

Medievalism and the Fantasy Heroine

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ABSTRACT *This essay aligns the narrative trajectories of a selected group of contemporary fantasy novels with various medieval sources, with an emphasis on the enduring cultural fantasy of the strong woman who rises above a general condition of female disenfranchisement. The article examines female exceptionalism as a source of narrative pleasure and considers the impact and significance of the insertion of feminist critiques into familiar story-lines. The article also considers the difficulties and delights of attempting to create a flexible language for female heroism in a series of ostensibly medieval contexts. While the reliance of the fantasy market on medieval motifs – its reliance on medievalism, to be more precise – is not news, there remain a few thoughts to be articulated about the means by which so many popular female protagonists continue to have staying power and high market value within particular systems of power, systems familiar to the medievalist even when decontextualized, displaced and relocated elsewhere in the space–time continuum of the imagination.*

KEYWORDS: Medievalism, fantasy, heroine, narrative pleasure, exceptionalism

Rising Above the System: The Woman Hero

He pressed his lips together in a thin, hard line. Heroes. They were women; he was going to die for two women. Yemus had been wrong, as he had been wrong so often of late, and the salvation of the Machnan was not at hand. The Machnan had paid everything they had to bring in the heroes, and for their pain they were going to get nothing.

Women.

(Zimmer Bradley & Lisle, 1996, p. 62)

Marion Zimmer Bradley and Holly Lisle have a secondary character in their fantasy novel *Glenraven* muse bitterly on his failed quest to find two heroes. Alas, too bad for him and for his dying people, the people he finds are women – female tourists – and thus of course not heroes at all. What could the novel possibly be about, after such a setup, if not the gradual development of these unsuspecting women into heroes? The overt project of *Glenraven* is the public reconciliation of the initially opposed categories of woman and hero. This text offers a feminist critique of female disempowerment in an imagined world isolated in space and time. However, the adverse external conditions which shape this world and challenge these exceptional female tourists are readily recognizable

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Journal of Gender Studies, Vol. 15, No. 2 July 2006, pp. 145–158
ISSN 0958-9236 Print/ISSN 1465-3869 © 2006 Taylor & Francis
<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journal> DOI: 10.1080/09589230600720042

to the medievalist, as is the trajectory of the heroine who overcomes adversities rooted in gender-based oppression. The novel offers a critique internal to patriarchal structures, in that it depends on ideas about medieval patriarchy to delineate exceptional women. The women in this novel leave the modern world and enter another, fantastic one, but it is an imperfect and incomplete escape from the familiar.

Margaret Maurer argues that when ‘we women’ read, we often observe in the women in our chosen texts ‘occasions to calculate the price we pay to participate in significant discourse’ (Maurer, 1989, p. 257). This is a suggestive formulation in relation to fantasy novels and medieval romances alike. Middle English romances speak in two voices about women, thus producing heroines who are at once aggressive and oppressed, active and acted-upon. Heroines of a particular kind, these are major players in a series of cultural fantasies about happy marriage, good rule, and prosperity. Rymenhild initiates her romance with Horn in *King Horn*; Goldeboru is heir to the kingdom of England in *Havelok the Dane*; the ever-resourceful Josiane of *Bevis of Hampton* offers to hold one lion while Bevis fights another and murders an unwanted husband. Helen Cooper observes that the romances recognize an ‘important social and psychological fact in presenting their heroines as active participants in forging their own destinies’ (Cooper, 2004, p. 224). These romance women are forceful and decisive; they act with aplomb and shape their own lives in impressive ways. However, they act within power structures oriented towards the systematic disenfranchisement of women. They are abducted, imprisoned, disinherited, forced into unwanted marriages, beaten, assaulted and condemned to death but, nevertheless, they thrive, escape, preserve their virtue, settle happily into heterosexual complementarity, and inherit what is rightfully theirs. As Cooper observes, the romances ‘do not offer any revolutionary attack on conventional sexual morals or a patriarchal system of dynastic inheritance, but they do repeatedly show women exerting their freedom within the system’ (Cooper, 2004, p. 222).

