

“I’m Not Like Storybook Girls”: Exploring Depictions of Gender in Fantasy Literature

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Joss Whedon, in a speech for the organization Equality Now, uttered these words that appear on a now-popular Internet graphic: “Why do you write strong female characters? Because you’re still asking me that question” (Equality Now Keynote Address). This question and answer were part of a series—Whedon lamented the fact that the innumerable interview questions posed to him are painfully repetitive. To illustrate, Whedon mockingly posed the question to himself multiple times, answering it differently each time. Once, he answered, “I think it’s because of my mother.” Another time, he explained that it is because men can identify with a strong female character as much as women, so his characters can help everyone. Next, he simply said, “Because they’re hot.” He ends his speech, though, with his real point: “Because you’re still asking me that question,” meaning that as long as people see the presence of “strong female characters” as an anomaly, he will continue to insert examples of them into popular culture. Whedon isn’t the only one to recognize the industry’s fixation on the “strong female character”—indeed, the phrase is ubiquitous, showing up everywhere from book reviews to Netflix, which helpfully generated me a list of “Feel-Good Movies Featuring a Strong Female Lead.” But who is this “strong” female? What does “strong” mean? Author Karina Cooper, in her recent blog post called “The Strong Female Character Myth,” summarizes a few attributes that the masses typically expect from strong females, physical strength and almost total independence being the most common ones (Cooper). Aware of this cultural assumption about what female strength looks like, I set out to read a variety of fantasy literature and see if the females who do, in fact, succeed at coming across as “strong” actually embody the attributes Cooper lays out. As it turns out, our cultural assumptions about what makes a “strong female” have too little nuance to truly capture what goes on in most fantasy novels: the female characters are almost never physically stronger than *every* other character, nor are they *entirely*

independent. Most characters, male or female, exhibit a range of traditionally gendered traits, and the audience's perception of their "strength" relies on subtle authorial moves in the text that go deeper than simply "Can this woman fight?" or "Does this woman cry?"

Readers and critics might expect the fantasy genre—in essence a genre that seeks to escape the familiarities of our world—to be exempt from the perpetuation of cultural stereotypes or conventions regarding gender. Often, though, despite the fantastical setting, authors reinforce traditional gender expectations and devalue instances of out-of-the-norm self-expression. Even in worlds where anything is possible, where wizards and dragons and talking animals push the boundaries of our imaginations, it is not uncommon to read female characters painfully pigeonholed into their stereotypical roles of healer, mother, or housekeeper, even when the characters themselves appear to want other options. Interestingly, these stereotypical, disempowering portrayals of female characters are limited mostly to older installments of the fantasy genre—Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, McCaffrey's *Dragonriders of Pern*, and C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, to name a few. Much of the newer fantasy literature in today's market instead features dynamic female characters who exhibit a wide range of traditionally gendered characteristics and behaviors—they cry, they wield swords, they nurse babies, they argue, they both love and hate different men at different times, they kill people, and they do it all on their own terms and timelines. Katniss, September, Karou, Tris, Hermione, and Sabriel all without a doubt are "strong" female characters, but not because they're outspoken—sometimes they're shy. Not because they're the center of the action—occasionally they're not. Not because they embody typical masculine characteristics—though they do engage in physical combat, express real anger, and take charge of many situations. Not because they reject

traditional femininity, either—they periodically cry, care for those in need, and cook food. Instead, these women are “strong” because, despite their fictional status, they are *real*.

This realistic depiction of many recent female characters is strongly rooted in the philosophy of third-wave feminism. Leslie Heywood, in her introduction to *The Women's Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third-Wave Feminism*, explains that the movement is “a form of inclusiveness; a feminism that allows for identities that previously may have been seen to clash with feminism. [...] One can identify with ‘male’ cultures like sport and also be feminist, or one can participate in as well as critique beauty culture and also be feminist” (xx). This means that to be considered a strong female, a character need not swear off all elements of traditional femininity in favor of masculine versions of strength, nor does she need to stay entirely within a traditionally female role. Third-wave feminism embraces, as Heywood says, inclusiveness. For the fantasy world, this calls for a character who chooses to express the full range of her personal traits whether they are traditionally feminine, masculine, or somewhere in between, and an author who cares to include that range as part of her character.

Some authors, as mentioned above, wrote much earlier than third-wave feminism or even second-wave feminism had come on the scene. This is reflected in their writings, as Tolkien, Lewis, and McCaffrey struggle to write female characters who can throw off any gender restraints and just be themselves. Tolkien in particular has come under criticism for the fairly conspicuous absence of female participants in his books *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Nancy Enright, in her article “Tolkien’s Females and the Defining of Power” recognizes the “general lack of a female presence in battle scenes [and] among the members of the Fellowship” (93). In their book *Women Among the Inklings*, Candice Fredrick and Sam McBride condemn Tolkien’s writing for more than simply a lack of female presence, arguing that Middle Earth is

“overtly patriarchal. Men are the doers, workers, thinkers, and leaders. Women are homemakers, nurses, and distant love interests” (109). Support for these perspectives appear first in *The Hobbit*, which contains no female characters beyond the ones simply referred to, as when Tolkien describes “women and children were being huddled into laden boats” (249). The only significant reference to a female character appears at the very beginning of the book with the mention of Bilbo Baggins’s mother. Bilbo’s Took heritage, which accounts for his adventurous spirit, comes through his mother’s side. Tolkien describes her as “the famous Belladonna Took, one of the three remarkable daughters of the Old Took” (2). The whole Took line is characterized as adventurous, and it is that Tookish side of Bilbo that inspires him to “go and see the great mountains, and hear the pine-trees and the waterfalls, and explore the caves, and wear a sword instead of a walking-stick” (16). This decidedly un-hobbit-like strain of characteristics is attributed to the fact that “long ago one of the Took ancestors must have taken a fairy wife” (2). By repeatedly linking Bilbo’s adventurous nature with his mother’s side of the family, and ultimately stating that it came directly from a fairy *wife*, Tolkien could be interpreted as redeeming himself from his lack of female characters in the rest of the story. In his own way, he is recognizing the contribution of Bilbo’s female relatives, in effect giving them sole credit for Bilbo’s desire to even participate in the adventure that is *The Hobbit*. Tolkien could not escape the social conventions of his day enough to include women in the action of the story, but this nod to Belladonna and the fairy wife at the beginning shows his awareness of the influence women can have. Even with that spin, though, it is inescapable that the only females mentioned are highlighted in terms of their traditional roles of mother and wife.

Tolkien begins to address his writing’s paucity of female characters with *The Lord of the Rings* series, where Galadriel, Arwen, and Éowyn appear. Galadriel, married to Celeborn, is an

elf known as the Lady of Lorien. When Tolkien introduces her, he does so in conjunction with her husband's introduction. He describes, "Very tall they were, and the Lady no less than the Lord; and they were grave and beautiful. They were clad wholly in white [...] no sign of age was upon them" (345). Though he does point out that Galadriel is equal in height to Celeborn, he presents them as a unit rather than introducing Galadriel as her own individual. She warrants a specific introduction, too; Fredrick and McBride recognize that Galadriel is "a female of great power and importance" (112) due to the fact that she wears one of the original rings of power and possesses the Mirror of Galadriel, which can bring visions of the past and possible futures to members of the Fellowship (*FotR* 354-356). She also gives the Fellowship gifts as they leave Lothlorien, namely the elvish cloaks that they wear throughout much of the rest of the journey (361). Beyond these contributions to the plot, however, Galadriel gets no other attention, even though her portions of the story show that she could easily demand that attention. In one scene where she is tempted by the Ring, she indicates her vision for herself as a more powerful, influential ruler. She imagines, "In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and Sun and the Snow upon the Mountain! [...] Stronger than the foundations of the earth" (356). This speech is an intriguing one, because Galadriel herself points out her intention not to be a "dark" ruler. The Ring would, of course, force her to be one, but her vision for herself is not one that includes malevolence. Despite this, Tolkien still depicts Galadriel as turning away from this desire for power, declaring, "I will diminish, and go into the West" (357). This "diminishing" is understandable within the context of the story because it is a laudable accomplishment for her to have resisted the pull of the Ring's power. However, what this scene reveals is that Galadriel *does* desire more power and influence—Tolkien could have provided her a channel through

which to attain those. After all, when Gandalf resists the Ring's power, he still takes a very active role in ensuring the Ring's destruction by staging battles to distract Sauron's attention, advising Frodo, and dealing with another enemy, Saruman. Instead of giving Galadriel a similar role, she virtually disappears from the story after she rejects the Ring. Tolkien relegates the rest of her story to *The Silmarillion* and other companion works, showing that her contributions have "little relevance to the story Tolkien wishes to tell" in *The Lord of the Rings* (Fredrick and McBride 112).

Arwen, another female elf, also appears in the trilogy. In the films, Arwen plays a significant role by rescuing Frodo from the Ringwraiths and taking him to Rivendell. This is a huge departure from her depiction in the books, where, though she is present in Rivendell, gets very little attention and does nothing as noteworthy as rescuing the Ringbearer. The lengthiest part about her in the trilogy only lasts a few paragraphs in *Fellowship*, where Frodo sees her at a feast and focuses almost entirely on her physical beauty. Tolkien describes, "Such loveliness in living thing Frodo had never seen before nor imagined in his mind" (221). Tolkien also mentions that "thought and knowledge were in her glance," and he tells a bit of her family history (221). Despite this fairly well-rounded introduction, Arwen never speaks. The feast is promptly over and the Council of Elrond begins, in which she does not participate. After the rest of the plot marches on without her involvement, she gets another brief mention near the end of *The Return of the King*. Tolkien states, "And Aragorn the King Elessar wedded Arwen Undómiel in the City of the Kings upon the day of Midsummer, and the tale of their long waiting and labours was come to fulfilment" (271). Though she becomes the wife of the final installment's title character, her role in the book is relegated to this single line. Tolkien does tell her full love story with Aragorn, but it appears in the appendices, shunted away from the primary plot just as Galadriel's

story was. His decision to exclude the majority of Arwen's story shows that Tolkien's female characters still do not have the option of equal participation in the plot beyond their traditional contributions as wives and mothers.

Éowyn makes the best case in defense of Tolkien's gender depictions because she takes the most active role of all the women. Her portrayal is complicated, though, by some of the decisions she makes. Éowyn's story begins with her falling in love with Aragorn, but since he is committed to Arwen, her love is unrequited. In her sadness, she decides to dress as a man and join the battle of Pelennor Fields under the name Dernhelm. During this battle, she kills the Lord of the Nazgul in a dramatic scene. The Black Rider threatens her, and she declares her intention to "hinder him." He scoffs, "Hinder me? Thou fool. No living man may hinder me!" to which she responds, laughing, "But no living man am I! You look upon a woman. Éowyn I am" (*RotK* 114). As the Rider attacks, "She did not blench: maiden of the Rohirrim, child of kings, slender but as a steel-blade, fair yet terrible. A swift stroke she dealt, skilled and deadly" (115). This powerful scene shows support for Éowyn in several ways—first, it validates her emotions. She went into battle because she was lovesick over Aragorn and determined to at least gain some honor on the battlefield. By having her kill a major opponent, Tolkien shows that her emotionally driven battle charge was worthwhile. Second, this scene allows her the opportunity to claim her sex. Instead of achieving her success while still disguised as a man, she states, "You look upon a woman," just before she kills the Rider, and promptly pulls off her helmet to let her hair down (115). This, too, can be read as Tolkien's encouragement of females' participation in crucial matters, without the need to deny their femininity in order to do so. Fredrick and McBride point out in their article "Battling the Woman Warrior: Females and Combat in Tolkien and Lewis" that "At one stage in the writing Tolkien revised her [Éowyn] to be a man" (35). His

narrative choice to keep her female further supports the argument that, by the end of the trilogy, he has recognized the value of a prominent female character.

The complication arises later in the book, after Éowyn has survived the battle. She finds herself rather depressed, because she still cannot be with Aragorn. Faramir, the brother of one of the original Fellowship members, offers her his love instead. When he questions, “Éowyn, do you not love me?” she seems to undergo a transformation. Tolkien describes, “Then the heart of Éowyn changed, or else at last she understood it. And suddenly her winter passed, and the sun shone on her” (262). Éowyn then responds, “I will be a shieldmaiden no longer, nor vie with the great Riders, nor take joy only in the songs of slaying. I will be a healer, and love all things that grow and are not barren [...] No longer do I desire to be a queen” (262). In the context of the story, readers applaud this shift because she finds happiness with Faramir rather than continuing to pine after the unattainable Aragorn. The feminist implications of this passage, though, are less straightforward. What appeared to be Éowyn’s greatest triumph—killing the Black Rider—now is cast as the “winter” of her life, as something to be renounced. Instead, the “sun shone on her” once she chooses to be a healer, which is a more traditional female role. Also, her admission that she no longer desires to be a queen superficially means that she is no longer interested in Aragorn, but it symbolically represents her shift from a position of power as a nontraditional, martial female to a more subordinate status as a traditional wife. Let me be clear, here: there *is* power in traditional female roles like wife and caregiver. Her newfound traditional desire does not, in itself, constitute “subordinate status.” I use the word “subordinate” because the new role she has chosen appears to be subordinate to her true character—she is clearly an effective and passionate soldier. She could have gone on to lead her people in her late father’s place, claiming authority thanks to her success on the battlefield, but instead she swears off those types of

masculine power entirely. It appears that Éowyn's "choice" here is more of an imposition by Tolkien to ensure that this clearly powerful female character did not step too far outside the bounds of appropriate female behavior. Robert Foster, in his *A Guide to Middle-Earth*, makes explicit the limitations on Éowyn, saying, "Giving up her desire to be a free, independent shield-maiden, she married Faramir and became Lady of Ithilien" (85). This is really the crux of the issue—it doesn't make Éowyn weak to have married a man, but what chips away at her strength is that in Tolkien's world, marriage means a sacrifice of a woman's "free, independent" nature. Fredrick and McBride take a rather more drastic stance on this narrative shift, summing it up this way: "Tolkien's choices for a would-be woman warrior: submit to your allotted role as wife, or die" (35).

