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Just Reading *A Spell for Chameleon*: An Appreciation with Caveats, and an Elegy

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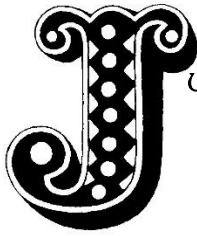
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Abstract

In 1977, a landmark year for fantasy publishing, Piers Anthony's *A Spell for Chameleon* emerged as one of the era's most popular fantasy novels. Since then, however, the novel's reputation (as well as Anthony's) has fallen precipitously. The reason for this, I suggest, involves our changing habits of critical reading, which view Anthony's sexism and outdated gender stereotypes as conduits for deeper and more reactionary viewpoints like misogyny and anti-feminist ire. In contrast, I argue that a "surface" reading of the novel can help recover those meanings foreclosed by more critical approaches. In particular, I examine *A Spell for Chameleon* in light of Bink's sexist views, the novel's odd rape trial, and the presence of a confessed misogynist within the text.

Additional Keywords

Mythlore; Just Reading *A Spell for Chameleon*: An Appreciation with Caveats, and an Elegy; Dennis Wilson Wise; Piers Anthony, *A Spell for Chameleon*, Xanth, misogyny, critique, surface reading, literary history



JUST READING *A Spell for Chameleon*:
AN APPRECIATION, WITH CAVEATS,
AND AN ELEGY

DENNIS WILSON WISE

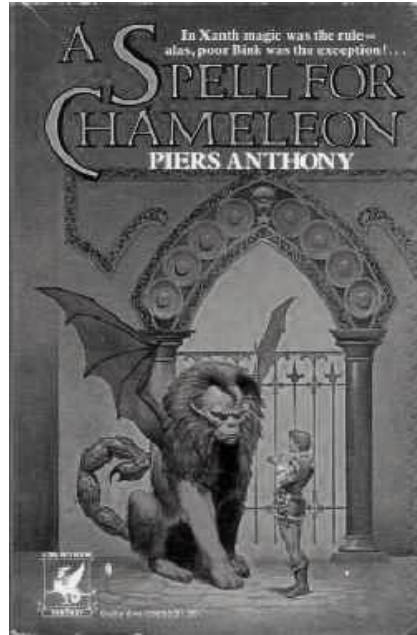
TWO DIFFERENT PEOPLE ARE WRITING THIS ESSAY—and both, as it happens, are me. One is me, *now*: a grown and happily married academic who teaches writing and literature at an R1 university. The other is me, *then*: an 11-year-old boy who had progressed from reading non-fiction books about dogs and dinosaurs, then from non-genre fiction geared to younger readers, to finally my first “adult” novel, a paperback fantasy—Piers Anthony’s *A Spell for Chameleon*. This must have been the summer before 6th grade, since the school library had closed and I could no longer borrow books. Yet my mother, a purely entertainment reader, had long been a fan of genre fantasy, so we always had books around. Long before I learned to read, the cover art of these novels fascinated me. *A Spell for Chameleon* was no exception. On its cover a man, whom I later learned was named Bink, stands before a massive monster—a manticore. But their confrontation is strangely free of violence or action. The manticore sits still except for its right forepaw, which extends slightly forward, aggressively. In contrast, Bink stands tall, his posture calm. Dressed neatly, he holds his heels together, toes splayed, legs straight. He has his left arm tucked beneath his right elbow; even had he wanted, the sheathed knife at his side could not have been quickly drawn. And his right hand is extended toward to the manticore. An open palm; a gesture of peace. This was the pose of someone making a point—a person discoursing on equal terms with a terrible monster, though one willing to listen. This was a thinking man’s book cover, an intellectual’s image. It left me wondering what Bink had to say.

Such a remark, I know, might elicit a few snorts from people familiar with Piers Anthony. And, to be honest, only now do I realize that Michael Whelan’s cover art does not actually depict Bink’s *first* encounter with the manticore, whom he comically kicks in its derriere, but rather their second encounter when he’s leaving the Good Magician’s castle. Part of me understands the snorters’ skepticism, too. After having read some 30 or 40 of Anthony’s novels by my senior year of high school, I no longer considered Anthony a “readable” author. His prose was maddeningly simple; all his characters tended to follow the same few molds. Still, I retained a sort of lingering affection for *A*

Spell for Chameleon, and Anthony's Incarnations of Immortality series introduced me to dazzling (if only now half-remembered) concepts about life, death, and religion. Yet what I perhaps remember best about Anthony are his revealing and honest "Author's Notes" that concluded many of his books. Although over two decades would pass before I read another Anthony novel to completion, I still fondly consider his work a respectable introduction to what fantasy has to offer.