For feminist readers the fascination lies in the nature of the price paid for female participation in these texts, the price, effectively, for female heroism in Middle English romance. The romance heroine, often described as independent, strong, feisty, and passionate – ‘feisty and desiring’, in Cooper’s formulation – does not exist within a system in which all women are independent, strong, feisty and passionate (Cooper, 2004, p. 220). She must be exceptional to catch our attention, and that of the hero. She often picks the man she wants, eludes the (many) others, escapes rape, lives a life less ordinary. Behind her and all around her is the silent rank and file of women who do not choose, elude, or escape. Just as Beowulf’s exceptional qualities are clearest when other men are running away, the strong women of medieval romances show up ways in which representation of a heroine, just as much as that of a hero, depends on strategies of reversal, contrast, and struggle. Strength needs weakness; extraordinary needs ordinary; the exception depends on the general condition. Inevitably, what is rejected is also desired and present, and reaffirmed at many levels and in many ways. Rymenhild, Goldeboru and Josiane are delineated against a backdrop of silencings, legal and social exclusions, abjections, sexual assaults, forced marriages and divisions between domestic and public space: that is their quotidian reality, and it is not altered by their many acts of resistance. As Jostein Gaarder’s heroine Sophie in *Sophie’s World* says, ‘It was like two sides of a coin that she kept turning over and over. And the bigger and clearer the coin became, the bigger and clearer the other side became too’ (Gaarder, 1995, p. 6). This is also the nature of the coin that purchases female participation in many of the significant discourses of Middle English romance.

What is the nature of the coin that purchases female heroism in so many contemporary fantasy novels? Genuinely medieval romance heroines such as Rymenhild of *King Horn* or Silence of the thirteenth-century *Roman de Silence* raise unanswerable questions about sexual politics through their actions and words, but they do not necessarily speak up to condemn patriarchy in explicit terms. These female fantasy characters, on the other hand, often do speak up and participate vigorously in overtly anti-patriarchal discourses. The transition is from implicit or submerged critique/destabilization to explicit and obvious critique/destabilization. In the former case, the natural order reveals itself to be problematically dependent on external aids, while in the latter, it is actively called into question. This transition does not, however, result in a radical new approach to the delineation of the female hero in contemporary fantasy fiction. The emphasis remains on the individual woman rising above a system that keeps her down – triumphing over it, reversing expectations – rather than in cultural revolution or innovation, and oppressive structures continue to provide the basis for representation. The expectations must still be there in order to be reversed: strength needs weakness, and the audience is interested whenever ‘the gods grant a common girl uncommon gifts’ (Micklem, 2004, back cover).

Anne Scott describes the ‘pleasure and security’ that accrue to the medieval romance audience’s encounter with a ‘stable, predictable world’ (Scott, 1988, p. 43). Scott points to ‘something both compelling and reassuring about stories that describe and reiterate the familiar, and that confirm expectations for happiness or success’ (Scott, 1988, p. 43). Many contemporary fantasy novels can offer all of these pleasures of recognition and familiarity plus the added pleasures of politicized critique. What can this development tell us about the relationship between some fantasy heroines of today and the fantasies of female empowerment embedded in many medieval romances? Medieval romance, as Scott observes, satisfies ‘our need for a fantasy world’ (Scott, 1988, p. 43). Cooper then asks the obvious question: ‘whose fantasy?’ (Cooper, 2004, p. 225).

It is not a simple matter of aligning older romances with newer novels, as the generic complexities are too great. It is a larger issue of the importance of the powerful medieval woman in contemporary popular culture. The fantasy heroines, surrogate sons and warrior-maidens of today also remind the medievalist of Scandinavian sources, such as the maiden warriors of the Icelandic tradition – women like the cross-dressed Hervör in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, who acts as a son in a male-dominated system, or any of the strong women who strike back in the sagas, like Auðr in *Gísla saga*. When looking at Old Icelandic texts Carol Clover claims that:

readers have been startled and not infrequently appalled by the extraordinary array of ‘exceptional’ or ‘strong’ or ‘outstanding’ or ‘proud’ or ‘independent’ women – women whose behavior exceeds what is presumed to be custom and sometimes the law as well. No summary can do them justice, not least because paraphrase (indeed, translation in general) forfeits the tone of marvelous aplomb, both social and textual, that is such a conspicuous aspect of their stories.