Dragonflight, the first installment in Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonriders of Pern* series, makes several notable departures from Tolkien's works, not the least of which is that it features a female protagonist written by a female author. Also, of course, the fantasy setting is different: Instead of Middle Earth, *Dragonflight* takes place in Pern, and the most powerful group is not wizards, but dragon riders. The Weyr, as the group is called, has been suffering for decades, though, as "a result of inferior queens and incompetent Weyrwomen" (24). The role of Weyrwoman is a vital one to the success of the group of dragon riders, and McCaffrey emphasizes that importance throughout her story—indeed, one of the dragon riders goes so far as to say, "We are doomed without a strong Weyrwoman" (60). McCaffrey fills this need with her protagonist Lessa, who she describes as full of "perversity, endurance, and guile" (5). Lessa promises to be the well-rounded, independent, feisty female lead that Tolkien lacked, and in some important ways, she succeeds in fulfilling this role. For one thing, she becomes the Weyrwoman that the Weyr so desperately needs in order to regain strength and prestige within

Pern. In one scene, when all the other potential Weyrwomen stand around crying because they're frightened of the newly hatched dragons, Lessa thinks to herself, "Let *them* be afraid. She was Lessa of Ruatha and did not need to be afraid" (82). Next, Lessa relies on her own intelligence to figure out the answer to the major puzzle in the novel: why did the past Weyr disappear? She studies a poem on a tapestry and is the only character to put together the clues to realize that the Weyr disappeared because they traveled to the future. Finally, she asserts her independence by time traveling, alone, to solve the problem; specifically, she time travels back to the past Weyr to give them the information they need to return to her contemporary time to help her and her fellow dragon riders protect Pern from the Threads. These feats of Lessa's all look wonderful on paper—she appears to enjoy a position of power and assert a large measure of agency as a result. McCaffrey's apparently "liberated" female character, though, requires a closer look than merely these headlines of her achievements. Heywood's *The Women's Movement Today* explains that the movement "makes allowance for different identities within a single person" (xx), but many subtle elements of McCaffrey's book show how Lessa is punished for her range of gender expression and is, instead, encouraged by McCaffrey and the other characters alike to seek a more traditional role.

The first issue is that Lessa exhibits shockingly little sexual agency, especially for a woman who rides the queen dragon of the Weyr. Ideally, she would have her pick of her fellow dragon riders, but she and her dragon have a surprising lack of control over the process. Ramoth, Lessa's queen dragon, is expected to fly around in the air until one of the male dragons from the Weyr can *catch* her and "fly" her—McCaffrey's chosen euphemism for "mate with." Then, the rider of whichever dragon flies Ramoth gets the pleasure of being Lessa's partner as well. This system of mating introduces quite a few disturbing elements into the text, the most striking of

which is the total lack of control. Not only can Lessa not choose her partner, but even her otherwise powerful dragon is left at the mercy of whomever can fly the fastest. Also, by setting it up so that Ramoth must essentially run away from the male dragons until she gets caught, McCaffrey underscores the lack of control and introduces a new element: consent. Showing Ramoth flying as fast as she can *away* from the male dragons suggests that Ramoth does not even want to participate in mating. Either that, or McCaffrey is tapping into a frustratingly pervasive misconception that an indication of “no” does not actually mean “no,” and, by flying away, Ramoth is *really* trying to indicate her desire by playing “hard to get.” In this case, McCaffrey’s mating ritual crosses over into a perpetuation of rape culture, where males think a female wants sex regardless of any actions that may indicate otherwise, assuming “she must have wanted it” (Heywood 271). Either way, this scene undermines Ramoth’s independence, and, through extension, Lessa’s. Once the male dragon Mnementh has successfully flown Ramoth, his rider F’lar is understood to be Lessa’s partner. This is not explicit in the text except for one place where McCaffrey describes F’lar as “shar[ing] Lessa’s bed,” which portrays Lessa as very passive (160). Throughout the rest of the book, McCaffrey continues to downplay Lessa’s interest in her physical relationship with F’lar by never showing her initiating any contact—indeed, the only time they are shown kissing, F’lar is entirely in control. McCaffrey describes, “F’lar crushed her against him, his mouth bruising hers [...] He released her so abruptly that she staggered back against Ramoth’s lowered head. She clung for a moment to her dragon, as much for support as for reassurance” (208). Clearly F’lar is not only in control, but his control is tinged with violence: the bruising kiss and the abrupt release cause Lessa to seek refuge with her female dragon rather than with her male lover. In a rare bedroom scene, later, Lessa tells F’lar that they should get to sleep. He teases, “You’ve got your mind on one thing, haven’t you?” during which

“his hands [are] caressing her eagerly” (226). He blatantly misinterprets her suggestion of sleep as an offer of sex. The scene continues: “She pushed ineffectually at him, trying to escape. For a wounded, tired man, he was remarkably amorous” (226). Clearly Lessa wants to stop his advances, but he ignores her attempts to do so, reasserting his control and denying hers. These scenes of sexual passivity, in conjunction with the mating ritual, contradict the independence that Lessa claims through her other actions in the book.

Lessa’s character is also undermined when, despite her prominence within the Weyr, McCaffrey shows her performing very traditional tasks for the male dragon riders. When she dines with F’lar, McCaffrey describes that Lessa “took a tray of bread and cheese, and [...] She served him deftly” (163). McCaffrey’s other options were to show a servant laying out both their plates, to show Lessa and F’lar serving themselves individually, or to show F’lar serving them both. Her choice to place Lessa in the traditional posture of providing a male with food is one of many examples that chips away at Lessa’s independence and prominence as a character—again, not because a woman serving food is inherently subordinate, but because this seems so at odds with her clear inclinations toward adventure and away from the domestic sphere. Also, when McCaffrey *does* show the reverse scenario, F’lar serving Lessa, it is clearly an anomaly. McCaffrey describes that “F’lar, with unusual attentiveness, held a chair for Lessa and poured her wine,” which seems reasonable enough to contemporary readers, but then Lessa herself is surprised at this “excess of courtesy” (269). These two examples, which are really only passing phrases in the scheme of the novel, show that McCaffrey unquestioningly portrays traditional gender roles regardless of whether or not those roles fit with the rest of each person’s characterization.

With closer study, those seemingly innocuous “passing phrases” turn out to be vital elements that reveal McCaffrey’s perpetuation of gender stereotypes. One instance is McCaffrey’s use of the word “feminine,” which appears on several occasions and shifts Lessa from an independent, nontraditional female to one who is rather awkwardly limited to traditional spheres. When Lessa gets a new skirt to replace her old, tattered one, the garment “mak[es] her smile in sheer feminine delight” (72). This use of “feminine” reduces the concept of femininity to the idea of being satisfied with new, pretty clothes, and it convolutes Lessa’s characterization as well—someone who otherwise has *no* interest in physical beauty or being “pretty” for some reason goes giddy over a new skirt. This narrow use of the word “feminine” continues in a scene where Lessa and another woman see children playing in the Weyr, and they glance at each other “in a timeless feminine amusement of the vagaries of the young under their care” (101). Again, McCaffrey reinforces a very traditional sense of the word “feminine” by equating it with child-rearing, even going so far as to call their amusement “timeless,” implying that women have always, and by extension, will always, be children’s primary caregivers. Even if this is true—after all, it is women who birth and nurse offspring—it again shifts Lessa’s characterization toward a more traditional emphasis, distracting from the impact of her prominent role in the Weyr. This caregiving role is again reinforced as a female one during a scene where a woman is in labor, and McCaffrey describes Lessa feeling a “deep [...] feminine instinct of easing a woman’s pain” (49). This description states outright that the instinct to care for others is a feminine one, and Lessa feels that instinct despite being “hardened [...] to all emotion” (49). Repeatedly, this use of “feminine” serves to counteract Lessa’s nontraditional characteristics by reining her back into traditional spheres. Rather than her traditionally feminine and traditionally masculine sides coexisting peacefully—as in Rowling’s Molly Weasley, who I’ll discuss later—

Lessa's characterization comes across as stilted and forced. All of these mentions of "feminine delight" and "feminine instinct" seem not to fit with the Lessa of the rest of the story—one who is bold, fearless, angry, and intelligent. Instead, they come across more like an attempt on McCaffrey's part to fit Lessa's character back into a traditional mold, perhaps in an attempt to make her more palatable to the contemporary audience, rather than Lessa's own choice to exhibit those characteristics.

At the end of the novel, McCaffrey makes the most obvious move yet to force Lessa into a secondary role. Earlier in the book, McCaffrey had described Lessa's role of Weyrwoman as a powerful and crucial one to the success of the Weyr, but eventually McCaffrey takes that original prominence down a few notches. She writes Lessa as having a "realization" where she reflects that "she had, at last, fully accepted her role: as Weyrwoman and as mate, to help F'lar shape men and events for many Turns [years] to come" (221). This certainly does not sound like the Lessa from the beginning of the novel, who was originally described as being full of "perversity, endurance, and guile," nor does it sound like the Lessa of the rest of the book, who perceptively solves mysteries, boldly travels through time, and fearlessly flies on an enormous dragon. Instead, this sentence undermines all that by casting Lessa as merely a helper to F'lar, the one who will actually be doing the shaping of men (notice the generic masculine, here—no mention of future queen dragons or Weyrwomen) and future events. Lessa's supporting role is further emphasized by the fact that she does not get to fight in the final battle against the Threads. Instead, the last three pages of the novel follow F'lar's perspective while *he* fights. This shift in focus continues through the novel's final sentence, which reads, "He was glad that now, of all times conceivable, he, F'lar, rider of bronze Mnementh, was a dragonman of Pern" (304). This unnaturally shifts the focus away from Lessa, whose perspective McCaffrey follows through the

rest of the novel, for the sole reason that Lessa does not participate in the fight. Removing her from this traditionally masculine sphere, placing her instead attending to the wounded from a previous battle, fits in the same category as McCaffrey's other characterizations of Lessa: being sexually passive, serving food, chuckling over children's antics. Though Lessa is a Weyrwoman, a dragon rider, and an otherwise influential character, McCaffrey's pervasive tendency to undermine those characteristics results in a version of Lessa that is sadly limited compared to the character she could have been—she is indeed a female protagonist, but she falls short of the label “strong” because McCaffrey denies her the option to define herself by her own terms, instead forcing her into traditional roles that seem not to fit with her true personality.

Lessa is not alone in struggling against the limitations placed on her by her author, either. Joining her from C.S. Lewis's world of Narnia are Polly Plummer, Susan and Lucy Pevensie, Aravis, Jill, and even the White Witch. Like McCaffrey, Lewis nods to the concept of gender equality in elements of his *Chronicles of Narnia*, but ultimately his narrative decisions create little space for his characters' self-expression. He writes almost all of his characters throwing around sexist remarks at one time or another, even including sexist remarks from the narrator's perspective as well. He gives very few options to women who want to participate in battle, keeping them relatively removed from the action. Lewis's writing also includes a pervasive discomfort with expressions of emotion, both from female and male characters, and he ends the series with what many critics have interpreted as a condemnation of female sexuality.

At first blush, though, it seems possible that the *Chronicles of Narnia* place a high emphasis on female characters—protagonists, even—who have a variety of nontraditional gender expressions and perform numerous “masculine” tasks throughout the books. *The Magician's Nephew* begins with “a girl called Polly Plummer” (3) who engages in some fairly

boyish play, pretending to have a “smugglers’ cave” where she keeps “a cash-box containing various treasures, and a story she was writing and usually a few apples” (8). By selecting these pastimes, Lewis places the focus not on Polly’s femininity, but on her adventurous spirit. Later in the book, Polly shrewdly suggests that she and her companion Digory mark their path into Charn so they can find their way back again. Without that idea, she and Digory would certainly have been lost between their home, the woods, and Charn, so Lewis appears to be giving her credit for intelligence and awareness. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Lewis makes a similar move by evenly distributing the gender of the Pevensie siblings: boy, girl, boy, girl. This suggests a lack of preferential treatment for either gender, which extends into the plot of the story as well; When Peter and Edmund are fighting a battle, Susan and Lucy are accompanying Aslan to the Stone Table. Both of these actions are crucial to the progression of the story, and each child is involved in his or her own meaningful way. In the third installment, *The Horse and His Boy*, Lewis introduces his readers to the girls Lasaraleen and Aravis. The former, “interested in clothes and parties and gossip,” has little in common with the latter, who “had always been more interested in bows and arrows and horses and dogs and swimming” (99). Instead of showing preference for one type of girl over the other, Lewis remarks that they “each found the other silly,” which gives equal validation to both manifestations of femininity (99). Jill, in *The Last Battle*, is described an “excellent guide,” so “as soon as Tirian saw she was the best pathfinder of the three of them he put her in front” (59), which shows recognition of her skills and contributions.

While these descriptions and plot points appear to encourage female characters to break out of the traditional feminine mold, Lewis imbues his series with a plethora of subtle elements that reverse any progress his female characters could have made in terms of flexible gender

expression. For every unique characteristic these women portray, there is an accompanying snide remark to remind them (and Lewis's readers) that those characteristics or actions are out of the norm and, therefore, unacceptable. Other remarks are not even specific to certain female characters, but instead serve to diminish the status of women in general. Beginning in *The Magician's Nephew*, Digory's uncle speaks of "rules," saying that they are highly beneficial "for little boys—and servants—and women" but that rules simply don't apply to "men like [himself]" (21). Uncle Andrew is a rather foolish man, so Lewis likely intends his readers to roll their eyes at Uncle Andrew's own self-importance. The real issue here, though, is not Uncle Andrew's over-inflated perception of himself, but the hierarchy he lays out to describe others. The full passage indicates that, from most important to least important, the social hierarchy exists in this order: wise men like himself, great thinkers and profound students, little boys, servants, and *then* women. His point is subtle—it is not even the focus of the passage—but this quotation begins setting the tone for the countless asides that follow. Later, Digory tells Uncle Andrew he will get his comeuppance for his trickery, because in fairy tales the "bad guy" is always punished. Uncle Andrew dismisses his comments by saying condescendingly, "Well, well, I suppose that is the natural thing for a child to think—brought up among women, as you have been. Old wives' tales, eh?" (28). Lewis tosses in this aside, which equates femininity with fanciful stories and childish thoughts, simply to discredit Digory. It does more than that, though; it establishes a derogatory attitude toward women's contributions to society, specifically child rearing.

Digory himself, a protagonist in this book, picks up Uncle Andrew's sexism and reasserts it. When Polly says she feels no magic in Charn, Digory responds, "That's all *you* know. It's because you're a girl. Girls never want to know anything but gossip and rot about people getting engaged" (55). Later, when Polly asks for an apology for Digory's rash actions when they first

arrived in Charn (physically twisting Polly's wrist and then ringing a bell which awoke the White Witch), he says, "Sorry? Well now, if that isn't just like a girl! What have I done?" (80). This reaction, as if it is unreasonable for a female to request an apology, is troubling. Digory thinks it is unreasonable partly because he does not see himself as having done anything wrong, but also because he likely does not view Polly as someone deserving of an apology. Uncle Andrew taught him that women are ranked below "little boys" and "servants," so why should he bother to apologize to a woman? In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Lewis shows that perhaps apologies to women are indeed futile, because they may not even be accepted: Edmund says it's "just like a girl" to be "sulking somewhere and [not to] accept an apology" (21). Both of these instances discredit the female characters' ability to demand respect, because whether they ask for an apology or not, they are criticized. In *The Horse and His Boy*, Prince Corin describes Lucy as being "as good as a man, or at any rate as good as a boy" (182). This echoes Uncle Andrew's hierarchy from *The Magician's Nephew*, showing that later books in the series still perpetuate those narrow ideas. Even as late in the series as *The Silver Chair* Eustace says, "It's an extraordinary thing about girls that they never know the points of a compass" (7). These comments serve to encourage negative generalizations based on gender, and more specifically, those generalizations consistently come from males and are directed at females.