Thus I was unprepared, years later, to discover the sheer hostility provoked by *A Spell for Chameleon* among fans of genre fantasy today. Despite its continuing popularity among young adult readers, the Xanth series—now at 47 volumes—can be considered the single "most divisive non-media publishing enterprise in all of fantasy" (Wagner). The most extreme reactions tend to come from adult readers revisiting a former childhood favorite, and their adult criticisms go far beyond Anthony's

clunky prose or pun-based humor. In Goodreads's most popular review of *A Spell for Chameleon*, a reviewer named Renee argues that the novel just "oozes creepy pervert syndrome."¹ A similar reaction comes from C. Palmer-Patel, a respected scholar of fantasy. On her blog, she admits to halting her attempted re-read after only 10 pages because, she realized, the book was a "disgusting misogynist mess." Its author, apparently, did not believe that "women are people in any sense of the word. They are objects, or creatures, designed specifically to fulfill men's 'needs'" (Palmer-Patel). If anything, Jason Heller



Michael Whelan's book cover for the 1977 edition of *A Spell for Chameleon*, (www.michaelwhelan.com). In the lower-left hand corner is Ballantine/Del Rey's cockatrice colophon, which sought to link the publisher's new line of fantasy novels with the famous Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series that featured a Unicorn's Head colophon.

¹ As of the time of this writing, Renee's review has 246 likes, almost 180 more than the second most popular review. Overall, five of the top seven reviews for *A Spell for Chameleon* are one-star reviews, the lowest possible rating, and the remaining two are only four and three stars. Site users must scroll down to the 18th most popular review on Goodreads before finding a 5-star rating.

judges the novel even more harshly. In a long re-read for the *A.V. Club*, brimming with feeling, Heller caustically writes that Bink views “female characters as obstacles, props, and objects of lust and condescension” before finally condemning *A Spell for Chameleon* as “little more than a bundle of leering, hateful, degrading judgments about both women and men. With basilisks and shit.”

What startles me so much about such remarks is how deeply they mischaracterize the author I remember from Anthony’s Author’s Notes. Even a casual glance through Anthony’s bimonthly newsletter, published on his website regularly since the late 1990s, or his two autobiographies, paints a radically different picture: a man raised by Quaker parents; married 63 years to his college sweetheart; caring for that same sweetheart during her final decade-long illness; a loving father; a vegetarian; owner and operator of an eco-friendly tree farm; responsive and kindly to fans.² In 1999, the organization Preditors and Editors granted Anthony a special award in recognition for his services to new writers. Likewise, Anthony is hardly some hidebound defender of traditional gender roles. During the late 1960s, while his wife worked, Anthony stayed at home with their newborn daughter. He describes his own politics as “far liberal” (“JewelLye”). Most poignantly of all, at least for me, are the weekly letters Anthony has been sending to Jenny Gildwarg for the last three decades. When she was 12, Jenny was left permanently paralyzed when a drunk driver hit her in a hit-and-run encounter. At her mother’s request, Anthony began a weekly one-sided correspondence that has never abated. Still, as a teenager, I remember my horror after first reading about Jenny. It was maybe the first time an incident from real life, rather than a Stephen King novel, had inspired that sort of feeling—horror, and loss, and outrage; the drunk driver was never charged. But that is Piers Anthony, the person. How could that kind of someone write a novel filled with hatefulness or misogyny?

So I revisited Anthony’s work for the first time since high school; I reread *A Spell for Chameleon*. And, in a sense, yes—the traditionalist gender stereotypes of male honor and female daintiness, so typical of the older pulp writers of Anthony’s generation but already fading rapidly during the 1970s, have aged just as poorly as one might expect. Yet I also found myself gently surprised at how skillfully *A Spell for Chameleon* is wrought. Although the novel is light entertainment and makes no pretensions otherwise, Anthony has a better prose style than I remembered, at least in this novel, and I found myself admiring several aspects of his plotting and characterization. *A Spell for Chameleon* is a coming-of-age story about a young man—intellectually curious

² To this day, he continues to answer all his fan mail, which occupies about 1/3 of his working time.

yet lacking in self-awareness—who slowly gains the maturity necessity to participate fully in his society, which for him includes marriage. Bink comes to reject Sabrina, a “girl next door”-type reminiscent of 1950s middle-class suburbia, whose greatest attractions for Bink are her beauty and the social expectation that they *should* be married, for his future wife Chameleon, a woman whose unceasingly fungible nature in some ways seems to reflect the changing norms of femininity itself during the late 1960s and 1970s. The novel didn’t seem to deserve the vituperation it has received. Early reviews certainly rated *A Spell for Chameleon*, which won a British Fantasy Award in 1978, quite highly.³ So, in the last few decades, how did such hostility for Anthony’s book arise?

To lay the blame on changing cultural mores in the United States, I suspect, only partly explains the situation. The other part involves general changes in how we read texts. Palmer-Patel observes, correctly in my view, that readers today are “more critically aware” than in previous generations. In other words, they have become more willing to diagnose texts for their (always present) ideological ills. The practice of *critique*, therefore, has gained methodological dominance within academic literary studies. Critique takes nothing for granted. It interrogates the basic assumptions that underlie “truth”; and, as Foucault explains, it is the political right that individual subjects have appropriated for themselves to “question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth” (32). By dint of this interrogation, a generation of academic scholars—their students too, including me—have been trained to approach texts suspiciously. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues in a famous essay, critical approaches as diverse as “New Historicist, deconstructive,

