). The result was an alarming rise in violence against Asian-Americans beginning in March/April 2020, with anti-Asian hate crimes in large U.S. cities rising 164% from first quarter 2020 to first quarter 2021 (Levin 2). As these statistics only include incidents reported to law enforcement, the actual increase in violence could actually be much higher. Canadian law enforcement also saw an increase in anti-Asian hate crimes during COVID-19, with Canada's four largest cities reporting an astounding 532% jump (Levin 3).

The description of the Great Plague that ravaged Gondor as coming “with dark winds out of the East” of Middle-earth therefore appears both prescient and prejudicial as seen through the lens of 2020 (Tolkien *Return* 328). John Magoun explains that Tolkien's imaginary universe has a very distinct “moral geography” in which the “East is defined negatively as ‘not West,’ or an antiparadise”, as the so-called Blessed Lands lie in the West. In particular, in *The Lord of the Rings*, “the East, or Rhûn, is dominated

by Sauron of Mordor, and its wild Men, the ‘Easterlings,’ are a constant threat to Gondor and the West” (139). The moralistic description of a barbaric hoard racing out of the Evil East to infect the more noble West sits even more uncomfortably in this time when anti-East sentiment rises to the level of violence against individuals and businesses who had no direct connection with the origin or initial transmission of the disease. However, the trope is a common one. Han and Curtis trace a trend of fictional epidemics moving “typically east to west, or at least from developing to developed countries” in Hollywood epidemic media, playing on the twin evils of “orientalization (perpetuating stereotypes about Middle Eastern, Asian, and North African societies) and othering” (Han and Curtis “Social response” 390-1).

Dimitra Fimi notes that the Easterlings, also called the “Swarthy Men”, are routinely described by Tolkien in language that “brings to mind racial stereotypes of black and ethnic people and their visual representation” (146). The racial stereotypes associated with this already marginalized fictional group are doubly disconcerting in the age of COVID, as the pandemic brought “disproportionate harm... to historically marginalized groups” in the U.S., especially low-income and minority populations (Lopez et al. 719). These groups have suffered higher rates of infection, severe disease, hospitalization, and death, exacerbated by a higher likelihood of living in crowded or multigenerational conditions, inability to work from home, lack of access to health care, and higher incidences of comorbidities (Lopez et al. 719). In short, “Systemic racism is the root cause of the racial disparities evidenced in the impact of the pandemic” (Peterson n.pg). It is therefore proper that we take the time to recognize and reject the racial and cultural stereotypes that are not only all-too-common in our society, but the pop culture media that is a product of that society.

6. The World in the After Times

Famed philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek has opined that COVID-19 “has also triggered a vast epidemic of ideological viruses which were lying dormant in our societies: fake news, paranoid conspiracy theories, explosions of racism” (39). Similarly, *Babylon 5*’s Dr. Franklin observed “Everyone’s looking for someone to blame. Same old story: Black Death, AIDS, Chalmer’s Syndrome. Millions die and no one remembers the lessons we’ve learned” (“Confessions and Lamentations”). At the end of the episode, Franklin, the medical hero who has found a treatment for the Drafa

virus too late to save the Markab species, sits at a station bar trying to find solace in his beverage. A background newscast explains that the Markab pandemic has spread across the known galaxy, leaving the species effectively extinct. The bartender jokingly offers “Hey, what do you call two billion dead Markabs? Planetary redecorating”. After amusing himself at the dead’s expense, the bartender turns more serious, offering that he “heard it was the Vorlons that poisoned that place. You know how they are”. Reaching his breaking point with this display of racism and ignorance, Franklin mutters “Nothing changes” and walks away in disgust (“Confessions and Lamentations”). In the words of *Reddit* poster quonotxo (n.pg) the “entire covid situation can be summed up by watching this episode I feel. The politics, the prejudice, the beliefs – it’s all in there”.

The impact of human behavior on pandemics, and pandemics on human behavior, is also mirrored in Middle-earth. The recently crowned King of Gondor, Telemnar, along with all his children, succumb to the Great Plague, leading to a shift in power to his nephew, Tarondor (Tolkien, *Return*, 319). The new ruler moves his official dwelling to Minas Anor, as the previously beautiful capitol city of Osgiliath is “now partly deserted” and beginning to “fall into ruin. Few of those who had fled from the plague into Ithilien or to the western dales were willing to return” (Tolkien, *Return* 328). A similar “urban shuffle” was seen in parts of the U.S. during 2020, as people working from home moved outward from large cities to smaller cities and further out into suburbs, especially in the New York and San Francisco metro areas (Patino et al. n.pg). Trench fever left Tolkien a “long hauler”, hospitalized several times over two years (Carpenter 93-106). We are still learning about the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on the human body. All of these outcomes echo Priscilla Ward’s warnings of the consequences that derive from our popular narratives about outbreaks: “They promote or mitigate the stigmatizing of individuals, groups, populations, locales (regional and global), behaviors, and lifestyles, and they change economies” (Wald 3).

COVID-19 has also had a palpable effect on the creation of popular media. For example, work on the second season of *The Witcher*, Netflix’s adaptation Sapkowski’s saga, was halted in March 2020 due to positive COVID tests. Filming resumed in August, but was paused a second time by another cluster of cases (Wiseman n.pg). So much of our lives was put on hold during the pandemic; weddings were rescheduled, college educations postponed, anniversary and birthday celebrations skipped or driven

into virtual reality. But none of these inconveniences can be compared to the utter personal and public devastation resulting from the deaths of millions of fellow human beings. Andrzej Sapkowski captures just a hint of this sorrow in describing how smallpox victim Little Eye is ultimately tended to by her friend and mentor Dandelion: he “had carried her out in his arms between corpses being cremated on funeral pyres and had buried her far from the city, in the forest, alone and peaceful, and, as she had asked, buried two things with her: her lute and her sky blue pearl” (Sapkowski, *Sword* 246).

Žižek compares our response to COVID-19 with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’ five stages of reacting to terminal illness and other catastrophic events:

First there was a denial (nothing serious is going on); then, anger (usually in a racist or anti-state form: the Chinese are guilty, our state is not efficient...); next comes bargaining (OK, there are some victims, but it’s less serious than SARS, and we can limit the damage...); if this doesn’t work, depression arises (let’s not kid ourselves, we are all doomed).... (51)

He muses “how would will [sic] the final stage of acceptance look?” (Žižek 51). Indeed, as we begin to emerge on the other side of the pandemic, what lessons will we take with us from the experience? J. Michael Straczynski wisely offers that the lesson of the Drafa virus is “if you make a disease political on either side, you’re gonna die. You have to set aside all that crap and just Deal With The Problem. The only ‘side’ this episode took was in advocating compassion for those afflicted” (“Guide: Confessions and Lamentations” n.pg). His thoughtful character Delenn perhaps more eloquently offers that “we honor the memory of those who are no longer with us by using what we have learned to save others. To exercise faith and patience and charity. To reach out to those who are afraid. If we can do that, then their passing will have had meaning - and we will grow from it” (“Confessions and Lamentations”). In a note to his philosophical essay *Athrabeth Finrod Ah Andreth*, Tolkien describes the beliefs of the elf Finrod about the far future of his fallen world, Arda Marred. Finrod has a vision of a new world as not merely unmarred, but “richer than the ‘first design’”. In Arda Re-made Elves and Men will each separately find joy and content, and an interplay of friendship, a bond of which will be the Past” (Tolkien, *Morgoth’s* 333). Likewise, may our new normal be a time of lessons learned and increased compassion, as we reflect on our shared experiences lived largely apart.



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