Eventually in the series, the females start to fight back. In *The Horse and his Boy*, the male protagonist Shasta sees Aravis riding up on her horse and exclaims, "Why, it's only a girl!" (30). Aravis defends herself, throwing back, "What business is it to you if I am *only* a girl?" Her response is refreshing, since until now in the series these taunts to various girls have gone unchallenged. The presence of Shasta's remark, though it *is* challenged, still forces Aravis into a defensive stance—since she is greeted with judgment based on her sex, she must fight for the

respect that would have been given to a male. A similar situation appears in *Prince Caspian*, when Edmund jabs, “That’s the worst of girls [...] They never carry a map in their heads” (119). The meaning of his sentence is rude enough, (and unfair, since it can hardly be true in the case of every girl) but it becomes even more rude when Edmund’s audience is considered. Instead of directing his comment to any of his female companions, he says this “to Peter and the Dwarf” (119). Like Aravis, Lucy defends herself, but she has to actually insert herself into the conversation because Edmund had not even done her the small courtesy of addressing his criticism to her. She shoots back a satisfactory answer, saying, “That’s because our heads have something inside them” (119), but the fact remains that she still must defend herself instead of simply being given the respect she deserves right from the beginning of the exchange.

In a few instances, female characters make these types of remarks without any prompting; on offense, rather than defense. On a remote island, Edmund and Caspian begin fighting over a newly-discovered pool that turns objects into gold. Lucy gets frustrated with their fighting and says “Oh stop it, both of you. That’s the worst of doing anything with boys. You’re all such swaggering, bullying idiots” (*VotDT* 128). At first, it is enjoyable to see a girl making an unprompted jab at the boys for a change, but beyond that superficial satisfaction, this comment actually does more harm than good. Like when these comments were directed at the girls, this insult has the same result—it reduces an entire gender down to a few characteristics, a few catchy words, leaving no room for nuance or respect for difference. Later, in *The Silver Chair*, Jill announces, “Where I come from [...] they don’t think much of men who are bossed about by their wives” (139). These comments further underscore Lewis’s message that a person of a particular sex only has a few options about how to behave; he clearly “doesn’t think much” of most variations. Also, while there are many more instances of Lewis tossing in criticism about

females, this reversal shows that Lewis perpetuates gender stereotypes regardless of the gender in question.

In a conference's keynote speech to The C.S. Lewis and Inklings Society, Dr. Devin Brown attempts to defend this plethora of derogatory comments, saying, "Whether readers see mutual gender bashing or just ordinary bickering in these scenes, Lewis makes it quite clear that uncharitable comments like these are wrong and should be avoided by everyone" (Brown). He continues, "If there is sexism here, rather than merely unthinking comments, it is Mrs. Beaver's, Edmund's, Lucy's, Eustace's, Corin's, Digory's, and Polly's sexism rather than Lewis's" (Brown). While this is a good point to make—after all, it is never a wise assumption to equate characters' thoughts and words with the author's own perspective—several instances from the books suggest that some of the sexism *is* Lewis's. When the narrator addresses the reader directly, rather than through the mouth of any of the characters, it seems safe to assume that the narrative voice belongs to Lewis. That narrative voice, quite subtly, minimizes females' place in this story both as characters and as audience members. When explaining how to address a Narnian dog, the narrator speaks to the reader directly, saying, "No dog that I ever knew, least of all a Talking Dog of Narnia, likes being called Good Doggie then; any more than you would like being called My Little Man" (141). The phrase "My Little Man" obviously assumes a male audience, excluding female readers. In *Prince Caspian*, Peter kisses a Badger on the head, but Lewis goes out of his way to assure readers that "it wasn't a girlish thing to do, because he was the High King," suggesting that it is not merely the characters who disapprove of emotional displays, but Lewis himself (173). In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, the narrator describes Susan very narrowly, saying, "grown-ups thought her the pretty one of the family and she was no good at school work" (5). Equating beauty with stupidity is perhaps the most detrimental

description of women we have seen thus far, and it comes directly from the narrator. This assessment allows no crossing of traditional gender boundaries, no blurring of the lines between physical beauty and intellectual capability. Instead it creates a dichotomy, suggesting the extremely narrow view that female beauty precludes female intelligence, or vice versa. Even if the voice here does not accurately depict how Lewis views the world, it undeniably supports an atmosphere that prizes male society and traditionally masculine behavior while devaluing feminine contributions.

In addition to all these direct vocalizations of sexism, elements of Lewis's plot also perpetuate different treatment for males and females. In *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, Father Christmas appears and gives the siblings specific gifts based on their sexes. He gives Peter a sword, intending him to fight in the eventual battle, but he gives Susan and Lucy gifts that will remove them from the immediate fighting: a horn and a bow and arrow, and a cordial of healing liquid and a dagger, respectively. Even though they want to fight—Lucy asks him why she won't be in the battle, and she argues for herself, saying, "I think I could be brave enough," (65)—the structure of the books does not allow for this amount of freedom. The gender norms are a little too rigid to allow Susan and Lucy to actively participate in the battle, so instead Lewis removes them and gives them other roles. Susan is the one who will call for help, and Lucy is a healer: both much more traditional female roles than "warrior" would have been. Later in the series when Lucy participates in a battle as an archer, Lewis's male characters still struggle to give the concept of female warriors proper recognition. Prince Corin, upon finding out that he will not be allowed to fight in the battle, scoffs, "Oh what nonsense! Of course I'm going to fight. Why, the Queen Lucy's going to be with the archers" (*HB* 179). This particular male character can't even conceptualize not having an opportunity that is already being afforded to a

woman—that's nonsense. Lucy gets dragged in again in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, during Lewis's introduction of Eustace Scrubb, who "was a puny little person who couldn't have stood up even to Lucy, let alone Edmund, in a fight" (4). Lucy symbolizes weakness, apparently, and is consistently portrayed as the lowest standard of achievement in battle, which limits her in the eyes of the reader.

As if limitation in battle weren't enough, Lewis's writing also frequently condemns traditionally feminine expressions of emotion, regardless of which sex they come from. It first happens to Eustace. When Eustace first arrives in Narnia—from a painting in his home to the middle of the ocean—he is understandably upset. He cries, but the narrator tells the reader, "Eustace was crying much harder than any boy of his age has a right to cry when nothing worse than a wetting has happened to him" (13). This idea that males need to have a specific "right to cry," rather than always being allowed to express their feelings is a very disturbing sentiment. It reinforces stereotypical assumptions and expectations about males, namely that they must subdue their emotions and only express them in culturally acceptable times. Apparently for Lewis, a culturally acceptable time is when one gets turned into a dragon; when that happens to Eustace later in the book, the narrator says kindly, "No one will blame Eustace if at this moment he shed tears" (90). This message, that some emotional expressions are justified for men but other expressions are not, pigeonholes the male characters in a way not unlike how the females are limited.

The narrator continues to show a clear preference for a masculine lack of emotion in *The Silver Chair*: when Jill becomes upset at one point, the narrator apologetically turns to the reader, saying, "I hope you won't lose all interest in Jill for the rest of the book if I tell you that at this moment she began to cry" (96-97). The narrator, who by this point I feel confident calling

“Lewis,” assumes that a feminine display of emotion will be equally as distasteful to his readers as it is to him. Near the end, even Jill herself expresses this distaste. When the Queen of the Underland (or “Witch” as Lewis shifts to calling her) turns into a serpent and attacks the group, Eustace, Prince Rilian, and Puddleglum all fight her while Jill “had very wisely sat down and was keeping quiet; she was saying to herself ‘I do hope I don’t faint—or blub—or do anything idiotic’” (161). Lewis’s gender restrictions are so pervasive that even the characters themselves believe them, which in this scene results in the males fighting and the female trying not to “blub.”

Ironically, amidst all this gender-based mudslinging, Lewis includes a nod to the concept of gender equality. In one of Eustace’s journal entries during the trip, he notes, “Lucy has been given a whole room on deck to herself, almost a nice room compared with the rest of this place. C[aspian] says that’s because she’s a girl. I tried to make him see what Alberta says, that all that sort of thing is really lowering girls but he was too dense” (31). Eustace means, of course, that treatment someone in a certain way based on his or her sex really does that person no good at all. This quotation shows that Lewis is definitely aware of a dialogue about equality, which makes his narrow depictions of females and males that much more frustrating. A cursory glance at some biographical information about Lewis, though, reveals his true feeling about those progressive ideals: Kath Filmer-Davies, in her book *The Fiction of C.S. Lewis: Mask and Mirror*, explains, “Lewis detected in what he called ‘modernism’ [...] the manifestation of evil and decay” (104). Lewis placed little value on “modern” concepts like gender equality, so he confines mention of those ideas to instances like this—brief mentions in the diary of a boy who, according to Lewis, cries too much.

The Last Battle concludes the series with what is likely the most controversial element of the Chronicles: Susan's exclusion from Aslan's kingdom, which can be understood as heaven. As Jill explains, Susan was not with the rest of the Pevensie siblings on the train because she was "interested in nothing now-a-days except nylons and lipstick and invitations" (135). Critics have latched onto the mention of "nylons and lipstick" as evidence of Susan's burgeoning interest in her own physical body, and therefore Lewis's exclusion of her from heaven is a direct condemnation of female sexuality. J.K. Rowling, in a TIME Magazine interview, sums it up by saying, "She's become irreligious basically because she found sex [...] I have a big problem with that" (Grossman). Philip Pullman reacts similarly in his essay "The Dark Side of Narnia," stating "Susan [...] is undergoing a transition from one phase of her life to another. Lewis didn't approve of that. He didn't like women in general, or sexuality at all" (Pullman). As much as it appears that Susan's exclusion from heaven could be further textual support for Lewis's limitation of female characters, Rowling and Pullman have actually misinterpreted Lewis here. After the "nylons and lipstick" comment, the rest of the Jill's quotation reads, "She always was a jolly sight too keen on being grown-up" (135). So, though Lewis does exhibit frequent and obvious criticisms of his female characters, as I've explored, the issue in this case is not Susan's sexuality; it is her focus on "being grown-up," whatever that may mean. The mention of "nylons and lipstick" is simply an unfortunate, stereotypical picture of "growing up" for a girl, which fits Lewis's pattern of assumptions about females that he makes throughout the series—that they don't fight in battle in the same way as men, that they are overly emotional, and, here, that they become more superficial as they grow older. While that assumption in and of itself is definitely limiting, the exclusion of Susan from heaven is more about Lewis's Christian emphasis on child-like belief and innocence, which he prizes in both genders. This focus on youth is evident from

early in the series—in *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* Lewis focuses more on the categories of older and younger than of male and female; for example, the two younger children are the first to enter Narnia, rather than the two males or the two females. Indeed, Lewis even gives Lucy preferential treatment due to her position as the youngest—she discovers Narnia first, sees Aslan before the others, and ultimately develops a stronger bond to Aslan than her siblings do. At one point, Peter tells Susan, “Ladies first,” and she responds, “No, you’re the eldest” (75). These elements suggest that Lewis cares little about gender distinctions and is more interested in the innocence of youth and the experience of age. Thus, when Susan is excluded from Aslan’s country for “being grown-up,” it fits within Lewis’s overarching value system.

Though criticism of *The Last Battle* is mainly focused on the issue of Susan’s fate, this final installment of the Chronicles still contains every element of Lewis’s typical limitations on his characters that appeared in the rest of the series. In one blatantly sexist scene, Jill takes the initiative to rescue Jewel the Unicorn from the Calormenes without King Tirian’s permission, and she is met with an appalling response. When discussing her actions, Eustace says to Tirian, “If she were a boy, she’d have to be knighted, wouldn’t she, Sire?” He replies rather gravely, “If she were a boy, she’d be whipped for disobeying orders” (65). Though Lewis means the focus to be on the nature of her conduct—worthy of reward or of reprimand—by framing it in terms of her gender, he implies that because she is *not* a boy, her actions are not worthy of *either*. Also, like Susan and Lucy in various battles, Jill is relegated to the role of archer, instructed to shoot at the enemy until they get close and then to “go back to the white rock and wait” (122). Another recurring element that presents itself, surprisingly even in Aslan’s country, is that of justified emotion. Lucy is understandably overcome with emotion upon realizing that she and her brothers are dead and that the Narnia they knew no longer exists, but Peter says with disbelief, “What,

Lucy! You're not *crying*?" (158). Even in Lewis's metaphorical heaven, his main male character is still incredulous at a full expression of emotion, indicating that it is unacceptable in this perfect iteration of Narnia. Even if Peter's statement carries a sense of "Don't cry, everything's perfect," it would still function as a slight chastisement for the emotional display, suggesting that tears are only appropriate in certain times and places. Finally, near the very end of the book, Lewis gets in one last reinforcement of the difference between males and females. In this scene, a Calormen man expresses his joy that Aslan brought him to Narnia, even when he considers himself unworthy, saying "me who am but as a dog." A Talking Narnian Dog takes offense to that, but then realizes, "After all, *we* call our puppies, *Boys*, when they don't behave properly." Another dog agrees, "So we do," and adds, "or, *girls*." Then, an older dog rebukes him for saying the word "girls," chiding him "S-s-sh! That's not a nice word to use. Remember where you are" (166). Clearly, Lewis is drawing on our own society's use of the word "bitch" as a gender-specific expletive. While this could have been an opportunity to even the playing field and remove all such singling out, since Lewis has reached the end of the series and almost all his characters are in Aslan's country now, Lewis does not appear to challenge the term. This scene functions mainly as a humorous one, rather than one that invites readers to consider why "girls" is a bad word, yet "boys" is not.

A final element of the Chronicles that I have yet to address is the character of the White Witch. She appears in several books and is involved in Narnia quite literally from its conception. At her first introduction in *The Magician's Nephew*, she is known as Jadis and she wreaks havoc in Charn, our world, and the newly-formed Narnia. When she appears again in *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, she has been keeping Narnia in an eternal winter and ultimately succeeds in killing Aslan. Kath Filmer-Davies explains the White Witch's presence and

characterization by saying, “In the Narnian Chronicles, [...] evil, the corruption of good, is depicted as femininity” (110). She contrasts the White Witch with Aslan, who she identifies as “ultimate good [...] ultimate masculinity” (110). Her comparison is a good one, because a close reading of the White Witch’s first appearance in the books reveals Lewis’s heightened attention to her feminine characteristics. Before she is awoken in Charn, she is first described as having “a look of such fierceness and pride that it took your breath away,” but the narrator continues past those characteristics, emphasizing, “Yet she was beautiful too” (*MN* 53). Despite her other features, her beauty becomes a focal point for Lewis. He goes on to specify that “the flash of her eyes and the curve of her lips” indicate “that she was a great queen,” locating her power within her physical being (58). Uncle Andrew, upon meeting her, deems her “a dem fine woman, [...] a dem fine woman. A superb creature” (82). The Witch herself even participates in the focus on her looks, telling Polly and Digory that “for love of my beauty [Uncle Andrew] has made a potent spell [...] and sent you across the vast gulf between world and world to ask my favor and to bring me to him” (70-71). *The Magician’s Nephew* ends with Uncle Andrew repeating his assessment of the White Witch as a “dem fine woman,” which could suggest that, despite the obvious power she wields, Lewis wanted to keep her characterization within the traditionally feminine realm of beauty, just as he wanted to keep (and succeeded in keeping) Polly, Susan, Lucy, Aravis, and Jill in their traditional roles as well.