³ Positive fanzine reviews for *A Spell for Chameleon* have all come from Philip Stephensen-Payne, Paul Macguire, and Charles R. Saunders. Rowena Cory also praises the novel, criticizing only that Bink never steps “beyond his childhood conditioning in order to question the basis of his country’s social system” (68). The lone hostile review that I found belongs to Joseph Nicholas, yet even here, Nicholas never targets sexism, misogyny, or patriarchal norms. Instead, he criticizes Anthony’s “puerile” jokes, his simplistic prose, and his allegedly “low” level of imagination (15). Otherwise, the closest early critique of Anthony’s attitudes to women hails from a review of *Castle Roogna* (Anthony’s third Xanth novel) by Baird Searles, who observes in the book a “rather sniggery attitude toward sex and females that may set some people’s teeth on edge” (18). This charge, however, is more a criticism on a seemingly adolescent (male) fascination with sex rather than a criticism of sexism or misogyny per se.

Overall, Anthony’s early reputation suffered mostly due to his prose style—a “general sense that Anthony’s writing does not match the level attained by his imagination and his ideas” (Collings 56)—and his perceived arrogance and bellicosity, especially vis-à-vis the publishing industry. Much like Harlan Ellison, Anthony has always been willing to fight for his rights as an author, and in 1967 this led him, for example, into being blacklisted by Ballantine for a decade.

feminist, queer, and psychoanalytic” criticism are marked by *paranoia*, a deeply felt suspicion that texts contain—always and everywhere—politically toxic ideologies that must be exposed (5). Building off Sedgwick’s work, feminist scholar Rita Felski describes this critical suspicion in a memorable passage:

This reader rarely doubts the merits of his own doubt; he is unlikely to retract or regret his own suspicions; he does not lie awake at night worrying that the text might turn out to be innocent of all wrong-doing. [...] Something, somewhere—a text, an author, a reader, a genre, a discourse, a discipline—is always already guilty of some crime. (39)

This *ethos* of critique, I think, helps explain why Anthony’s most famous novel—a light-hearted *bildungsroman* that delights in puns—elicits such overwhelming hostility today. The novel’s antiquated gender stereotypes no longer strike the majority of contemporary readers as harmless, well-intentioned, or natural. Instead, contemporary readers have been trained to make the almost automatic interpretative leap—the novel’s sexism *must* indicate a darker, more insidious viewpoint. Simply take your pick: patriarchy, sexual exploitation, anti-feminist resentment, misogyny. And since exposing toxic ideologies has become the academic critic’s most intellectually prestigious role, any reader who contravenes such alleged toxicity damns themselves as complicit.

We need not even delve into Felskian postcritique, however, to witness how deeply such critical attitudes have pervaded our adult reading habits. In children’s literature scholarship, too, this has been a topic of contention. Alison Waller, for examples, observes that adults who return to childhood favorites often seek to reread those old texts according to new “principles of deep critical understanding and research rather than a return to earlier layers of response” (130). Feminist critics have been particularly keen on the disenchantment game, often proposing a “narrative of developing critical reading skills that overlays naïve early engagement with adept adult response” (148). In a way, we seek to prove—partly to ourselves, partly to our adult contemporaries—how far we have come by effectively delegitimizing our own earlier, non-critical reading habits. In the process we forget that no interpretative framework, including critique, should ever be considered axiomatic or *a priori*.

That is why this essay on Piers Anthony requires two authors—me now, after a lifetime in academic criticism, and me then. As an 11-year-old kid and later as a teen, reading practices like irony, ambiguity, and paradox meant nothing to me. Discourse analysis? Ideology critique? What were those? Even the endless symbolism hunting that I remember from reading *The Scarlet Letter* in high school had little impact on how I read genre fantasy. Instead, I simply *read*—a model of reading, ironically, that Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus have theorized as “surface reading” or “just reading”: an attentiveness to the

narrative's obvious or manifest meanings rather than to any latent meanings in "need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter" (1). This, let me suggest, is our best way of approaching *A Spell for Chameleon*. Some critics, of course, will consider this approach naïve or culpably innocent. Still, as a child I was an unsophisticated though voracious reader, and without such a model in mind, I doubt we can grasp the fascination Anthony's book once held—and *still* holds for Anthony's younger fans—without resorting to genre- or book-shaming. A surface reading of *A Spell for Chameleon* opens up a host of meanings and affective responses forbidden by more theoretically savvy hermeneutical styles.

In what follows, I hope to motivate the plausibility of "just reading" Anthony's first fantasy novel, and how a more wholesome interpretation of the book—something innocent of misogyny and patriarchal resentment—might emerge. Correspondingly, each of my following sections tackles the three episodes perhaps most troubling to today's readers: Bink's condescending sexism, the rape trial, and the presence of a genuine misogynist in Anthony's text.