(Clover, 1993, p. 64)

However, a Scandinavian context also brings us to the issue of fantasy, and the question of ‘whose fantasy?’ Elsewhere Clover observes that:

Generally speaking the ‘powerful’ women populate Eddic poetry and the sagas (chiefly the sagas of Icelandic families but also those of the Norwegian kings), and the ‘powerless’ women the laws and *Sturlunga saga*. With Sigurður Nordal’s evaluation of the sagas as fiction and the concomitant privileging of the laws and contemporary sagas as history, the ‘powerful’ woman was consigned to the realms of fantasy. If an earlier generation, more trustful of the Icelandic sagas as sources, construed her as the pagan original and the ‘powerless’ woman as the degraded voice of Christianity, the generation of scholars after Sigurður Nordal has exactly reversed the priority. For them, the ‘powerless’ woman is the real one, and the ‘powerful’ woman a medieval fiction.

(Clover, 1988, p. 147)

The powerful, and contested, medieval fiction of female power is also a powerful and contested contemporary fiction. What can we learn about the very nature of fantasy (cultural, national and sexual) in relation to the contemporary fantasy market’s fascination with the powerful medieval woman? The focus of this article is on several female fantasy writers, in an effort to bring to light some of the issues raised by the placement of feminist critiques within familiar – and previously largely male-produced – story-lines, in which the strong woman triumphs over adversities in various ways. In other words, instead of looking at ‘masculine fantasies about the feminine condition’, in Jenny Jochens’ phrasing, this article examines a few selected female adaptations of these same masculine fantasies (Jochens, 1996, p. 3).

Excelling Within the System?

In the post-Tolkien era, the interrelationships between mediaevalia and fantasy are not news to anyone. The realm of fantasy is enormous, and certainly cannot be properly or fully represented here. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that many popular female protagonists continue to have staying power and high market value within particular systems of power, systems familiar to the medievalist even when decontextualized, displaced and relocated elsewhere in the space–time continuum of the imagination. In many contemporary fantasy novels, much as in many medieval sagas and romances, literary heroines remain at their best when rising above external conditions that are against them in gender-based ways. They dress up as men to escape restraints on their freedom, run away from abusive fathers, escape unwanted marriages, avoid, avert or survive rape, or take up arms.

Motifs of rape, domestic abuse, forced marriage and other forms of gender-based oppression and violence are markedly interlaced within contemporary fantasy novels.¹ Female characters experience them as aspects of a continuum rather than as isolated difficulties. Elian flees an arranged marriage, cross-dresses, and runs away to take up arms as a squire (Tarr, 1997). Alanna rebels against the prospect of life in a convent leading to an arranged marriage; she cross-dresses through her years of knight’s training (which obviously involves a lot of taking up of arms) (Pierce, 2003b). Romilly flees her father’s beatings and an arranged marriage and later averts another attempted rape/forced marriage (Zimmer Bradley, 1988). Paksennarion runs from her father and an arranged marriage, cross-dresses, takes up arms, survives a beating that would have turned to a rape had it lasted a few more minutes, and later survives a beating that does turn into a rape and

an extended session of torture which strongly invokes hagiographic motifs (Moon, 1992). Marian survives an abduction, avoids an unwanted marriage and takes up arms several times (Roberson, 1992). Kethryveris survives a forced marriage/rape as a child (she is sold to a much older husband by her malevolent brother), runs away from her family and takes up arms (Lackey, 1993). Tarma survives a brutal gang rape, cross-dresses [in fact, renounces her sexuality entirely (Lackey, 1993), as do several Zimmer Bradley characters in different novels from her extensive *Darkover* series, who become *emmasca*, neutered – literally sexless] and takes up arms – in fact, she cries blood-feud on her rapists and kills them all. Aerin cross-dresses and takes up arms; Harimad does the same while also surviving an abduction (McKinley, 1987, 1991). These elements do not exist separately from one another, but are aspects of a symbolic system that acts out the dispossession of women in order to highlight feminine resistance to that dispossession.