Looking back on the works of Tolkien, McCaffrey, and Lewis, today’s readers can easily see the lack of third-wave ideology that results in pervasive traditional depictions of both female and male characters. This does not mean their stories are not still enjoyable, nor does it mean that their characters are not worth getting to know. Certainly, many a young female reader has identified with Frodo’s perseverance or admired Susan’s archery, despite the more subtle

implications of these authors' overall depictions of gender. Today in the fantasy tradition, the philosophy of third-wave feminism is very much in the public awareness—perhaps not in name, but certainly in practice many people grasp the concept. For some people, though, the awareness of third-wave feminism *is* explicit. Author Patrick Rothfuss, in a blog post titled “Fanmail FAQ: The F Word,” answers a fan’s email question about his view of himself as a feminist. Rothfuss begins his answer by outlining his general definition of feminism: “1. Feminism is the belief that women are as worth as much as men. [...] 2. Feminism is the belief that women shouldn’t have to do things just because they’re women. 3. Feminism is the belief that women shouldn’t have to *avoid* doing things just because they’re women” (Rothfuss). He also adds corollaries under each point, such as “2a. Men shouldn’t have to do things just because they’re men,” and “3a. Men shouldn’t have to *avoid* doing things just because they’re men” (Rothfuss). He gives an example to make the concept a little more concrete to his readers, explaining, “#2 means that women shouldn’t feel obliged to be stay-at-home moms. #3 means that if you want to be a stay-at-home mom, and it makes you happy, then you should feel free to do that. It doesn’t mean you’re not a feminist” (Rothfuss). Though Rothfuss never uses the phrase “third-wave” in this blog post, the feminism he describes is exactly the feminism Heywood claims in *The Women’s Movement Today*: one that prizes inclusiveness and comfortably accommodates “different identities within a single person” (xx). Rothfuss’s progressive, contemporary understanding of feminism appears in his own writing, which I will discuss in depth later, but it also manifests in the works of other contemporary writers, even if they may not articulate their personal awareness of it. This results in fantasy authors exploring all facets of their characters, conventional or not, and creating a space that allows their characters to choose their own paths. In addition to Patrick Rothfuss, Catherynne Valente, Laini Taylor, Garth Nix, Veronica Roth, Suzanne Collins, and

J.K. Rowling all exhibit superb command over this new type of female character—if “command” is even the right word. Perhaps we should say instead that these authors show an ability, which McCaffrey, Lewis, and Tolkien lacked, to allow their fictional women to be who they are without imposing gender norms or conventional expectations onto them.

Catherynne Valente’s writing is a good starting place for analyzing the contemporary approach to gender in fantasy literature, because her protagonist, September, represents a drastic shift from any fantasy females seen before. Even the title, *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making*, sets a new tone regarding female characters in fantasy: They are agents of the action, and those actions are impressive. This title departs from fairy tale tradition which tends to avoid giving sole credit to a female character—think *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, or Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*—and when it does, such as in *Cinderella* or *Sleeping Beauty*, the females are not active in their own fates whatsoever. Valente makes a distinct break from this tradition, highlighting September’s greatest achievement in the book’s most prominent place. Valente even nods to the tradition as she breaks from it, by describing September remembering watching a fairy tale from back home: “September had not liked the princess so much [...] she had a high, breathy voice she found deeply annoying. But the owls and the mines and the flashing eyes in the wood—*that* she had liked” (86). September’s preference for the threatening aspects of the Snow White story show that she has little in common with the traditional females found in fantasy literature.

Valente continues to distinguish September from other, more traditional female characters by pointing out her atypical characteristics and behaviors throughout the novel. The Green Wind, a character who helps September get to Fairyland, tells her that she “seem[s] an ill-tempered and irascible enough child,” to be worthy of the journey (2). Instead of going to

Fairyland thanks to a sweet disposition or a pretty face, she gets the opportunity to go because she is a cantankerous kid who has the spunk to withstand a trying adventure. She is also a very analytical, discerning girl, which Valente shows by having September say, “Sir Wind [...] I want to ask you a question, and I want you to answer me seriously and not call me any pretty names or tease me” (12). September is aware that young girls like herself are often underestimated and belittled in conversation—consider how often you have merely commented on a young girl’s “pretty dress” rather than asking her about her favorite subject in school. Valente’s direct address of this cultural tendency shows how integral the concept of equal treatment is to the world she is creating. Not only is September analytical, but she is also quite daring. In order to gain entrance into Fairyland, she must pass a few tests that Latitude and Longitude set for her, two of which are to draw blood and to tell a lie. September responds by “unfasten[ing] the jeweled orange key from her lapel and prick[ing] her finger sharply with its pin. Blood welled up and dripped onto the blue stones. She laid the key gently at the feet of the impassive Latitude and Longitude and drew a deep breath. ‘I want to go home,’ she lied softly” (9-10). In this brief scene, September’s unique characteristics are undeniable—she has little fear, she is not squeamish (or if she is, she conceals it well), she lies easily, and unlike Baum’s Dorothy, she is *not* particularly interested in getting home. One final unique characteristic of September is her favorite color: not pink, as one might expect with a stereotypical young girl, nor blue, as if she were swearing off femininity entirely, but orange. As she says, orange is “bright and demanding,” and “you can’t ignore orange things” (6). Gone are the frightened, fragile, stereotypical female characters of other fantasy literature—September is here, a new, well-rounded girl, and you can’t ignore her either.

Another wonderful aspect of September’s character, which also can’t be ignored, is that she is not *entirely* unlike traditional females. She is irascible, yes, and analytical, adventurous,

and any number of other nontraditional characteristics, but she also cares for younger children, struggles with her self-image, worries about her hair, and is conscious about exposing her body. In one scene, September meets a girl who has been separated from her parents. She “looked down and saw the little Pooka girl beside her, trembling [...] September took the child’s hand and squeezed it comfortingly” (72). Valente could have written September as rejecting the child entirely, since anything else could cast her as a mother figure and bring to mind traditional femininity, but Valente does not shy from that association. September chooses to fill a traditionally female role of caregiver, here, and thereby rounds out her own character. Instead of being an entirely nontraditional female, September comfortably assimilates aspects of traditional femininity into her identity. Another traditional characteristic she claims is an appreciation for her own beauty. At one point in the novel she finds herself in need of something to lash together a makeshift raft, and all she has to use is her own long hair. She mourns the loss, crying as she cuts it off. Valente describes, “She did not want to sniffle—what was a little hair?” But still, “as the scissors sliced smoothly through her hair, she cried a little. Just a tear or two, rolling slowly down her cheek” (173). Again, Valente chooses to show September’s emotional side, recognizing that showing both masculine and feminine attributes makes a balanced, real character.

Due to her medley of gender characteristics, September confesses to the Leopard, a companion of the Green Wind, that she feels she may not be right for this adventure. She worries, “Maybe you didn’t mean to choose me at all, because I’m not like storybook girls. I’m short and my father ran away with the army and I wouldn’t even be able to keep a dog from eating a bird” (14). Here, in an adorably odd way, September expresses her awareness of the differences between herself and the traditional female who appears in many fantasy stories.

Valente uses this opportunity to make it very clear that September's full self-expression, conventional or not, is exactly what makes September wonderful. Her companion, the Leopard, calms her worries by saying, "We came for you [...] Just you" (14). This response perfectly encapsulates Valente's goal with this story—she aims to show that regardless of a female character's preexisting notions about what she should or should not be, we readers come to the book for her. For her, with all her different roles and variable self-expression: just her.

Valente also goes further than any previous author (discussed so far, at least) along the path of creating a flexible space for September to exist within; she not only makes September a nontraditional character, but she goes further and creates other nontraditional females and even several nontraditional male characters. Their presence solidifies her novel as one that accepts *all* variation, not merely the variation of "weak female" into "strong female." Nontraditional characters are scattered throughout the book, beginning with Betsy Basilstalk, a customs agent of Fairyland. Betsy is a female gnome, yet Valente describes her with traditionally masculine characteristics: "The little woman's muscled chest was shaped like a bear's, her legs thick and knobbly, her short hair sludged up and spiked along her scalp, sticking up in knifepoints. She chewed on a hand-rolled cigarette" (16). This description illuminates Betsy's variety of nontraditional aspects: her "muscled chest" and her "short hair," which are both typically masculine features, and the bear-like shape to her chest, an animal feature. Later, she's described as having "extremely respectable biceps," obviously another masculine feature, and yet she has a quintessentially feminine name (17). Her role as Fairyland's customs agent, one who ensures that people obey Fairyland's immigration policies, sets her up symbolically to inform the reader of Fairyland's other "policies." Her appearance introduces the idea that one of Fairyland's main

“policies” is that biological sex does not determine expressions of gender—female sex does not equate to long hair or physical weakness.

Valente reinforces and expands this idea with the character Calpurnia Farthing, whom September meets as she tries to catch a ride on a velocipede (a sort of wild, untamed bicycle). Calpurnia, already an experienced velocipede rider, is described as a “handsome woman with lovely dark-brown skin and wild curly hair” (120). She also wears “big goggles to keep the dust out of her eyes and thick boots with dozens of buckles over [...] funny riding pants [...] that bow out on the sides and make one look like one has squirreled away watermelons in one’s pockets” (120). Valente’s use of the word “handsome” rather than “beautiful” shifts her depiction of Calpurnia toward the traditionally masculine side; her emphasis on Calpurnia’s practical garments, rather than ones chosen for aesthetic purposes, does the same thing. Interestingly, Calpurnia is not depicted only with these more masculine attributes—she is also a mother, which is undeniably a traditional role for a woman to play. Also, the fact that her child is an adopted one gives an even higher-than-usual sense of her dedication to caregiving and her maternal instincts, since she went out of her way to set up this parent-child relationship. When taken into account all together, these facets of Calpurnia’s characterization show how little Valente cares about maintaining traditional gender depictions. She is just as happy to write a mother figure as she is to write a wildly adventurous woman in goggles, and if those happen to be the same character, then all the better.

Another nontraditional female in Valente’s story is September’s mother. Though she does not actively participate in the action since she is not in Fairyland, her unique characteristics and past teachings help guide September through her adventures. September’s mother, who Valente describes as very physically strong, is also a mechanic. September remembers learning with her

mother in the garage, thinking, that she “would have been happy to watch her mother shoulder-deep in engine grease, but her mother wasn’t like that. She made September learn very well how a clutch worked, what to tighten, what to bend” (118). This scene explains that September’s tendency toward action comes directly from her mother—were it not for her mother’s encouragement, September likely would have sat on the sidelines and never chosen to go to Fairyland at all. Clearly, September responded very well to the recognition and nurturing of her natural curiosities and abilities. Valente writes, “That was what September liked best [about her mother...] She never said anything was too hard or too dirty and had never once told September that she would understand when she was older” (118). September’s mother’s influence also appears in Fairyland when September finally retrieves her “sword” from the woods, which presents itself differently to each person: her sword turns out to be a wrench. This connection to her mother through a traditionally masculine vocation emphasizes the huge number of available options for September’s self-expression, regardless of gender.

Another option Valente portrays is that of the wholly traditional female, embodied in the character Lye. Lye, a woman made of soap, exists in the book predominantly to serve September as a chambermaid. She bathes September with the soap from her own body: “Lye broke off one of her deep blue fingers and dropped it into the tub” (60). This symbolizes a very traditional maternal tendency to care for others even when it requires personal sacrifice, and though Lye’s role is highly conventional, her encouragement and support are crucial to September’s emotional wellbeing and commitment to her adventure. Lye is also not particularly bold or feisty—she says to September, “Careful, I am fragile,” to which September responds “That’s all right. I’m not” (64). This exchange perfectly illustrates the balance that Valente achieves in the novel as a

whole: each character openly recognizes and claims her characteristics, conventional or not, and the response is always the same: “That’s all right.”

Betsy, Calpurnia, and September’s mother, and Lye are not the only characters to embody Valente’s acceptance of all gender expression. In addition to the variety of females, Valente provides the character of Saturday, a nontraditional male. His presence in the novel and Valente’s treatment of him greatly impact the atmosphere of the book, opening it even wider to allow for variation of gender expression in either direction. Saturday is a little boy who is also a Marid, a being of the ocean. September rescues him from the Marquess, and he accompanies her on many of the rest of her adventures. In one particular adventure with September, Saturday meets Calpurnia, who “brusquely extended her hand to Saturday, but when he moved to shake it, she grabbed it up and kissed his fingers like a lord kissing a lady’s hand” (131). This endearing reversal is an explicit statement of what Valente has been hinting at thus far in the novel: gender norms mean *nothing*. So little, in fact, that whoever feels moved to may kiss another’s hand, regardless of the standard social expectation. This exchange also does a lot to define Saturday’s character, because it suggests that Calpurnia is recognizing his beauty and gentility. As he describes when he first meets September, he has both great power and great weakness: he can grant wishes, any wishes, but he deeply dislikes the manipulation that often comes with that. He tells September, “I cannot cheat. I cannot pretend. And even now, I am strong. I must be made to submit. Like the sea, my grandmother, I cannot be changed—I can only be mastered.” Sadly, then, he tells her, “But I would rather be gentle. And loved. And never wish for anything, ever” (109). His gentle, pacifist nature distinguishes him from the typical war-mongering males of other fantasy books, and it appears in other scenes as well, like when September is upset. Saturday becomes visibly concerned for her, asking, “Oh, no, no...are you all right?” (157).

September falls to her knees, shaking her head, and Saturday responds by “put[ting] his thin blue arms around her. He was not sure it was allowed, but he could not bear not to. He held her, gingerly [...] Saturday had never had anyone to cradle and protect before” (157). This scene is as heartbreaking as it is sweet. Though Saturday is doing an admirable job caring for September, Valente also reveals that he is unsure about it because, presumably as a male, society has never afforded him the opportunity to care for someone in that way. Despite his clear instinct to be a caregiver, Saturday has never been able to indulge that instinct. Valente, recognizing that males can be just as tender and nurturing as females if the situation demands it, gives Saturday that opportunity. This scene with September carries even more weight when, later in the book, Valente reveals that Saturday and September will have a daughter together. So, not only does Saturday respond tenderly to a peer, but his doing so suggests that he will also move easily into the role of nurturing, loving father.

A gentle male character also appears in Laini Taylor’s *Daughter of Smoke and Bone*. In Taylor’s fantasy world, a war rages between angels and chimaera, and Madrigal, a resurrected chimaera soldier, falls in love with Akiva, an angel. Madrigal dreams of peace between the two races, and instead of scoffing at her, Akiva shares and supports her desire for peace. She says, “*We were meant for something [...] to bring peace,*” and later, “*We dreamed together of the world remade*” (Taylor 401, emphasis added). Akiva’s characterization is very complicated, though, because after Madrigal is killed, his devastation leads him away from his peaceful ways and he reverts to a violent existence, determined to exterminate the chimaera. When Madrigal, resurrected as Karou, learns of Akiva’s violence against her people and her family, she abandons their relationship in favor of familial loyalty. Through the inclusion of Akiva’s nontraditional pacifist leanings and subsequent abandonment of them, Taylor has created a space in which it is

also acceptable for Karou to both revel in the joy of romantic love and then choose to turn her back on the romantic plot line and prioritize other relationships.