What infuriates contemporary readers first about *A Spell for Chameleon*, I suspect, is Bink himself. Generally speaking, his attitudes toward women seem patronizing and objectifying. Certainly, there's a whiff of the 1950s in how Anthony—born in 1934—imagines male-female relationships. His female characters are usually dainty, wholesome, and yet appealingly sexy. They enjoy being looked at by men, though modesty demands they pretend otherwise. Moreover, as the focalizer for *A Spell for Chameleon*, Bink himself constantly comments on how women look. He mentally praises his girlfriend Sabrina for the "naturalness" of her beauty, unblemished by artificial enhancements (2). Borrowing a cliché from the pre-sexual-revolution dating playbook, Bink notes that modesty heightens Sabrina's appeal since "girls who had it didn't need to put it on casual display" (4). Likewise, another apt cliché—although only implied by Anthony—might be that "men won't buy the cow if they can get the milk for free." Afterwards, when Bink first meets Wynne, Dee, and Fanchon—Chameleon's three aspects—his objectifying tendencies continue. In a reference on Fanchon's ugliness, for example, Bink thinks about the usefulness of the dark pit in which they are imprisoned: "She sounded very human; it was easier to appreciate that quality when he couldn't see her" (183). Worse, his condescension perpetuates various cringe-inducing gender stereotypes. After Fanchon refuses to explain her second reason for leaving Xanth, Bink thinks: "It figured. She had said he wouldn't believe her reason, and he had believed the first one, so she wouldn't tell him the other. Typically female logic" (175).

The list goes on. It seems no wonder, then, that for readers this kind of blatant sexism overwhelms Bink's good qualities—his sense of honor and love for Xanth, for instance, or his insatiable intellectual curiosity (especially about magic) so brilliantly captured by Michael Whelan's book cover. My own wife, when she first read *A Spell for Chameleon* a few years ago on my mother's recommendation, considers the novel's most "outrageous" moment to be Bink's climactic declaration of love to Chameleon:

"I like beautiful girls," he said. "And I like smart girls. But I don't trust the combination. I'd settle for an ordinary girl, except that she'd get dull after a while. Sometimes I want to talk with someone intelligent, and sometimes I want to [make love]." (306)

No normal woman, in other words, can satisfy Bink's male craving for variety, and no *trustworthy* woman can be beautiful and smart at the same time—a lesson that Bink allegedly learns with Sabrina, his former fiancé. Only a bespelled woman like Chameleon fits the bill, which sets up a role model impossible for any real woman to match.

Some of this sexism disappears if we realize how tightly Anthony focalizes his narrative through his protagonist's eyes. To take just one example, readers guess long before Bink himself that there is nothing "typically female" about Fanchon's logic—rather, she refuses to explain her second reason because she hardly wants to admit her own growing love for Bink, since he has never before met her "Fanchon" phase. Not all Bink's sexism can be dissociated so easily from the text's broader sexism, of course, but even so, other legitimately non-sexist interpretations of the novel exist. In a commentary for NPR, for instance, Melissa de la Cruz describes her own experience reading the novel as a 13-year-old girl of Filipino descent. She identified deeply with Chameleon, who was "moody, beautiful, smart, ugly, sensible *and* average" all at once; and, like Chameleon, de la Cruz wanted to "find a partner who accepts that I am difficult and different, and who won't want me to change" (Johnston and de la Cruz).

This interpretation certainly stays true to Anthony's core message in *A Spell for Chameleon*. As Bink comes to realize, "How many people similarly spent their lives searching for their own spells—some gratuitous benefit such as a silver tree or political power or undeserved acclaim—when all they really needed was to be satisfied with what they already had?" (343–44). Such a theme resonates deeply with the entire corpus of young adult and children's literature. Chameleon is not "flawed" for the changes that her body undergoes after the onset of puberty, nor is Bink flawed for his alleged absence of magical talent. Both learn to accept themselves—and each other—as they are. For de la Cruz,

who found Anthony's novel at a particularly confusing time of her life, that message overrides any sexist representations of gender.

As a young boy, though, I obviously identified more closely with Bink. As much as Bink's sexism strikes me as a genuine flaw now, as a kid it never seemed especially beyond the pale. After all, I grew up watching "Nick at Nite" on Nickelodeon, which featured old-time television classics like *Bewitched*, *My Three Sons*, and my personal favorite, *The Dick van Dyke Show*. (I also greatly admired later programs like *Laverne & Shirley* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, although their gender politics obviously went over my head.) So, for me, the benevolently sexist comedies of my parents' and grandparents' generation were old hat. Nothing struck me as particularly toxic about Bink. He looked at girls, of course, but how could I fault him for that when I was just beginning to notice them myself? More importantly, Bink treated women honorably. For some contemporary readers, his unabashed voyeurism seems to clash with the doctrine of consent, especially in an age of #MeToo. Nonetheless, Bink refuses to take unfair advantage of Wynne's sexual availability as she guides him to the Gap Chasm; Bink realizes—although Anthony doesn't quite use these terms—that her drastically lowered intelligence represents an inability to agree to intercourse. Only later, once Bink professes his love for Chameleon, does honor permit more intimate relations. In the end, Anthony's first Xanth novel seemed nothing more than a slightly more risqué version of *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*.