One may ask, just what is genuinely medieval about all of this imagined and represented dispossession and oppression, given what may strike the medievalist as a high degree of decontextualization of historical data? Resistance is futile. Ideas about the thing come to displace the thing itself, and in some sense come to be the thing itself: after all it is in the nature of medievalism to inspire forms of creative re-enactment. There are good researchers writing fantasy novels, of course, such as Judith Tarr, but in most cases writers rely on popularly disseminated ideas about the medieval period. Many of these ideas call to mind Claire Sponsler's regret that 'the Middle Ages are so often understood to have been shaped by a monolithic and homogenizing patriarchal regime that predates modern constructions of sexuality and otherness' (Sponsler, 1997, p. 26).

In this passage, one of *Glenraven's* embryonic female heroes makes explicit the novel's hitherto-implicit reliance on a body of received ideas about the Middle Ages:

Their faces were a slap to the comfortable notions she'd held about the goodness of life prior to what she had considered the dehumanizing effects of mechanization and industrialization and progress. Life in the Middle Ages hadn't been full of pageantry and chivalry for the great mass of people. These peasants who trudged by her were the great masses, and they were stoop-shouldered and gray-faced and rotten-toothed and gaunt. They shared their homes with livestock and rats, pissed in trenches, bathed rarely, ate when their crops survived the rats and the birds and the late frosts and the early snows and went hungry when the crops didn't. Their children died in droves. So did they.

(Zimmer Bradley & Lisle, 1996, p. 157)

Fantasy novels often invoke things medieval in this relatively unselfconscious manner. They draw freely on an apparent body of received knowledge and information (and misinformation, but that, again, is not the point) about the medieval period: ideas about costuming, guilds, marriage, rape, barter and trade, the training of knights – and many other things – all spring from this body, in which sagas, romances, hagiography, chronicles and myriad other sources coexist and merge. Zimmer Bradley, not incidentally, was one of the founders of the Society for Creative Anachronism. Reworkings and re-imaginings – re-creations in an active and productive sense – of medieval plots or historical events are essential within the fantasy genre, as with the versions of Robin Hood stories written by Roberson (1992) and McKinley (1989) or Tarr's reworking of twelfth- and thirteenth-century events – especially remarkable is her development of the story

of the Western advance into Constantinople in 1203–4 in *The Golden Horn* (1993), the second book of her *The Hound and the Falcon* series. Writers like Sasha Miller are getting medieval in non-European ways; in her case, the turn is to medieval Japan. Miller's novel *Ladylord* (1997) tracks the transformation of a daughter raised as a son in a feudal, Shogun-esque society.

Within these many and varied medievalisms, one of the most consistent representational trends is a condition of disenfranchisement of women, which is then overturned by the heroine or heroines. Tarr's Thea Damaskena, a woman of the fair folk in *The Hound and the Falcon* books, takes delight in flouting the expectations of medieval monks, and she not only cross-dresses but changes her sex to fight as a man in the Varangian guard. Miller's oriental setting also depends on resistance to oppression: her heroine, Javere, is a strong woman in a world ruled by men, exceptional and sexually assaulted. And so it goes. Even given the widely-acknowledged intertextuality of medieval sources and modern-day fantasy novels, it is a matter of particular curiosity that the perceived oppression of medieval women remains so central to the representational projects of many contemporary fantasy writers. This is especially remarkable within a genre increasingly dominated by female writers, many of whom have explicitly feminist politics. Zimmer Bradley's *Darkover* books are anti-patriarchal to the point of representing certain groups of married women literally in chains, while raped women sometimes choose to neuter themselves. This, too, is familiar to the medievalist. Ann Clark Bartlett discusses a range of types of mutilations and disfigurements as 'graphic forms' of a 'regendering' which demands 'a physical removal of the emblems of feminine sexuality or attractiveness to men', among them the mutilation or removal of lips, breasts, and noses performed by medieval nuns (Clark Bartlett, 1995, p. 39). Zimmer Bradley's *Darkover* novels introduce us to the Free Amazons or Renunciates, groups of women who live apart from a society represented as so pathologically abusive that it drives women to become social outcasts, leaving behind goods and families – often husbands and children – to swear a detailed oath of sisterhood. The oath appears in several novels in the *Darkover* series, for example *The Shattered Chain*, and *Thendara House* (Zimmer Bradley, 1978, p. 1; 1983, p. 3). It is also available for perusal on-line: < http://www.geocities.com/Renunciates_Guildhouse/oath.html > . There is an Internet submission form available at this site for women who wish to join the virtual Guild of the Renunciates of Darkover, complete with oath and information about choosing a new name based on matrilineal principles. The other end of the spectrum is a different form of rejection: Roberson's Marian in *Lady of the Forest* sums it up well, saying 'That is what my mother did. This is what *all* women do: we wait . . . I would rather be a man, I think' (Roberson, 1992, p. 648).