The technique of featuring nontraditional males in addition to nontraditional females truly does create a very open space for everyone's unique self-expression. Another author who uses this method is Garth Nix in his *Abhorsen Trilogy*. Nix's female protagonists through the series, Sabriel and Lirael, are well rounded, exhibiting both traditionally masculine and feminine traits. Complementing them is Nix's character Touchstone, a young king who was frozen in time for two hundred years and then awoken by Sabriel. He embodies some typical masculine traits, most obviously his inescapably masculine body. Sabriel makes note of his "circumcised penis, which [she] glanced at in an embarrassed way, before looking back at his face" (204). Beyond this, though, references to Touchstone's masculinity are limited. Much more prevalent are Nix's descriptions that show Touchstone's more traditionally feminine characteristics. One of the most obvious examples is when Sabriel first awakens him in what reads as a reverse *Sleeping Beauty* or *Snow White* scenario. He has been magically frozen as the figurehead of ship, and the spell requires simply breath or as much as a kiss to be broken. Sabriel chooses simply to breathe on his face rather than kiss him, and Touchstone wakes up, framing her as the savior and him as the "damsel" in distress. To further this characterization, Nix shows Touchstone feeling overwhelmed by the realization that he has missed such a huge period of time and his kingdom is now in disarray. Quite understandably, then, "tears started in his eyes, and his head slowly fell to meet his upturned hands" (223). Eventually, "the young man's back ceased its heaving and the harsh in-drawn gasps between sobs became calmer," but it is undeniable that he gives over to his emotions here (223). Mogget, a spirit in cat-form points out the difference between Touchstone's emotional display and Sabriel's demeanor, rather harshly telling Touchstone, "My current

Abhorsen [Sabriel] certainly isn't lying around crying her eyes out. Make yourself useful and help her" (223). This comment solidifies Touchstone's feminization in the scene, highlighting the reversal of roles (crying vs. being in control). Nix further feminizes Touchstone through his clothing. Since he was naked when she woke him up, Sabriel offers him the only clothes she has—her spare ones. She thinks to herself, "[He could wear] my spare shirt, I suppose. The breeches might fit him with a bit of work, I guess—we'd be much the same height" (217). Interestingly, though Nix feminizes him by putting him in her garments, he also takes a step back toward neutrality, since her clothes are breeches and nothing hyper-feminine. Also, pointing out their similar sizes brings their characterization even more toward gender-neutral than strictly feminine or masculine. This is a masterful shift that Nix achieves, because he starts with a recognizable reversal—Sabriel is masculinized, Touchstone is feminized—and then shifts both their characterizations toward gender neutrality.

He also creates other gender-neutral characters that, though they are not central characters, are explicitly labeled as having unidentifiable gender. Nix describes a "sending," which is a spell that can perform a variety of human tasks, as having a "face [that] wouldn't stay fixed, migrating between scores of possibilities." He then explicitly states, "Some were women, some were men—but all bore tough, competent visages" (107). This attention to the potential differences in sex but the similarities in characteristics starts to show the irrelevance of the labels "masculine" and "feminine"—when both a woman and a man are "tough" and "competent," why label them differently? Later, another sending helps Sabriel get ready, and Nix describes this one as "smaller, of indeterminate sex" (112). Again, Nix is breaking down typical assumptions—in this case, he dissociates smaller physical size from female sex, suggesting instead that the traditional "indicators" of gender are useless.

This gender neutrality also manifests in several of the characters' comments to each other throughout the series. Near the end of the book, Touchstone hypothesizes about when his swords were forged, and he supposes that "the Wallmaker made them at the same time that he—or she, I suppose—made [Sabriel's] sword" (277). This noticeable pause points out the equal possibility of the Wallmaker's sex being either male or female. Within this world, the act of forging swords is not seen as a particularly masculine or feminine activity, so Touchstone pointedly says the Wallmaker could be a "she." This almost reads as a message from Nix to his readers, though it's framed in Touchstone's mouth, telling us to question our assumptions by showing his characters questioning their own. He does this multiple times, too. Another instance comes from Sabriel, when she asks Mogget "What happened to him?" Mogget replies, "Her, actually" (329-330). This example, since it is a female assuming that someone is male, shows that assumptions about gender do not come only from men like Touchstone; they are made just as often by females like Sabriel. No matter who makes the assumption, someone gently corrects them, and the characters work together to remind each other that gender biases are often baseless. These comments that pervade his series are a striking departure from Lewis's characters' pervasive comments about gender—where Lewis wrote comments that reinforced and perpetuated stereotypes, Nix writes comments that challenge assumptions and invite readers to reconsider their preconceived notions about gender roles.

In addition to these direct addresses of gender assumptions, Nix's ideas of gender equality are so integral to his fantasy world that they manifest themselves on the clause level of his writing. He consistently avoids the generic masculine, instead opting for the phrases "he or she," "man or woman," or "King and Queen." In one example, a flock of crows is infused with a human spirit, and Nix describes that it's the spirit of a single "man or woman" (174). The burial

ground where Sabriel discovers Touchstone is reserved for the “Kings and Queens of the Old Kingdom” (203). In the second book of the series, the male protagonist Sam goes searching for a Necromancer who is wreaking havoc on the Old Kingdom. Nix points out, “there was no guarantee that Sam was going in the right direction to find him, or her” (221). In the final book, *Abhorsen*, Nix describes “hundreds and hundreds of blue-clad men and women” (323) and “normal men and women” (326). These types of examples go on and on, because this gender neutrality pervades Nix’s writing. If a character’s sex is not specified, he consistently opts for these phrases to recognize each option, instead of forcing any characters (or his works themselves) into an inflexible mold. Again, unlike Lewis’s subtle assumptions of male readership (as when he addresses the reader as “My Little Man”), Nix uses the subtle elements of his writing to encourage, rather than limit, equal representation.

Other contemporary authors, Veronica Roth and Suzanne Collins, use similar methods as Valente and Nix to portray their characters: they write characters who choose a blend of masculine and feminine traits and therefore come across as well-rounded and accessible. Both Roth and Collins write dystopic literature which gives gender constructions even less validity because, in a dystopia, civilization itself is crumbling—and if society can’t maintain itself, how can it maintain its conventions of gender?

In Roth’s post-apocalyptic Chicago, each person grows up with their family in one of five factions: Abnegation, Erudite, Dauntless, Amity, and Candor. Each faction is named for the characteristic they naturally exhibit and work to emphasize throughout their lives: for example, the Abnegation manifesto shows that members of Abnegation take the virtue of selflessness to an extreme, warning against “the dangers of self-involvement” and encouraging “forgetting the self” entirely (378). Roth’s protagonist, Beatrice, grows up as a member of Abnegation. Her

association with this faction places Beatrice begins on the extreme feminine end of the spectrum, raised with philosophy of what sounds like motherly sacrifice and self-deprivation in favor of others. Her rejection of this philosophy begins early and manifests on a basic level: instead of using her given name, Beatrice, she opts for “Tris,” a less obviously feminine name that sounds a little tougher. She also struggles with the daily rules of Abnegation, often catching herself looking at her reflection, which is frowned upon as attention that should be focused on others. At age sixteen, Beatrice completes her rejection of Abnegation’s philosophy: at this age, each person must choose either to stay with their faction of origin or join a new one, and Beatrice actively chooses to join Dauntless. Dauntless are known as the danger-seekers, the reckless, tattooed rebels, who prioritize physical strength and self-interest over almost anything else. In her first initiation task as Dauntless, she must jump from a building’s roof onto a moving train and off the train again once they reach their destination. None of the other Dauntless help the one new member who doesn’t complete his jump—he falls to his death, and the others continue their thrill-seeking without a backward glance. This attitude couldn’t be further from Abnegation’s philosophy of self-denial, and when examined in terms of gender expression, the two can be read as extremes of the male-female spectrum. Abnegation is a painfully exaggerated feminine state of being, like a mother’s sacrificing love gone a little too far, and Dauntless is a dangerously inflated masculine state, like a teenage boy heady with testosterone, making reckless decisions left and right.

Of course, Tris’s shift to Dauntless is not a straightforward shift from feminine characteristics to masculine. The bold spirit of Dauntless serves to unlock new elements of Tris’s femininity that Abnegation had been suppressing. One of her first acts is to shed the shapeless, gray garments of Abnegation in favor of a tighter, black ensemble meant to show off her curves.

Her friend Christina, who spearheads the makeover process, is very clear about her goal: she says, “Who cares about pretty? I’m going for noticeable” (87). The focus is not a traditional feminine label of “pretty,” but a new hybrid of masculine attention seeking through means of her feminine attributes. Another aspect of Tris’s femininity that Dauntless helps bring out is her sexuality. In the Madonna-like Abnegation, sex was likely seen as too self-indulgent to waste time on, so her sexuality was not featured until she left. Once in Dauntless, though, she meets a handsome older boy Four, who leads her initiation group, and develops a crush on him. Part of the Dauntless process is to go through simulations of fear-inducing scenarios, all personalized, that each new initiate must master in order to become fully Dauntless. Tris, to her surprise, discovers that one of her fears is Four himself. The fear-inducing scenario is simply Four, on a bed, beckoning her to join him. She cannot overcome the fear at first, and expresses her amazement: “My fear is being with him. I have been wary of affection all my life, but I didn’t know how deep that wariness went [...] *This* is what I can’t cope with? *This* is the fear I have no solutions for—a boy I like, who wants to...have sex with me?” (393). Her previous Abnegation teachings taught her to shut down her physical body, essentially, and deny that aspect of her femininity. This scenario in Dauntless, however, allows her to tap into some traditionally masculine control and use it to unlock her sexuality. Ultimately, the next time she faces the simulation, Tris decides to “press against him and kiss him, my hands wrapping around his arms. He feels strong. He feels...good” (394). With that action, she is released from the simulation, after which she goes and kisses Four in real life. So, instead of Dauntless being an excuse to abandon all the feminine traits of Abnegation, it instead gives Tris the option to define her own femininity and include aspects of the masculine Dauntless in her new self-image.

Collins's protagonist Katniss Everdeen exhibits a similar blend of masculine and feminine characteristics, but more significantly, Collins's post-apocalyptic world of *The Hunger Games* already has equality built into it. Year after year, when it is time for the Hunger Games tributes to be chosen from each of the twelve districts in Panem, each district must sacrifice a male *and* a female tribute. She could have written the games as a solely masculine enterprise, since the games are (and the players become) inescapably brutal. She could have written the games strictly with females, perhaps to fill her audience with even more revulsion at the idea of formerly peaceful creatures fighting to their deaths. Instead, she chose for the group of tributes to be half male, half female, with no discussion of disparities in physical or emotional strength. This suggests that dystopias defy gender distinctions—in such desperate conditions, “male” and “female” cease to matter.

Collins's female protagonist Katniss embodies both sets of characteristics, living proof that her situation requires her not to be masculine or feminine, but simply to be functional. Since her father died in a mining accident and her mother struggles to stay mentally present, Katniss fills the role of provider for her family. She and her friend Gale, who fills a similar provider role for his younger siblings, frequently go hunting (illegally) for game for their families. This habit requires physical strength and endurance, and the fact that she completes this task alongside someone who is sexed male makes her appear masculine. After closer examination, though, it becomes clear that her motivation to provide stems more from maternal instinct than anything. Without Katniss's game, her younger sister Primrose would, quite literally, be starving. Katniss assumes this masculine provider role because it is the only way she can keep Primrose alive, but the driving force is one of a traditionally feminine desire to care for young. Because of their nearly hopeless situation, Katniss simply fills whatever roles need filling, father or mother. This

dual motivation holds true for Katniss's self-sacrifice—when Effie Trinket draws Primrose's name as the District 12 tribute, Katniss volunteers herself for almost certain death in her place. The act is one of both masculine boldness in the face of danger and feminine desperation to shoulder another's burden.

Though Katniss often exhibits these recognizable masculine and feminine traits, Collins uses Katniss's romantic storyline to depict her as neither masculine or feminine—instead, Katniss comes across almost as asexual in her disinterest toward romance. Katniss has two love interests: Gale, her friend from home, and Peeta, her fellow District 12 tribute, but she seems equally dispassionate about both of her romantic options, if not openly hostile. Katniss's unusual approach to her love interests occurs first when Peeta admits in a public interview that he likes Katniss, and she gets upset with him (Collins 130-134). She could have easily fallen into his arms, thanking God for sending her a trustworthy ally in the otherwise savage arena, but instead, she does not fulfill the audience's expectation. She defies that completely by getting angry and wanting little to do with Peeta. Eventually, her anger dissipates and she begins to participate in the romance that Peeta wants: “Impulsively, I lean forward and kiss him, stopping his words. This is probably overdue anyway since he's right, we are supposed to be madly in love” (*HG* 261). Instead of really committing to the kiss, though, Katniss thinks to herself, “It's the first time I've ever kissed a boy, which should make some sort of impression, I guess, but all I can register is how unnaturally hot his lips are from the fever” (*HG* 261). This shows how little Katniss is interested in her own romance plot—her focus is predominantly on keeping her ally Peeta alive, and part of that is giving him something to live for. In *Catching Fire*, book two of the series, Katniss responds equally dispassionately when Gale kisses her. She recalls, “I was completely unprepared. You would think that after all the hours I'd spent with Gale—watching

him talk and laugh and frown—that I would know all there was to know about his lips. But I hadn't imagined how warm they would feel pressed against my own" (27). Her last comment suggests that she "hadn't imagined" the way their kiss would be because she had never imagined kissing him at all. Then, in analyzing the kiss, Katniss says, "I tried to decide how I felt about the kiss, if I had liked it or resented it, but all I really remembered was the pressure of Gale's lips" (CF 27). Again, she involves her emotions very little in the romance plot, showing her distance from that traditional storyline. By the end of the series, she rather surprisingly marries Peeta. She explains, "Peeta and I grow back together. [...] His arms are there to comfort me. And eventually his lips" (M 388). In explaining why she chooses Peeta, she says, "What I need to survive is not Gale's fire, kindled with rage and hatred. I have plenty of fire myself. What I need is the dandelion in the spring" (M 388). While her ultimate choice of Peeta makes sense, it gives the typically emotional choice of a partner an atypical rational slant, suggesting that her commitment is rather contrived. Either way, Collins shows her readers that the crucial element is not acting traditionally male or female, but simply making decisions and choosing whichever path feels personally appropriate.