Bink's fascination with Chameleon's changeable nature, though, also captures something important. Overall, despite his intelligence, Bink doesn't know himself particularly well. Throughout the novel, he continually resists Iris's and Trent's power grabs for the throne of Xanth, but he never truly understands *why* he resists. Only towards the end does he articulate his reasons. As he explains to Chameleon, "If the crown starts being available by conquest or conspiracy, we'll be back in the days of the Waves, and no one will be secure"—and the quality of this answer surprises even Bink himself (309). But just as Bink is confused by his own political ideals, so do matters of love confuse him as well. He and Sabrina initially believe they love one another, but their romance does not survive Bink's exile. Rather, they are simply two people who happened to have grown up together in the same small village. Anthony continually hints that Xanth suffers from catastrophic depopulation, and Sabrina initially moves to Bink's small village because of a scarcity of acceptable boys in her own even smaller community (*Spell* 18). So what kind of life partner does Bink truly desire? Like many young people, he hardly knows. Despite his age, the Spell-less Wonder has been doomed by social taboo into a perpetual adolescence. He is a man unable to perform Xanth's most basic social expectations of manhood. As such, he has been left woefully unable to develop

a stable adult identity, but when Bink encounters Chameleon, her changeable nature seems to speak to his own seeming lack of final form. Like him, she is a misfit. Together, they can address their confused and inchoate longings for a mature sense of selfhood.

At the same time, Anthony ties these issues all together into male sexuality, which makes sense given that sexual longing is what often spurs adolescent confusion in the first place. Even so, many readers might continue to dislike Bink for his voyeurism and sexism, and that is fine. Anthony certainly admits his own light voyeurism frankly enough. Writing in his newsletter, the 75-year-old Anthony confesses that he still likes “shapely young women,” and he compares observing them to “bird watching: you catch every glimpse you can, but you never touch or become too obvious” (“SapTimber”). Today, expressing such sentiments might seem inappropriate, and I am not wholly comfortable with them myself. Still, I remember once reading a collection of essays analyzing and praising popular fiction writers, and the academic tasked with analyzing E. L. James, who wrote the truly awful *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy, betrays some difficulty—to my eye, anyway—finding anything nice to say about it. Finally, she settles on how James chooses to express “female sexual desire,” a topic that mainstream critics typically disdain (Downey 116).⁴ Anthony represents the other side of that equation. And clearly, too, Anthony would deny any contradiction between light voyeurism and forming healthy adult relationships—his own long and happy marriage attests to that, and actions speak louder than words. Although readers wedded to the critical perspective might still wrinkle their noses at someone who could unabashedly write a novel entitled *The Color of Her Panties* (1992), the fifteenth book in the Xanth series, male sexual interest appears in Anthony’s books as something both healthy and normal. If joined to respectfulness, maturity, and honorable intent, it need not be toxic.



Regarding gender relations, then, *A Spell for Chameleon* in one sense simply fell prey to rapidly changing cultural norms. Despite Anthony’s

⁴ Erotic fiction and erotic genres typically marketed to women, such as romance, have historically earned little respect from academic and mainstream critics. Tellingly enough, Anthony himself has written two erotic novels, *Eroma* (2014) and *Pornucopia* (2015), both while in his 80s. Worth noting, too, is that another pulpish SFF writer, Samuel R. Delany, a literary lion for Marxist and deconstructive SFF criticism, has also published several explicitly erotic novels. Just as significantly, the men’s magazine *Playboy* was also one of the highest-paying markets for fiction, especially genre fiction, for several decades after the Second World War.

apparently good intentions and leftist leanings, Bink's voyeurism and sexism represents an older viewpoint already crumbling by the late 1970s. In stark contrast, the rape trial in *A Spell for Chameleon* seems like a much darker episode, something probably unpublishable today. The trial—actually, more of a pre-trial hearing—appears quite early in Bink's journey. In exchange for a night's lodging, Bink agrees to take a farmer's place in an unspecified civic obligation. When he arrives to fulfill that obligation, he discovers that he must participate in an inquiry about an alleged rape. In this "playlet," as the bailiff calls it, three men are seated across from three women; one man stands as the anonymous accused, one woman the anonymous accuser. According to the complaint, the man attacked the woman near the Gap Chasm. Since he threatened to throw her over the ledge if she screamed, she never called for help. Unfortunately, it emerges that the attacker was previously known to the victim, so the judge, unable to rule out consensual intercourse or a false rape allegation, explains that he would "probably, were this case to come up in formal court, find the man not guilty of the charge, by virtue of reasonable doubt" (57). Dismayed, the three women decline to press the matter further.

Even as a child, this episode struck me as odd. No 11-year-old, of course, really understands the full implications of rape. It was simply a bad thing, like murder or theft. But the logic of the court proceedings puzzled me especially. Besides some arcane legal chatter, nothing really happens in this scene, and when the trial ends suddenly, Bink blithely continues his quest. During subsequent rereads of *A Spell for Chameleon*, the trial episode continued to puzzle me, so I just—ignored it. To be honest, I did the same with unfamiliar dictionary words; as mentioned, my reading habits were voracious but unsophisticated. Now, though, the trial's apparent sexual and legal politics strike me as almost shocking. In this case, we cannot simply absolve Anthony for being a member of a generation that believed in chivalry, gallantry, and a kindly masculine authority. By 1977, second-wave feminists were already making patriarchy, rape culture, domestic abuse, and workplace sexual harassment into major topics of cultural conversation. Then appears *A Spell for Chameleon*, a novel that portrays a (male) judge discouraging a female assault survivor from pressing charges; a possible rapist going free without consequences; and a quickly forgotten female victim who must then continue living in the same small village as her unprosecuted attacker. Worse, everyone—including the victim—is oathbound to remain silent about the proceedings. Although this maintains everyone's anonymity, it also means the victim can never tell her story. Read in this way, how can *A Spell for Chameleon* be read as anything except a reactionary, anti-feminist diatribe designed to protect patriarchal privilege in a system brutally hostile to survivors of sexual assault?