Attempting to Expose the System

The extent to which contemporary fantasy is meant to be didactic is not always clear, though it is at least clear that this is an important element to be considered. Both the fantasy and young adult/children's markets are invested in the notion of the female role model and, thus, in the exposure of similarities between the world(s) of fantasy and quotidian reality. This is especially true of fantasy novels aimed at young girls, such as Pierce's *Song of the Lioness* quartet (2003b), and her follow-up on that series (same plot: another girl training to be a knight, but not cross-dressed this time), *Protector of the Small* (2004a). Three other series by the same author, *The Immortals* (2003a), *Circle of Magic*

(2000), and *The Circle Opens* (2004b) also feature female protagonists of an age similar to that of the target audience: girls in their pre- and early teens. Likewise it is common to find lessons learned in one, medieval reality being taken back to the real world, especially when the set-up involves travel between realities.

275 Fantasy writers depend on strategies of analogy to enable insights into contemporary culture and gender politics, and that is one of the reasons that there is so much heavy-handed symbolism (women in chains, women transforming into men) and so many discourses of feminine dissatisfaction ('I would rather be a man, I think'). In *By the Sword*, Lackey has Tarma – the same Tarma who, after a gang rape, becomes celibate for life –
 280 observe of the husband of a rather weak-minded woman that:

It's a damned good thing he was an honest and unmalicious man, because if he'd beaten her and told her she deserved it, she'd have believed him. How could *any* woman put herself in that kind of position willingly?

(Lackey, 1991, p. 111)

While that may or may not be the most obviously useful approach to the education of readers about domestic violence, all of these didactic elements raise interesting questions. When women like Alanna, Aerin and Marian triumph, what do their triumphs teach us? Is the message sent by these heroines that *we shall overcome*? If so, is this a message that overturns expectations about culture or paradoxically provides a backwards affirmation of an undesirable general condition? When women like Lissla Lissar, Romily and Tarma suffer, what do their sufferings tell us? That nothing has changed, or that things have changed, or that things *should* change? Why are these motifs of oppression so stable, so popular, across space and time? Is this form of cultural fantasy, or this *genre* within the realm of fantasy, with its defining, derivative and repetitive series of plots and motifs, a reflex of patriarchy, so that internally produced attacks are doomed to failure? How is it that fantasies of female disempowerment continue to sell so well? Is this reconcilable with the fact that so many of these novels are explicitly anti-patriarchal?

300 One possible problem with *we shall overcome* is that it can be set up in a manner that posits an oppression that endures into the foreseeable future and thus continues to provide the basis for meaning and representation. It is significant that through strategies of decontextualization, liminalization and repetition, female fantasy writers frequently reproduce Anne Heinrichs' criteria for the medieval Brynhildr-type, namely:

1. isolation in space and time;
2. self-determination with regard to (a) an active life, and (b) behaviour towards the opposite sex;
3. wisdom combined with prophetic qualities;
- 310 4. power over life and death.

(Heinrichs, 1986, p. 116)

There are many compelling modes of escape from patriarchal structures to be considered in contemporary fantasy, all of which merit more discussion than can be granted them here. These include but are not limited to: the development of magic/mind powers as a female escape from oppression (magic as the new cross-dressing); the thematization of female-to-female bonding and love-affairs as legitimate and desirable

alternatives to compulsory heterosexuality; the frequent erasure of the hero as a necessary aspect of the representation of the heroine; and overtly anti-Christian commentaries. In this final category, fantasy writers such as Gael Baudino and Patricia Kennealy-Morrison (author of the memorable Kelts in Space series, properly *The Keltiad*) turn to pagan Celtic sources as an alternative to what they perceive as the medieval Christian degradation of women. For Baudino and Kennealy-Morrison, Celtic materials provide freer fantasies of female empowerment than would otherwise be representable. When Kennealy-Morrison's astonished Earth people meet the interstellar Kelts for the first time, we learn that:

After a few thousand years, a few wars, a few invasions, Ireland had grown sufficiently unpleasant so that most of the Danaans felt the need to depart ... Christianity had come in, all magic was condemned, there were persecutions ... And that was when St. Brendan the Astrogator built ships according to the old patterns.