Another contemporary female protagonist faced with a similar situation is Bella Swan. Like Katniss, she has two love interests, but instead of distancing herself from both, Bella is significantly infatuated with both Edward and Jacob. Interestingly, though their romantic storylines share some characteristics, popular opinion approves of Katniss vastly more than Bella. This can be ascribed to the fact that Bella, along with Meyer's entire cast of characters, seems not to participate at all in the philosophy of third-wave feminism. The entire *Twilight* series is widely recognized to have disturbingly patriarchal messages embedded in the romance plot, resulting in a "passive, besotted Bella" for our female protagonist (Miller). In her article

“*Twilight* is Not Good for Maidens: Gender, Sexuality, and the Family in Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* Series,” critic Anna Silver performs the same type of close reading for *Twilight* as I have done for the other texts in this essay. She highlights Edward’s condescending labels for Bella, pointing out, “Edward frequently refers to or treats Bella as a child” (Silver 125). She cites passages, like the one where Edward admits he first saw Bella as “an insignificant little girl” (*Twilight* 271) and scenes where he calls her “little coward” (279) and “Silly Bella” (281), as evidence for his dismissive attitude toward her. Later, after a frightening near-rape scene, Edward asserts his dominance over Bella even more. Early in her relationship with Edward, Bella drives with some friends to a neighboring town to shop for prom dresses. She splits off from her friends to go to a bookstore, and on the way, a man catcalls to her on the street. She soon notices that he is following her, along with a friend, and their two other companions are coming up to her from the other direction. The implication here is clear: a dark alley, a single female, and four men are a recipe for gang rape. Bella considers taking action—she thinks about dropping her purse so they will take that instead, she considers getting the attention of a passing car, and she attempts to remind herself of basic self-defense tactics (159-160). Her action is never necessary, though, because Edward speeds up in his car, flings open the door for her to hop in, and drives her to safety. Then, after this rescue, he acts disturbingly like the would-be rapists in his interactions with Bella: instead of recognizing Bella’s ability to think for herself and make her own decisions, he demands things from her just as the four men were about to. Edward orders her to eat and drink something, his voice “full of authority” (166). Bella complies with his demands, which may not strike the reader as problematic at first, because after all, Edward is “the good guy.” However, the pattern is the same: Bella has very little agency, and simply responds to whoever exerts the most pressure on her. Silver explains that this example “clearly

connotes a power dynamic in which Edward makes important decisions and Bella, though often grumbling and pouting, almost inevitably submits” (125). Silver’s mention of Bella’s “pouting” is reminiscent of how Lucy Pevensie weakly protested to Father Christmas that she thought she “could be brave enough” to participate in battle. Ultimately neither character gets what she wants, instead resorting to accepting the forceful suggestions of more powerful men.

Another troubling element of the *Twilight* series is Meyer’s portrayal of motherhood. After Bella and Edward’s romance plot reaches its inevitable conclusion in marriage, Meyer continues past that traditional stopping point to tell the story of their “happily ever after” in the form of their child. During their honeymoon, Bella feels a quickening in her belly, which she realizes is a quickly-growing vampire-human hybrid fetus. Edward, frightened of the unknown, attempts to comfort Bella by telling her that they will “get that thing out” before it can hurt her. Instead of going along with Edward’s forceful suggestions as she has for the entire series, Bella is suddenly fierce in defense of her desire to keep the child. After all the family politics, the physical dangers, and the implications for Edward and Bella’s relationship are addressed, Bella ultimately does achieve her goal of carrying the baby to term and delivering it alive. This is one of Bella’s only notable successes at that point in the series, and it is at first refreshing to see her consistently defend her priorities and fight for her right to make her own decisions. A closer look, though, reveals several complications with the whole thing. First of all, as Silver points out, Bella only stands up for her desires and makes her own decisions *after* she has married and begun to view herself as a mother, suggesting that her desires were not valid enough to deserve attention before there was a child to consider. This concept is very far removed from the ideologies of third-wave feminism, which, as Rothfuss explained, means that a woman should not *have* to do anything simply because she is a woman. Meyer’s message appears to be that a

woman *has* to become a mother in order for her thoughts and desires to be meaningful to larger society. Silver puts it this way: “Only within marriage and motherhood, Meyer suggests, can women find true equality with men and, more largely, truly become themselves” (132). This expectation is extremely limiting for Bella, not because there is anything inherently wrong with traditional feminine roles of wife and mother, but because Bella is not allowed to exert any power or influence until she fills those roles. That’s troubling in and of itself, because women are people regardless of their relationship status, and society’s recognition of their contributions should not be dependent upon their fulfilling certain roles. But, alas, this is exactly what Meyer shows us.

Another angle of Meyer’s depiction of motherhood comes back to Bella’s relationship with Edward. Though, as Silver says, Bella is finding fulfillment in her role as a mother, I argue that her stronger reason for wanting the child is solely because it is *Edward’s* child. Some critics, like Laura Miller of Salon.com, have applauded Bella standing up for her desires, saying “One thing you can say about Bella Swan, though: She knows what she wants” (Miller). While that’s true, it appears throughout the pregnancy that “what she wants”—the baby—is merely an extension of her mindless, persistent, self-destructive desire for Edward. Before she even knows the sex of the baby, she quietly names him “EJ,” which stands for Edward Jacob, reflecting her lack of distinction between baby and husband (Meyer 326). Earlier in the series, Meyer made it very clear that Bella’s desire for Edward is all-consuming. In *New Moon*, when the Cullens move away from Forks and Edward breaks off all contact with Bella, she utterly shuts down. There are several pages in the book that are blank except for the names of months, indicating the passage of time where nothing of value happens because Edward is not around (Meyer 85-92). Indeed, the story only picks back up when Jacob, her second love interest, enters her life. So, it is Bella’s

singular focus on Edward, made very explicit in book two, that drives her fierce protection of her child—she sees the baby as an extension of Edward, and carrying it to term will ensure Edward’s continued presence with her, and therein lies her devotion to the child. This level of codependence is, quite literally, debilitating. It essentially causes Bella’s death during labor, just as it caused a near-drowning, numerous motorcycle accidents, and a body covered with handprint-shaped bruises earlier in the series. The issue is not commitment to a partner, because that is not what Meyer shows us—the issue is Bella placing another person’s importance so above her own that she suffers consistently, with little choice in the matter.

Consider the different approach Meyer takes in her other popular novel, *The Host*. In this book, too, the female protagonist has the choice of motherhood. Wanderer, or Wanda, is not human, however, so reproduction looks different for her species, called “souls.” When one of them decides to become a Mother (which Meyer herself capitalizes in the book to emphasize the importance of that role), instead of mating, she just splits herself into a million tiny pieces, each of which becomes a new, sentient member of their race (467-469). The process does not require a male member of their species, and the concept of parenthood does not exist, since the Mother ceases to be after she divides herself. Meyer makes sure to point out specifically that becoming a Mother is “a choice. A voluntary choice. [...] A trade, for a new generation” (468). Popular opinion still sides with *The Host* in a way it no longer does with the *Twilight* franchise, and this subtle difference could be at the heart of that: motherhood in *Twilight* is really just an extension of Bella’s slavish devotion to another character, but motherhood in *The Host* is an independent decision.

The failure of Bella as a “strong” female protagonist, though disappointing, really proves one of Rothfuss’s tenants of feminism. Just because *Twilight* was written by a woman and

features a female protagonist does not mean the portrayal of women contained therein is necessarily empowering. As such, even some fantasy novels that feature male protagonists can offer highly empowering depictions of both sexes. J.K. Rowling and Patrick Rothfuss himself both wrote series that feature male protagonists—Harry and Kvothe, respectively—and their fantasy worlds happily accept a character's choices, wherever those choices may fall on the gender spectrum.

In J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, Harry's presence as a male protagonist does not stop his fellow characters from expressing a full range of gender expressions. For example, the females around him do not automatically fall into the "damsel in distress" category simply because he is a male hero. Also, central to Harry's development and plot arc is the power of sacrificial love, an element which is more traditionally aligned with a maternal figure. Using love as the basis for the whole series and pairing it with a male protagonist makes Harry a nontraditional male character, and Rowling has therefore opened up the space for other characters—prominent ones like Hermione, Molly Weasley, and Ginny Weasley, and others like Minerva McGonagall, Madam Pomfrey, and Madame Maxime—to fully express themselves through the series.

Minerva McGonagall, the head of Gryffindor House and the Transfiguration teacher at Hogwarts takes full advantage of the open space Rowling creates and expresses a range of traditional traits from both ends of the gender spectrum. First of all, she is an undisputed leader—she typically leads Gryffindor House, but she moves easily into the role of headmistress for the entire school when the need arises. Not only does she accept these leadership roles and perform them admirably, but everyone in the book accepts and respects her position of power, too. For example, when Lockhart brags that he knows the location of the Chamber of Secrets,

she calls his bluff and tells him that he must prepare to enter the Chamber and battle Slytherin's monster. He quails at her suggestion as much as he would have had it come from Dumbledore—there appears to be no issue with her gender interfering with her ability to lead or, more importantly, with people's *perception* of her ability to lead. She is simply, unquestionably, in charge. This is not because she exhibits solely masculine characteristics of confidence and assertiveness, though. In one scene in *Chamber of Secrets*, Harry and Ron tell her that they are on their way to visit the petrified Hermione. Understandably upset by the attacks, McGonagall becomes noticeably emotional—she speaks with a “strangely croaky voice,” and Harry notices “a tear glistening in her beady eye.” Harry and Ron “distinctly heard Professor McGonagall blow her nose” after they walk away (288-289). This display of emotion in no way impedes her leadership ability, nor does it affect Harry and Ron's perception of her as a formidable force within Hogwarts, to be respected and admired.

Another female who does not express herself along rigid gender lines is Madam Pomfrey. Though she has a distinctly secondary role, Rowling still manages to convey her wide variety of characteristics. The most obvious of Madam Pomfrey's characteristics is her status as the school healer, a traditionally feminine role. She approaches this “feminine” job in anything but the traditional way, however. She does not coddle her patients at all, but instead is rather aggressive with them while administering care. In *Chamber of Secrets* when Harry loses all the bones in his arm, she tells him bluntly, “I'll be able to [regrow the bones], certainly, but it will be painful.” Later, she offers no comfort or traditional maternal gentling, but instead says, “You're in for a rough night,” and leaves it at that (174). In *Prisoner of Azkaban*, when Harry finds himself in the infirmary yet again, Madam Pomfrey continues her pattern of treating him roughly. Harry is in the middle of explaining Peter Pettigrew's reappearance and Sirius Black's newly realized

innocence, but instead of listening to him, “Madam Pomfrey suddenly stuffed a large chunk of chocolate into Harry’s mouth; he choked, and she seized the opportunity to force him back onto the bed” (390). Actions like these solidify her as a no-nonsense caregiver with little in common with a traditional motherly nurse-figure.

Even some males break out of their traditional mold in the wizarding world. Rubeus Hagrid, though he has some very masculine characteristics—after all, he is a bearded, monster-loving hulk of a man—also tenderly cares for his animals and is frequently depicted in the kitchen (*PoA* 273; *GoF* 28, 265). In the first book, he buys a dragon egg from a hooded stranger in the Hog’s Head bar. He brings this egg home, places it in the fire and stokes it lovingly. Then when the dragon hatches, he calls himself Norbert’s “Mommy” without a hint of sarcasm or irony (240). He also gives Norbert a teddy bear, doing everything to nurture and care for this little being. Hagrid’s love interest, Madame Maxime, is also fairly nontraditional because she does not fit the typical “dainty” female ideal—she is a half-giant like Hagrid. She is also “not afraid of roughin’ it,” as Hagrid says proudly to Harry, Ron, and Hermione when he recounts their trip to find the giants. He says, “Yeh know, she’s a fine, well-dressed woman [...] I wondered ‘ow she’d feel about clamberin’ over boulders an’ sleepin’ in caves an’ tha’, bu’ she never complained once” (*OotP* 424). This shows that, like Molly Weasley, Madame Maxime is capable of filling a variety of roles—she can be the elegant French headmistress of a school, and she can also hike for months without magic in giant-infested mountains (430). The pairing of Hagrid and Madame Maxime, while providing two more characters with a range of gendered traits, also serves to show that romantic love and companionship are perfectly accessible to people who may not fit a traditional mold.

These supporting characters help set the stage for the most prominent female character in the series: Hermione Granger. Much ink has been spilled over whether or not Hermione succeeds as a “strong” female character, whether or not she is portrayed in a positive light, and whether or not she takes an active enough role in the plot. According to Rothfuss’s definition of feminism, Hermione fits the bill perfectly—she does not shy away from her intelligence and strength because she is female, nor does she squash her empathetic tendencies or her occasional displays of strong emotion. Hermione’s first appearance in the books puts her in a position of power—when she meets Harry and Ron on the Hogwarts Express in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, she is already familiar with the information in their textbooks and has successfully tried a few spells. Harry and Ron look ill prepared in comparison, so Hermione’s intelligence is already highlighted as a beneficial attribute. Near the end of the first book, Harry, Ron, and Hermione are planning a daring and quite illegal trip into the third floor corridor to prevent Snape from stealing the Sorcerer’s Stone. They fret a bit about possibly being expelled, but Hermione states matter-of-factly, “Flitwick told me in secret that I got a hundred and twelve percent on his exam. They’re not throwing me out after that” (271). This quotation is significant because, though her intelligence has been mentioned throughout the rest of the book, here she claims it for herself. Rowling shows that not only is Hermione fully aware of her own intellectual nature, but she recognizes its worth and, by extension, *her* worth in the eyes of others. Later in this adventure, after the trio completes a life-sized game of wizard’s chess, Ron is hurt. Here, instead of staying with him to perform a traditionally feminine task of caregiving, she continues ahead with Harry to the potions puzzle where her intelligence plays an absolutely essential role in getting Harry closer to the Sorcerer’s Stone. Interestingly, Chris Columbus, the director of the *Sorcerer’s Stone* movie, chose not to include Hermione’s logic scene, and instead shows her staying with Ron to

care for him after he is injured. So, though the film appears to rein her in toward a more traditional role, Rowling's depiction gives Hermione the chance to first make her intellectual contribution and *then* perform the role of caregiver to Ron.

In addition to her intelligence, Hermione is often also depicted as a character with recognizable physical strength. In a moment of anger during dinner one night, "Hermione slammed her Arithmancy book down on the table so hard that bits of meat and carrot flew everywhere" (*PoA* 111). She also directs her physical strength toward Draco Malfoy, the trio's main antagonist in the student body. Malfoy insults Hagrid and his hippogriff, and the three friends respond angrily: "Harry and Ron both made furious moves toward Malfoy, but Hermione got there first—SMACK! She had slapped Malfoy across the face with all the strength she could muster" (*PoA* 293). Another dimension of this scene is that Ron "tried to grab her hand as she swung it back," attempting to curb the physical expression of her anger. She responds with a frustrated, "Get *off*, Ron!" and successfully rejects any limitations on her emotions or physicality.