Nonetheless, feminist activism over the last four decades has so thoroughly entered legal and political common sense that Anthony's more earnest goals have become difficult to discern. That Anthony wished to comment on contemporary American jurisprudence seems certain. After all, in a land as magical as Xanth, there's no reason that a Xanthian trial should resort, essentially, to a "he said/she said" scenario. Yet Anthony hoped, I think, to mirror then-current realities about American rape law as closely as possible. Really, despite the major institutional successes of second-wave feminism in the 1970s, such as rape crisis centers and battered women's shelters, feminist activists did not truly begin to target systematic legal reform until the 1980s. Not until 1987, for instance, did the United States pass its first date rape bill, which made a victim's previous acquaintance with an attacker inadmissible in a court of law. Otherwise, the old prevailing juridical logic appears nearly unaltered in *A Spell for Chameleon*. The principle of "reasonable doubt" enshrined within American due process created an almost impossible evidentiary burden in most cases of sexual violence. Such cases rarely have eyewitnesses, and, since DNA evidence wouldn't become widely available until much later, prior relationships between victims and attackers placed a higher burden of proof on the prosecution. Likewise many states, still naïve about the effects of trauma or fear, still had physical resistance requirements on the books. If a victim could not prove they struggled against their attacker by screaming or calling for help, that was considered evidence favorable to the defense. Both factors come into play during Anthony's rape trial. As galling as it might seem to us today, *A Spell for Chameleon* is merely following the standard legal logic of its era.

Anthony, though, offers one key variation on this legal logic: his opposing twin three-person panels. As the narrator explains, these panels seek to preserve the anonymity of everyone involved. A false rape allegation could ruin a man's reputation; likewise, surviving sexual assault could "ruin" a woman socially by permanently dimming her marriage prospects (56). If we ignore Anthony's offensively outdated framing of the "reputation" problem, we can see him sincerely trying to address a real issue in sexual assault allegations. This is not to say that Anthony's solution is any *good*. Beyond hoping that all the parties involved—three men, three women, one bailiff, and the judge—stay permanently silent about the trial, which is unlikely, Anthony's solution is nothing more than a band-aid. Caught up in conventional thinking, Anthony apparently did not consider deeper reforms to American rape law possible. Nor does it help his case that *A Spell for Chameleon* emerged in the same year as *Lord Foul's Bane*, the first novel in Stephen R. Donaldson's ambitious new fantasy trilogy at the forefront of second-wave feminist theorizing about sexed violence. Much more clearly than Anthony, Donaldson represents rape as a crime of consent; he challenges the alleged rarity of rape; and he reconfigures sexual

assault as a crime of power rather than a crime of sexual desire. Although the *Chronicles* do preserve several myths about rape, then still quite common, Donaldson also refuses to let his novel's rape victim suffer any social stigma for her victimization.⁵ Still, in *A Spell for Chameleon*, Anthony does seem to be offering one modest reform to rape law in good faith, ill-conceived and patchwork though it be.

Other issues remain. As an old-style liberal, Anthony generally represents rape as an individual crime, not a social one. Similarly, his casual—even ludic—references to rape in *A Spell for Chameleon* have acquired over the last few decades a toxicity that Anthony probably never foresaw.⁶ Still, rather than simply assuming that noxious misogynistic discourses *must* underlie Anthony's rape-trial episode, as more critical readers tend to do, a surface reading lets us see the less toxic (and more obvious) meaning: namely, how Anthony—a pulp writer producing a genre novel he never took seriously⁷—is offering a well-intentioned if seriously flawed idea on a partial reform to rape law. Unless one assumes that all texts are always already guilty, though, or that texts *always* operate as indices for the worst ideologies society has to offer, linking outright misogyny to Anthony's rape trial in *A Spell for Chameleon* seems like an interpretative leap. Although the novel clearly reflects the sad realities of American rape law during the 1970s, it does not protect, uphold, or reinforce those realities against reformist feminist energies in any obvious way. Yet someone might point out that Anthony's first Xanth novel contains a confessed

⁵ For an in-depth explanation of these feminist positions in *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever*, plus several limitations of Donaldson's handling of the subject, see Wise, "Violations as Profound as any Rape': Feminism and Sexed Violence in Stephen R. Donaldson," especially pages 135–41; for Donaldson's handling of positive law specifically, see also Wise, "The Image of Law in Stephen R. Donaldson's 'Reave the Just': Agency, Blame, and Sexual Assault."