(Kennealy-Morrison, 1986, p. 48)

Baudino too has many negative things to say about the 'Christers' in her novel *Gossamer Axe* (1993), which locates female empowerment in pre-Christian Ireland. Both women thereby recreate within the fantasy market a critical trend in medieval studies that is now subject to increasing scrutiny; namely, the association of a lost, pagan prehistory with increased freedom for women – effectively, this is nostalgia for a lost Brynhildr-type. These pseudo-Keltias come to serve much the same function as the ever-receding matriarchy that Albrecht Classen locates 'at the beginning of historical time' (Classen, 1992, p. 110).

Classen provides a case in point of the assumption that underlies a certain type of theorizing about matriarchy: 'I believe that misogyny is an expression of a society fighting back women who used to be in control of that society'. Is this a supportable argument, working backwards as it does from an absence of information? He argues that:

Many fairy tales, sagas, heroic poems, and other literary representations of the archaic age indicate that a form of female power structure once existed which sometime at the beginning of historical recording was defeated by male opponents or a class of male opponents.

(Classen, 1992, p. 92)

This is the next-generation version of the argument that Peter Foote and David Wilson advance about the 'fierce and imperious women' of Icelandic literature, who, it seems, 'must certainly have some basis in reality' (Foote & Wilson, 1980, pp. 110–111). Some basis, surely, but the jump to a transparent relationship between literary sources and a lost prehistory is not an easy or clear one, as literary hostility directed towards women does not necessarily indicate any clear form of female power structure in the distant past. Fierce, imperious, recalcitrant or unnaturally strong women do not necessarily or obviously tell us more about matriarchy than they tell us about patriarchy. This is not to say that such literary hostility is unmotivated or unhistorical, just that the ways in which it is motivated or historical may be different from those they are often understood to be. However, this resistance, too, is futile. In the realm of fantasy, medievalism can encompass visions of matriarchy as easily as patriarchy. Matriarchy, like exceptionalism, is deployed as a

critique of oppressive male powers. For Baudino and Kennealy-Morrison, nostalgia itself is a weapon: things were better in the past, elsewhere. It is obvious that in many different and interesting ways, female fantasy writers are aware of and irritated by the difficulty of creating a compelling and flexible language for portraying female heroism. They struggle to get around the problem by developing female characters who reject the *status quo* and forge new realities for themselves – magical, sexual, martial, religious and political.

Let me now examine two brief scenes. The first scene is the unmasking of Alanna's male disguise in Pierce's *Song of the Lioness* quartet. Like the cross-dressed Silence in the Old French *Roman de Silence*, Alanna is exposed as a woman at court, in the course of a larger confrontation – in this case, between Alanna and an evil wizard, Roger, whom she charges (rightly) with plotting to kill the royal family, and who in return challenges her to a duel. In the case of Silence, of course, the wizard is Merlin. Throughout this series, Alanna's situation makes it clear that contemporary fantasy preserves almost all of the major elements critically associated with the medieval maiden warrior: exclusion of women from the public realm, being raised as a son, cross-dressing, resistance to heterosexual complementarity (until late in her training, in any case), even demonization. In fact, one of the more striking features of the follow-up series, *Protector of the Small*, is the development of a theme of resentment of Alanna among conservatives who are opposed to her public success as Champion to the King – a resentment shored up by the assertion that her successes reflect some sort of supernatural cheating. Once again, this is a motif very familiar to medievalists, for example from treatments of Brynhildr in the *Nibelungenlied*.

When the fact that Alanna is a woman is revealed – her shirt is cut open – during the trial by combat with Roger, the king is enraged, and asks the court, in a 'low and dangerous' voice, 'Who knew?' Of course her friends step forward, including the king's son, Jonathan, and several other prominent persons:

'I knew.' Jonathan's voice was strong and clear. 'I've known since the Black City.'

'I knew', Coram admitted in a shamefaced rumble.