Hermione's intelligence and significant contributions to the plot of the early books does not prevent her from also exhibiting some more expected traits of a pre-teen girl. Specifically, she develops a crush on Gilderoy Lockhart, their Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher in their second year. Lockhart sends her a get-well card during a brief stay in the infirmary after an unfortunate mishap with Polyjuice Potion, and Ron finds it: "He pulled it out, flicked it open, and read aloud [the card from Lockhart]. Ron looked up at Hermione, disgusted. 'You sleep with this under your *pillow*?''" (228). Ron's disgust could be interpreted as disgust over Hermione's crush itself, which would be highly limiting because it would seem to criticize feminine romantic interest, but the larger context shows that this is not Rowling's intention at all. Ron frequently

expresses his distaste for Lockhart *himself*, thus Ron's disgust here is directed at the object of Hermione's crush, not the concept itself of her having a crush. Also, after reading the rest of the series, it becomes clear that Ron never approves of any of Hermione's romantic interests, because he has always been interested in her himself. This knowledge offers another interpretation of his disgust—jealousy. Either way, the goal here is not to criticize Hermione's romantic exploration or to condemn her youthful, unattainable crush. Instead, the function of this scene shows that Hermione, top of her class, is still welcome to consider romantic attachments. This becomes even more apparent when, in a later book, Ron experiences almost the same situation—he has a crush on an equally unattainable adult: Madam Rosmerta, bartender at the Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade. In *Prisoner of Azkaban*, she is described as “a curvy sort of woman with a pretty face.” Ron points her out, saying “That’s Madam Rosmerta [...] I’ll get the drinks, shall I?” As he says this, he turns “slightly red,” belying his crush and showing that, though he poked fun at Hermione's attraction to Lockhart, he goes through the same experience (200).

Another traditional female characteristic that Hermione exhibits is that of compassion and maternal love, which first appears in *Prisoner of Azkaban* when she adopts her cat Crookshanks. She seems to select him because the shopkeeper “said he’d been in there for ages; no one wanted him” (61). Though Hermione is not shown with children until the epilogue, her maternal instincts are already present, as she unthinkingly responds to a helpless being's need for care and affection. This comes to a head with her S.P.E.W. campaign in *Goblet of Fire*. Though perhaps not thought entirely through, her instinct to help the helpless is very maternal. Interestingly, though Harry and Ron both dismiss Hermione's Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare as a useless attempt to free beings who do not want freedom, Ron ultimately

recognizes the value of it in *Deathly Hallows*. During the battle of Hogwarts, amid all the fighting, Ron pauses and says, “Hang on a moment! We’ve forgotten someone! [...] The house-elves, they’ll all be down in the kitchen, won’t they?” Harry misinterprets Ron’s meaning, asking, “You mean we ought to get them fighting?” Ron responds, “No, I mean we should tell them to get out. [...] We can’t order them to die for us,” at which point Hermione runs to him and kisses him “full on the mouth” (625). Ron’s statement, in addition to providing an excellent reason for Hermione to break the sexual tension of several years with their first kiss, also serves to recognize the validity of Hermione’s ideas and activism. Ron shows that he truly does understand the caring spirit behind Hermione’s S.P.E.W. campaign, and his support of it in this scene shows that he has those same loving, nurturing instincts that one might expect from a traditional female character, or from Hermione’s traditional side.

For some reason, some critics have interpreted Hermione’s romantic relationship with Ron and her previous romantic relationship with Viktor Krum as negative aspects of her characterization. Julie Alexander, in her essay “The Filmic Heroine,” analyzes Hermione’s first appearance at the Yule Ball with Viktor in *Goblet of Fire*. Because Hermione dresses up and does her hair more than on a typical day, Alexander says, “Hermione was sexualized [...] and finally obtains the adolescent, romantic attentions of Ron. This marks a detrimental turn of her character in the film franchise” (Alexander 20). I will not contest her assertion that Hermione is sexualized in this scene, both in the book and the movie: she *is* presented as physically beautiful, and she certainly does gain the attentions of Ron here. But I do take issue with Alexander’s assumption that this is “detrimental” for Hermione. Alexander seems to be approaching this from a second-wave feminist standpoint, assuming that anything traditionally feminine, in this case being appreciated for her physical beauty, weakens a character. From a third-wave perspective,

though, this scene (and all mention of Hermione's romantic encounters) serve to show that the traditionally masculine characteristics she exhibits—above-average intelligence, rationality, and a somewhat overbearing nature—do not preclude her from also being attractive as a female. What Rowling does with this scene, rather than create a “detrimental turn” for Hermione, is show her audience on a fundamental level that a girl can choose to be both smart and pretty. Unlike Lewis's Susan, who is “the pretty one of the family” and is “no good at school work,” Rowling uses Hermione's beauty and eventual romantic involvement to show that those two characteristics are not mutually exclusive.

Molly Weasley is another character who embodies characteristics that could be interpreted as contradictory, but in reality, Mrs. Weasley is just as important and wields just as much power (though of a decidedly different sort) as any other female in the books. Mrs. Weasley represents the quintessential mother. She is frequently depicted in the kitchen, cooking for her family; her body is soft after carrying and feeding seven children; and she loves her family fiercely, indulging her children and husband often. She also disciplines them strictly, though, when necessary. It is not an uncommon occurrence for the Weasley children to warn each other to stay out of their mother's way when she is in a bad mood, because they know they will get their due tongue-lashings, nor is it uncommon for Mrs. Weasley to direct those scoldings toward her husband, as when she realizes he has bewitched a Muggle car to fly (*CoS* 38). The best example of Mrs. Weasley's fierce side occurs in the final book of the series, when she chooses to leave the setting of the home entirely and take center stage at the battle of Hogwarts. Bellatrix Lestrange, one of Voldemort's most faithful and savage Death Eaters, is dueling with Hermione, Ginny, and Luna. Bellatrix sends a Killing Curse at Ginny, which misses her only barely. Mrs. Weasley sees this and charges forward, screaming, “NOT MY DAUGHTER, YOU

BITCH!” (*DH* 736). She tells Hermione, Ginny, and Luna “OUT OF MY WAY! [...] Get back! Get *back!* She is mine” (736). Then, as she takes up the duel, she says to Bellatrix, “You—will—never—touch—our—children—again!” (736). This powerful scene shows, as Alexandra Hidalgo states in her essay “The Unstoppable Force of Maternal Love,” that “being a housewife and a doting mother does not preclude a woman from being fierce when such behavior is needed” (74). Hidalgo also points out that Molly Weasley embodies her different roles—housewife, disciplinarian, warrior—“without visible conflict” (85). So, though not a member of the youngest generation represented in the books, Molly is a true third-wave woman who recognizes her ability to contribute in a variety of ways, regardless of traditional expectations.

Ginny Weasley, too, offers up a range of characteristics like her mother, but they are a distinctly different set. Ginny’s prominent traits are less traditional than her mother’s, and as she grows up in later books, her feisty side becomes increasingly evident. During a scene in *Order of the Phoenix*, Harry gets angry and starts yelling at his friends. In response, “Ron looked down at his feet but Ginny seemed quite unabashed” (499), and she proceeds to yell right back at him. Ginny leans into the conflict, which is particularly highlighted in this scene because Ron, by contrast, steps back from it. She knows the value of her voice and her contributions, so she does not hesitate to bring them to the table. Director David Yates recognizes this quality in her during the sixth movie, when Harry tries to get everyone’s attention after a Quidditch match. The noisy common room ignores his attempts, so Ginny hollers, “Shut it!” and everyone snaps to attention (*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*). Ginny also, during the *Half-Blood Prince* book, makes the comment that after growing up with Fred and George, “you sort of start thinking anything’s possible if you’ve got enough nerve.” The implication here is that she *does* have enough nerve, which she shows by creating diversions so that Harry can break into Umbridge’s

office (*OotP* 738-739) and, later, leading a group herself into Snape's office to "smash open the glass case where he was apparently keeping the sword [of Gryffindor]" (*DH* 297). Interestingly, Fred and George seem to gain as much inspiration from Ginny as she does from them. When discussing what possible weapon Voldemort could be after, Fred points out that it could be something small. His twin George says, "Yeah, size is no guarantee of power. Look at Ginny." Harry asks what he means, and George cites her "Bat-Bogey Hex" as evidence for her power (*OotP* 100). Ginny's power and intelligence do not only apply to her magical skills, either. She has plenty of common sense: When the group is cleaning out the drawing room of all its borderline sinister items, they encounter a music box that makes them all "curiously weak and sleepy until Ginny had the sense to slam the lid shut" (116). By the end of the series, it is clear that Ginny's nontraditional characteristics have not prevented her desired family life with Harry. In the epilogue, Rowling shows Ginny and Harry bringing their children to the Hogwart's Express, along with Ron and Hermione bringing theirs. Ginny's lines in the epilogue show both motherly concern for her children's wellbeing at school and true Ginny-like exasperation at some of their antics—her son James sees his friend Teddy kissing a girl, and Ginny says, "You interrupted them? You are *so* like Ron" (*DH* 756). Lines like these show that, unlike Bella, Ginny has not sacrificed anything in order to be a wife and mother; she has simply chosen to accommodate those labels into her identity, and she still fully expresses the rest of her personality.

In addition to this laundry list of well-rounded characters, Rowling also includes several Nix-like elements in the fundamentals of her world-building that speak to equality. The most obvious of these is that Hogwarts's full title is "Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry"—both witches and wizards, females and males, are represented here. Another is that the

Gryffindor Quidditch team, easily the best of the “good guys,” evenly represents each sex. The Keeper and two Beaters are male, and all three Chasers are female. Harry’s presence as the Seeker tips the total toward male, but later in the books Harry is banned from Quidditch and Ginny Weasley fills his position. In a similar shift, Oliver Wood is the Gryffindor Quidditch captain when Harry arrives at school, but in Harry’s fifth year Angelina Johnson takes over the role. This even representation is directly in contrast to Slytherin’s team, which Rowling points out explicitly, saying, “There were no girls on the Slytherin team” (*CoS* 110). One other aside that underscores the equality of the wizarding world is Mr. Weasley’s casual mention that the Minister of Magic before Fudge took the job was a woman, Millicent Bagnold (*OotP* 93). Even the Wizengamot, the wizarding world’s court of law, has prominent women. Fudge, the minister, sits in “the very middle of the front row” because he is the current Minister of Magic, and flanking him on either side, in presumably the two next most prominent positions, are two witches (*OotP* 138). Finally, like Nix, Rowling often chooses “men and women” or “witches and wizards” rather than default to a generic masculine; this happens so often that the instances are too numerous throughout the seven-book series to list here.

Only a few challenges exist to contradict the otherwise open space for gender expression in J.K. Rowling’s wizarding world. One of these comes out of the mouth of Tom Riddle, or Lord Voldemort, beginning in *Chamber of Secrets* when he says that “it’s very *boring*, having to listen to the silly little troubles of an eleven-year-old girl” (309). This dismissal of Ginny’s life experiences comes from the ultimate villain, indicating that it is not, in fact, a fair assessment to say that the concerns of young girls are “silly” or “boring,” much less when the young girl in question is the feisty Ginny Weasley. Another possible negation of J. K. Rowling’s otherwise open space for gender expressions is that she often depicts dangerous females with masculine

characteristics. Millicent Bulstrode, a Slytherin girl, is “large and square” with a “heavy jaw” that “jutt[ed] aggressively” (*CoS* 191). Marge, Harry’s cruel aunt, is described as “very like Uncle Vernon: large, beefy, and purple-faced, she even had a mustache, though not as bushy as his” (*PoA* 22). In *Goblet of Fire*, the lying, sensationalist journalist Rita Skeeter has “mannish hands” (307) and the female sphinx, an obstacle in the Tournament’s final task, has a “deep voice” (628). These depictions could be suggesting that a safe, good woman is one who has traditionally feminine characteristics, and a woman who has features outside of conventional gender is a threat in some way. This angle of analysis falls apart, however, with the character of Dolores Umbridge. Arguably the most dangerous woman in the series (barring, perhaps, Bellatrix Lestrange), Umbridge is not described in masculine terms at all. Instead, she is described as “toad-like,” which is neither masculine nor feminine. Then, she exhibits a lot of distinctly feminine characteristics: She has a “fluttering, girlish, high-pitched voice” (146) and her office, which “had all been draped in lacy covers,” contains “several vases of dried flowers, each residing on its own doily” (265). She chooses to cover the walls with “ornamental plates, each decorated with a large technicolor kitten” (265). Since she is even more dangerous than the “masculine” women, it is safe to say that Rowling’s descriptions have little to do with how the characters express themselves: even a woman who likes pink can wreak serious havoc on the wizarding world, so power and danger are not solely located with masculine characteristics. Additionally, sometimes women with masculine characteristics can be harmless—Professor Grubbly-Plank smokes a pipe, for instance, and not only is she not threatening, but she is a great help to Harry because she cares for Hedwig’s injured wing (*OotP* 358).

Patrick Rothfuss’s *The Name of the Wind* exhibits a breadth of gendered characters similar to J.K. Rowling’s, Catherynne Valente’s, and Garth Nix, and he also adds even more

explicit addresses to the issue of sexism and stereotypes. He also imbues his male protagonist, Kvothe, with a myriad of traditionally feminine characteristics, while leaving no doubt about the fact that Kvothe is, indeed, strong. The beginning of *The Name of the Wind* introduces Kote, a simple innkeeper in a small, nondescript town. A man called Chronicler shows up looking for Kote, and it comes out that Kote is really Kvothe, a person of legendary proportions. Chronicler asks for Kvothe to tell him his life's story, to record the truth underneath all the wild tales that circulate about his many feats, and Kvothe agrees. *The Name of the Wind* is mostly, then, Kvothe telling his story to Chronicler.