⁶ The most egregious example occurs during the rape pre-trial. Bink looks at Wynne and thinks, "She was a [beautiful] creature constructed for no other visible purpose than rather than love" (Anthony, *Xanth* 57). Although Bink clearly recognizes that thinking about women in such terms is wrong, hence his self-correction, Anthony clearly did not consider such a joke as exploitative or harmful. At the time, though, such viewpoints *were* in their cultural infancy. Although feminist invocations of "rape culture" first began during the 1970s, understanding sexual assault as a discursive phenomenon inclusive of rape jokes would only gain steam after feminist theory took its poststructuralist turn in the late 1980s. The most famous early essay to critique discourses about rape is Sharon Marcus's "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention."

⁷ As he explains in an interview for *Jitterbug*, "Xanth became funny because I discovered that I just couldn't take fantasy seriously" ("Xanthmaker"). Even today, Anthony considers his long-running Xanth series in a much different light from his more "serious" genre fiction.

misogynist, the soldier Crombie, who might be conveying an authoritative viewpoint hateful of women. Since this question is a good one, I turn to it next.



So far, my discussion on sexism in *A Spell for Chameleon* and its rape trial has avoided direct references to the concept of misogyny. To some this might seem perplexing. After all, misogyny has been the most damning and frequently levied charge against the novel. It is an ugly charge, too, signifying a brutal contempt for women with dire socio-political repercussions. Ever since the second wave, misogyny has been a steady target of feminist discourse, but the last decade especially has witnessed a horrifying litany of scandals involving misogyny: Gamergate, the Incel movement, Harvey Weinstein and the #MeToo campaign, toxic masculinity, and the Trump administration. For some, all this speaks to a need for an unrelenting, fierce, and unmitigated critique of misogyny wherever found—up to and including pun-based fantasy novels with enduring young adult readerships. For any grown-up returning to *A Spell for Chameleon*, furthermore, misogyny seems like such a natural, automatic accusation. In so many ways, Bink comes across as a poster child for adolescent male resentment, a man-child ripe for simmering misogynistic passions. He is a sexist in his mid-twenties who objectifies women and fantasizes about wielding powerful magic so “no one would dare to tease him or laugh at him or baby him, ever again” (14). He even befriends Crombie, a self-professed hater of women. How could one help but read Anthony’s novel as some bitter and cruelly anti-feminist tirade?

Yet I believe reading *A Spell for Chameleon* as misogynistic is a mistake—a rhetorically powerful one, to be sure, but a mistake nonetheless. Studying the fan commentary, I’m struck by how many reviewers treat *misogyny* and *sexism* as synonyms. In fact, each term designates a different (though related) referent. In her book *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, philosopher Kate Manne defines sexism as the “branch of patriarchal ideology that *justifies* and *rationalizes* a patriarchal social order” whereas misogyny is the “system that *policies* and *enforces* its governing norms and expectations” (20, emphasis in original). Sexism, in other words, can be seen as rationalizing a certain set of non-egalitarian social relations between people based on their perceived sexual difference. Although some forms of sexism can be benign (“gentlemanly behavior”) or even positive (“women and children first!”), sexism nonetheless tends to maintain the social subordination of women on the ideological level. Misogyny, however, *enforces* that social subordination. Through tactics such as gaslighting, male anger, sexual intimidation, and physical or emotional abuse,

misogynistic systems visit hostile or adverse social consequences on women for contravening the patriarchal social order.

No honest reader of *A Spell for Chameleon*, I think, can suggest that anything like hostility or resentment appears in the text. Despite Bink's sexist attitudes, he treats women with honor and respect according to his internalized social norms. Anger is not an emotion common for Bink; rather, he's unsure of his own identity, confused about why he holds the political ideals he does, and curious about his world. Likewise, although Xanth clearly accepts a patriarchal social order, we never actually see Anthony or his characters stringently enforcing that patriarchy. The closest example is the Sorceress Iris, a power-hungry illusionist—reminiscent of *The Odyssey's* Circe—whose gender legally disbars her from kingship. On one hand, Anthony certainly presents Iris as temperamental and vindictive, two classic stereotypes of evil queens from fairy tales. The Good Magician Humphrey also rather baldly states that Iris “requires a man she can respect—one who has stronger magic than she does” (138-39). On the other hand, despite this blatant sexism, Anthony never punishes Iris for her political ambitions. Indeed, he seems to sympathize with them. While neither Iris nor Trent are allowed to manipulate their way into power, the folk of Bink's North Village, after the old Storm King dies, arrange a political marriage where Trent becomes king and Iris queen. Within the bounds of Xanth's patriarchy, Anthony thus permits his sorceress her heart's greatest desire: political influence. And, eventually, patriarchal limitations disappear from Xanth entirely. In *Night Mare* (1983), the Xanthians reinterpret the law about kings being magicians to now count female sorceresses and non-humans with powerful magic as “magicians.” When Iris temporarily becomes a full king, Anthony permanently shatters Xanth's glass ceiling.

What about Crombie? Here, the instinctive hostility some critical readers hold for *A Spell for Chameleon* blinds them to Anthony's clear intentions. One obvious non-toxic reason for making Crombie into a hater of women exists: it adds an extra dose of mystery to the story. Crombie's talent is location, and he offers to find Bink the “greatest threat to [his] welfare” (111). But his talent instead finds only Dee, and of course the joke is that only misogynists would consider Bink's future wife a “threat”; meanwhile, the reader must wonder about the mysterious, seemingly normal woman whom Bink has just encountered. Even more importantly, Crombie's misogynistic views do not go unchallenged in the text. Bink, for instance, declines to accept the soldier's judgments about women—tepidly, to be sure, but he likes Crombie and wishes to keep the peace. Similarly, Dee herself challenges Crombie directly. She calls him “disgusting,” and she points out his obvious character flaws (119). Then, rather than tolerate Crombie's suspicions further, Dee leaves the group's shelter despite the presence of a powerful hailstorm. In other words, she neither

requires male protection nor permits men to disrespect her, which challenges allegations about subservient women in Anthony's text. Later, Chameleon (as Fanchon) even rescues Bink from several sticky situations—something that Bink's former fiancé, the "demure" and girlishly feminine Sabrina, could never have done.

For those still determined to see misogyny as textually pervasive, however, we must also understand how toothless Crombie's misogyny really is. Beyond being personally odious, Crombie—who gets a larger backstory in *The Source of Magic* (1979) and *Ogre, Ogre* (1982)—never actually harms Dee or any other woman. This is important. According to Kate Manne, Crombie's misogyny falls under the "naïve" conception of the term, wherein misogyny is seen only as a "property of individual misogynists [...] prone to hate women qua women" (18); however, this naïve conception makes misogyny a "virtually nonexistent and politically marginal phenomenon" (19). Unlike gaslighting or emotional abuse, such misogyny becomes a personal idiosyncrasy without any real power to silence women or systematically oppress them. Moreover, even as a kid, I readily grasped the logical limitations of Crombie's misogyny. It's a horrible strategy for getting a date, for one thing—a fact not yet appreciated by the modern Incel movement. But I also understood that Crombie was someone who felt spurned by love. Bink realizes this too. He notices that the soldier "rejected all women because he felt they rejected him," and, for Bink, this seems like a "good enough rationale" (*Spell* 121). Although critic Jason Heller bitterly denounces Bink (and Anthony) for this comment, I suspect that Bink, as a fellow social exile, recognizes how Crombie's resentment is one flawed way of asserting his presence in the world—his method for refusing to suffer passively the pain, isolation, and loneliness he feels. Yet in the end, although Crombie's personal misogyny operates as a self-fulfilling prophecy that dooms him to uneven adult relationships (his future wife Jewel, for instance, is non-human), it bears no larger ideological implications in terms of systematic patriarchal oppression.



When Jason Heller published his polemic against what he calls the "sad, misogynistic fantasy of Xanth," it evidently struck a chord with readers. The article inspired over 1,200 responses in the comment section, many of them highly laudatory. One of the few dissenting voices belonged to site user Kunzaito, who follows my own core intuition—namely, the jarring disparity between Anthony himself and the kind of book he is alleged to have written. Another site user, however, responded with what I consider a quintessentially "critical" reply, that authors must be divorced from their books and that *A Spell*

for Chameleon fails to stand on its own because of various encoded ideologies (FeRD). For my part, I have less interest in debates about authorial intention than in whether books can, in fact, “stand on their own.” Throughout this article, what I have suggested is that novels exist mainly through how we read them, and in the decades since the first publication of *A Spell for Chameleon*, especially among academic readers and their students, the two main emotive habits of critique—suspicion and paranoia—have made our core literary motto, as Mad Eye Moody might say, into “Constant vigilance!” As such, Anthony’s old-fashioned and highly gendered sexism has increasingly inspired reflexive—but *not* axiomatic—interpretative leaps into seeing his text as encoded with misogyny, anti-feminist ire, and other toxic viewpoints.

In my reading of *A Spell for Chameleon*, I’ve tried to motivate the plausibility and decency of non-suspicious surface reading. In particular, Anthony’s rape trial and his lone misogynistic character both carry more modest—and more obvious—intentions than what critical readers have been inclined to ascribe. At the end of the day, though, I am not suggesting that innocent, reparative, or surface readings should entirely replace critical, paranoid, or symptomatic ones. After all, critique remains a politically and socially central tool of criticism. Nonetheless the paranoid style of reading, as Sedgwick observes, knows “some things well and others poorly” (9). When we approach texts expecting to find the worst, the worst is generally what we find. Yet I believe that criticism can be cooperative as well as critical. Texts can be built up as easily as they can be torn down. By “just reading” books, paying attention to their surface meanings, we can uncover the interpretations that non-critical or non-academic readers have always found: interpretations just as potentially valid, just as potentially useful, as others. Of course, the surface approach to texts did not prevent me from outgrowing Anthony by my senior year of high school; and so, in some sense, this article is an elegy, a lament, for a lost habit of reading, the instinctive interpretative apparatus that once made Xanth such a beguiling experience for myself and a whole generation of younger readers. At the same time, *A Spell for Chameleon* deserves better than it has received today. Unless we can understand why, or until we can better explore modes of reading beyond critique, we will continue to flounder when it comes to grasping an important work in the literary history of modern genre fantasy.

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