Kvothe's story begins with his idyllic childhood where he travels with his performance troupe, part of a larger group of troupers known as the Edema Ruh. He recounts an overheard conversation between his parents and his teacher, Ben, during which Ben comments on Kvothe's capable hands. Kvothe's father Arliden responds by saying, "He gets them from his mother, delicate, but strong. Perfect for scrubbing pots, eh woman?" Then Kvothe remembers, "My mother swatted him, then caught one of his hands in her own and unfolded it for Ben to see. 'He gets them from his father, graceful and gentle. Perfect for seducing young nobles' daughters'" (95). Rothfuss does several things here: first, he uses the adjectives "delicate, strong, graceful, and gentle" in no particularly gendered way—he does not shy away from using "strong" for Kvothe's mother and "graceful" for Kvothe's father. Even more importantly, Rothfuss uses this dialogue to call attention to and reject existing stereotypes of gender. Kvothe's mother rejects the female stereotype herself by "swatting" at her husband, and Arliden's personal character rejects the male stereotype because he is desperately faithful to his wife, never seducing anyone but her. Rothfuss challenges stereotypes again, much later in the book, when Kvothe tells of his journey to Tarbean in a caravan with a Cealdish family. When the caravan driver's wife gives Kvothe

money at the end of the trip, which was not part of their original travel agreement. Kvothe wonders if her husband Rowant knows that she gave him the money, and Derrick, a fellow traveler, explains that Rowant definitely knows, but that “grown Cealdish men don’t give away money. It’s seen as womanish behavior.” Kvothe asks, “But why?” and Derrick shrugs, “There isn’t any why. It’s just the way they do things” (244). Though this isn’t a stereotype particularly applicable to our world, Rothfuss still makes the effort to point out the lack of inherent reason for distinguishing certain actions “womanish” or not. There truly *isn’t* any “why.” Rothfuss also adds a subplot that shows how little that Cealdish stereotype holds up in the Aturan Empire: Kvothe is desperately poor and needs to borrow money. When he finds someone who will give him a loan, he admits that he had “been ready for a muscular thug and negotiations filled with thinly veiled threats and bravado.” What he finds instead is a young blonde woman named Devi. Kvothe remembers, “I didn’t know what to make of this smiling waif” (358). Devi, too, recognizes the stereotype of moneylenders being “thick-necked [...] with scarred knuckles. [...] Someone ready to beat twelve distinct colors of hell out of you if you were a day late” (360). She comfortably admits that she does not fit that description, instead revealing that she is accomplished enough in sympathy (Rothfuss’s term for the type of magic the University teaches) that she does not need to resort to physicality to ensure repayment of the loan. Instead, she can use a couple drops of a client’s blood to locate them and hurt them magically if need be. She asserts, “My way is better. Simpler” (360). What she doesn’t have to say is that her way is *smarter*—it requires intelligence and a mental acuity that Rothfuss stresses repeatedly through the book. The sympathetic bindings required to do magic of the sort she threatens are difficult, to say the least, so her achievement in that department shows that if giving away money is “womanish” behavior, then “womanish” must mean both brilliant and dangerous.

So, Rothfuss uses dialogue and characters like these to challenge existing stereotypes about gender, which has the effect of creating an atmosphere that encourages characters to step out of those stereotypes. Kvothe himself steps far outside the stereotypes of the typical, manly hero. He cries frequently, both as a child in the story he's recounting and in the present day. After hearing his parents sing an impossibly difficult and beautiful song, he remembers, "I wept [...] Yes, I cried at the end of it. I did then, and I have every time since. Even a reading of the story aloud will bring tears to my eyes. In my opinion, anyone who isn't moved by it is less than human inside" (118). Rothfuss again, subtly this time, debunks the idea that shows of emotion are feminine, emphasizing that emotion is not gendered, simply *human*. A bit later, when Kvothe's teacher Ben settles in a town and stops travelling with the troupe, he leaves Kvothe a book, in which he jotted a note encouraging him to go to the University. Kvothe says, "I read his inscription again, cried a bit, and promised him that I would do my best" (121). This example is a distinct departure from the examples of men crying that appeared in Lewis's *Narnia*—in those cases, the narrator consistently made sure to point out that a man's tears had to be for good reason. For Rothfuss, though, a man's tears can simply be because he feels sad, even if the circumstances are less than devastating. And let's be clear, here, these are not single tears rolling stoically down an otherwise dry cheek: During one emotional episode, Kvothe remembers, "I had worn myself out with sobbing," and even that extreme emotion is acceptable (213). Interestingly, after telling one particularly sad part of the story, the present-day Kvothe takes a break from his tale and goes out behind his inn under the pretense of gathering firewood. Instead of completing this chore, he "wept quietly, his body wracked with wave on wave of heavy, silent sobs" (134). This instance of tears shows that not only is it okay for the ten-year-old Kvothe of the early story to cry, but it is equally acceptable for the adult Kvothe to cry, mourning the same

events. Again, it requires no justification. Also, Rothfuss gives equal attention to the various motivations for emotional displays: at one point, Kvothe cries because he gets admitted into the University with a negative tuition for his first term. He says, "Relief flooded me. As if it were a great wave that swept my legs from beneath me, I sat suddenly on the floor and wept" (259). Later, he meets his closest friends at the University, Wilem and Simmon, who share Kvothe's penchant for tears. When Kvothe performs *The Lay of Sir Savian Tralliard* at the Eolian, he returns to a Wil and Sim who are as distraught as he originally felt upon hearing the song. Sim is "red-eyed," and when Kvothe asks him what he thought of his performance, Sim simply "bowed his head and began to cry hopelessly into his hands" (407). Wilem, in response, "put a protective arm around Simmon, who leaned unashamedly against his shoulder," and then Kvothe "noticed that Wilem's eyes were red around the edges too" (407). This scene shows that not only is it okay for Kvothe to show emotion, but it is okay for his two closest male friends to do the same. Instead of turning away or hiding their emotion from each other in an attempt to save face, they respond very lovingly to each other in their sadness.

True to Rothfuss's philosophy, all these emotional displays do not mean that Kvothe cannot also exhibit the traits people expect of a hero. He has an impossibly agile mind, achieving entrance into the University at age fifteen, three years younger than most students begin their education there. He also has the expected healthy rivalry with a fellow student, Ambrose, who he satisfyingly humiliates at various times through the story. He frequently plays the hero, once saving a fellow student from a chemical fire in their workshop and another time using difficult magic to kill a fire-breathing draccus and save the town of Treban. All of these events are interspersed with his displays of emotion, showing that, like Molly Weasley, his variety of gendered behaviors does not create any internal conflict. Kvothe also comfortably accommodates

the fact that while he does exhibit many typical heroic traits, he also makes terrible mistakes. He gets tricked into carrying a candle into the University's library, which gets him banned. He rather stupidly humiliates a Master at the University and gets brought up on charges of malfeasance. He also, when attempting to prove his dedication to studying "naming" under a particular teacher, jumps off of a roof. He asks the teacher, Master Elodin, "What do I have to do to study naming under you?" and Elodin responds, "Jump. Jump off this roof," and Kvothe, appallingly, *does*. He breaks three ribs, dislocates his shoulder, and gets a mild concussion. Elodin responds with, "Congratulations, that was the stupidest thing I've ever seen. Ever," and then he refuses to teach him (344-345). So, looking at Kvothe's characterization as a whole, it becomes clear that not only does he exhibit a range of gendered traits, but he also exhibits everything from heroic to idiotic. Kvothe characterizes himself by saying, "How young I was. How foolish. How wise" (484). Calling himself both foolish and wise underscores the comfort with duality that pervades the world of *The Name of the Wind*: it is okay to be smart sometimes and idiotic others, and just as okay to be masculine sometimes and feminine others. The important factor is individual choice, rather than social pressure in any certain direction.

The most prominent female in the book, Kvothe's love interest Denna, describes herself as not "need[ing] much delicacy, as a rule" (559). She exhibits a strikingly similar combination of emotionality and heroism as Kvothe. Kvothe first meets her on the road to Tarbean, and she reappears in his life one night as he performs *The Lay of Sir Savien Tralliard*. The song calls for a female harmony, and Kvothe begins his performance simply hoping that a female audience member will know the difficult song and volunteer to sing the part of Aloine. Sure enough, at the appropriate time, Kvothe hears Denna's voice fill in the harmony. Later, when he finds her and thanks her for completing his performance, she mentions that she was a little uncomfortable

jumping in. He asks why, and she explains that she had only heard the song twice before—this means that in an impossibly short time, she committed to memory the difficult countermelody *and* all the words (426). The longer they talk, the more it becomes clear that Denna is Kvothe’s intellectual equal: not only does she have the same practically perfect memory, but she also catches his subtle references to *Daeonica* and *Felward’s Falling*, two contemporary plays (424-428). Interestingly, these characteristics they share—musical aptitude, memorization skills, and familiarity with current literature—are neither particularly masculine or feminine. By writing Kvothe and Denna as sharing so many characteristics, Rothfuss shows an option that all fantasy authors have, but few take advantage of: the option to portray a strong *female* character simply as a strong character, period, who can choose the same pastimes and intellectual pursuits as any prominent male character.

Denna certainly is a strong character, not settling for any characterizations that would place her in a secondary role. After Kvothe’s performance at The Eolian, he searches for the lady he calls “my Aloine,” but cannot find her. Finally, *Denna* finds *him*, telling him, “Two hours I waited for my Savien to come. Finally, filled with despair, I decided Aloine could do the finding this time, and damn the story” (424). She gives him “a wicked smile,” showing her sense of humor and her total acceptance of the role reversal. Several days later she runs into Kvothe again, and he fondly refers to her as “Aloine,” referencing their performance. She emphasizes her agency here, responding, “Please, if either of us is Savien, it’s me. I’m the one that came looking for you. Twice” (483). This direct address of the gender reversal and of female agency is characteristic of Rothfuss, who not only shows nontraditional gender behaviors, but writes his characters discussing those reversals to highlight them even more. In one scene where Denna and Kvothe are trying to lure a dangerous draccus away from the town of Treban, Denna uses a

feminine pronoun to refer to the draccus, saying they could lead “her” off the side of a cliff.

Kvothe questions, “Why do you think it’s a *she*?” and Denna responds promptly, “Why do you think it’s a *he*?” Again, Rothfuss is calling direct attention to assumptions about gender, and, like Nix, inviting the reader to consider his or her own preconceived notions.

The most significant discussion of gender happens between Kvothe and a fellow university student, Fela, whom he saves from a workshop fire. A few days after the incident, Fela laments to Kvothe that she “was just standing there. Like one of those silly girls in the stories my mother used to read me. I always hated them. I used to ask, ‘Why doesn’t she push the witch out the window? Why doesn’t she poison the ogre’s food? [...] Why does she just sit there waiting to be saved? Why doesn’t she save herself?’” Then Kvothe pats her hand in an attempt at comfort, and notices that her hand is tough, not “the delicate, fragile” hand of the typical girl. He encourages her, “This isn’t the hand of some swooning princess who sits [...] waiting for some prince to save her. This is the hand of a woman who would climb a rope of her own hair to freedom, or kill a captor ogre [...] and this is the hand of a woman who would have made it through the fire on her own if I hadn’t been there. Singed perhaps, but safe” (503). This honest assessment of their roles in the savior-saved relationship takes any negativity out of the traditional roles, shifting it instead to a recognition that each person is capable of doing what needs to be done, and that everyone needs help on occasion, too. This scene is the polar opposite of Edward’s multiple rescues of Bella, because the implication is that she never could have saved herself. Here, Rothfuss assures his readers that his female characters are fully capable, but sometimes it just so happens that a man is closer to the exit.

In the sequel to *The Name of the Wind*, Rothfuss makes the most striking move yet to shift society’s gender expectations by dealing with the issue of sex. In *Wise Man’s Fear*, Kvothe

finds himself in the land of the Adem. He learns swordfighting from them, and along the way is introduced to a drastically different culture regarding physical intimacy. As he spars with his mentor Vashet, he becomes aroused, which is understandable—after all, he is a sixteen-year-old boy in close proximity to a very fit young woman. She responds by suggesting that they pause their sparring, have sex, and then resume their training, which they do. She explains to him later that their coupling does not indicate a commitment between them, saying that the Adem “are not strange about our sex. We do not feel shame about it. We do not feel it important to keep someone else’s sex all to ourselves” (*WMF* 822). This reversal, showing the male being concerned about emotions and attachment and the female encouraging sexual freedom without punishment, shows what the fantasy genre is truly capable of. Rothfuss has taken society’s conventions and reversed them, showing a female in complete control of her many sexual experiences, without any shame or negative consequence. This is similar to a move that Garth Nix makes in *Lirael*, when he introduces the Clayr as a group made up mostly of women, for whom “it was quite normal [...] to seek casual lovers from visitors to the Glacier” where they live (36). In fact, the Clayr “often bore children fathered by visiting men [...] and they made no secret of the fathers” (19). Here, too, are female characters entirely in command of their sexual experiences, deciding when and with whom to have sex, and happily raising their children among themselves with little need for the father’s participation. Catherynne Valente, too, recognizes the value of reclaiming female agency in the realm of sexuality and the physical body. In *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making*, September and Lye discuss the concept of nakedness. Lye offers September a bath, but September responds, “I...don’t like to be naked. In front of strangers” (58). Lye comforts her by saying, “Even if you’ve taken off every stitch of clothing, you still have your secrets, your history, your true

name. [...] Just getting into a bath isn't being naked, not really. It's just showing skin. And foxes and bears have skin, too, so I shan't be ashamed if they're not," (58). This separates female nakedness from the concept of sexuality, two elements that are often conflated in contemporary culture—as in the assumption that a short skirt, exposed skin, is “asking for” sex. Valente uses Lye's speech to separate the two elements, a separation which September then embraces. When she builds her “ship,” which is really just a makeshift raft, she realizes that she needs a sail, but she has no fabric to use. She remembers Lye's words about not being ashamed to be in her skin, and she announces to no one in particular, “Well, I shan't be! My dress, my sail!” (174). She then “wriggled out of her orange dress. She tied the sleeves to the top of the mast and the tips of the skirt to the bottom. The wind puffed it out obligingly. [...] There she stood, her newly shorn hair flying in every direction, naked and fierce” (174). Valente's shift here, like Rothfuss's and Nix's, reclaims a traditionally off-limits aspect of femininity for her female characters—their sexuality and their physical bodies belong to them, and are theirs to share, to claim, and to enjoy.

Consciously or unconsciously, authors have without a doubt begun writing more female characters who are the agents of their own fates, who are beholden to no one, and who, most importantly, express themselves with whatever traits are personally appropriate, regardless of traditional expectations. Tolkien, McCaffrey, and Lewis worked as best they could within the boundaries of their time periods, but contemporary authors have clearly arrived at a time which allows them the freedom to write any kind of female or male character. Using various narrative techniques—incorporating females into a huge variety of plot elements, weaving equality into the structure of their fantasy worlds and the structure of their sentences, and showing nontraditional males as well as females—contemporary authors have provided an definitive answer to the question of the “strong” female character. What is she? She is present. She is

involved. She is both conventional and wildly new. She is smart *and* pretty, and does not have to choose one or the other. Most importantly, *she chooses*. She does not sacrifice her self to meet others' expectations—she chooses who she wants to be, and when. The “strong female character” is best summed up by September, who asks the Green Wind if she is the “chosen one.” He says:

“Of course not. No one is chosen. Not ever. Not in the real world. You chose to climb out of your window and ride on a Leopard. You chose to get a witch’s Spoon back and to make friends with a Wyvern. You chose to trade your shadow for a child’s life. You chose not to let the Marquess hurt your friend—you chose to smash her cages! You chose to face your own death, not to balk at a great sea to cross and no ship to cross it in. And twice now, you have chosen not to go home when you might have, if only you abandoned your friends.” (205)

We could easily substitute this list of accomplishments for any others: You chose to volunteer yourself in your sister’s place. You chose to break the law to feed your family. You chose to make a new alliance and learn a whole new way of life. You chose to study your father’s magic and take up his post to protect your kingdom. You chose to read widely and become top of your class. You chose to accompany your friends on the most dangerous mission imaginable, for the sake of the greater good. You chose to love fiercely and sacrifice greatly. You chose to reappropriate masculine traits as your own. You chose to embrace the parts of traditional femininity that felt right to you. Herein lies the beauty of the strong female character that we all seek, and that we all love to read: As the Green Wind says, “You are not the chosen one. [...] You chose yourself” (205).

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