'And I knew', Myles added. 'I guessed when Alan – Alanna – cured Jonathan of the Sweating Sickness, Majesty.'

The King looked at Alanna. 'What have you to say for yourself?'

Alanna met his eyes squarely. 'I hated lying to you', she admitted. 'I wanted to tell; but I couldn't. Would you have let me win my shield if I had told the truth?'

The King's silence was answer enough. 'I've tried to be honest about everything else. And I can't regret what I did.'

Roger's snarl of fury surprised them all. 'You *demon!*' he screamed. 'You lying, cheating –'

Without warning he lunged at her, his sword raised.

(Pierce, 1984, p. 226)

Alanna's exposure is handled in a manner rather different from that of Silence in the *Roman de Silence*, because Alanna is able to voice all of the things that remain unsaid for Silence, whose final words in the romance mark a surrender of self that is literalized in her subsequent silence:

La vertés nel puet consentir
 Que jo vos puissce rien mentir,
 Ne jo n'ai soig mais de taisir.
 Faites de moi vostre plaisir.

Truth does not permit me
 to keep anything from you
 Nor do I care to keep silent any longer.
 Do with me what you will

(Heldris of Cornwall, 1992, pp. 310–311)

In contrast, *I can't regret what I did*, asserts Alanna. She points out the obvious: that the king would not have allowed her to win her shield or to participate in public life, had her true sex been known. She criticizes the king directly and in public, and thereby attacks the status quo as well. In Alanna's words we hear a feminist voice inserted, however anachronistically, into an ostensibly pre-feminist context. Silence is never able to point out Ebain's various injustices, among them being the disinheriting of all women through a ban on the transfer of property to daughters. Alanna, however, can say to the king that she has no regrets about deceiving him.

Roger's reaction to Alanna is in many respects a traditional one, complete with an accusation that she is a demon, but, of course, he is the bad guy. Thus it is a malign character who voices the strongest and most marked resistance to her disguise, just as in the subsequent series *Protector of the Small* it is hidebound conservatives who insist that Alanna's magic is a form of cheating and reject all the proofs that she tries to offer that a woman can be as good as a man at things martial. Through this representation of continued resistance to Alanna and her story in the follow-up series, we are reminded that the general condition is *not* fixed or overturned by Alanna's very individual success. Strategies of reversal and adaptation seem to remain trapped in a feedback loop: all the by-now familiar elements of the maiden-warrior plot, however critiqued, are nevertheless present and each one is worked through in its turn. It remains intractably true that it is only through disguise that Alanna wins her shield: yes, the author disapproves, yes, fascinatingly, the reader is invited to disapprove, and license is given to the characters to disapprove as well. It is a matter for some debate, however, as to what exactly is accomplished through the insertion of dissenting voices into highly repetitive, indeed seemingly inevitable, trajectories of plot and characterization.

What is distinctive about Alanna relative to Silence is that her decision to disguise herself is her own, not that of her parents. Alanna's negligent father never even notices what is happening, and though it remains true that she must *be* a man socially in order to attain distinction, she does not, like Silence, give up her arms after her disguise is penetrated, nor (though it is an issue for a while) does she marry the king, as Silence does. Ultimately, Alanna marries an alternative king: the king of thieves, a commoner – a commoner who is conveniently ennobled, however, late in the series. All this is to say that there is a constant and deliberate effort, in the life trajectory of Alanna, to get away not only from the limitations imposed by a general condition of female disenfranchisement but also from the limitations imposed on someone like Silence, the authentically medieval warrior-maiden. This effort, however, has many ultimately conservative implications: the insertion of disapproval into these narratives is what makes it possible, and palatable, to continue to recreate them. The pleasure of internal critique comes to support the prior pleasures of recognition and familiarity – of inevitability.

The System Wins

So, it seems that for many female fantasy writers, patriarchy itself serves as the female
 455 adventure and oppressive gender-based structures consistently provide the external criteria
 that define extraordinary women. In Roberson's *Lady of the Forest*, Marian FitzWalter
 knocks out a man who has abducted her, thereby also saving the life of Robin of Locksley
 (Robert, son of the Earl of Huntington). She then stands there with a quarterstaff clutched
 in her hands. We are seeing her through Robin's eyes:

460 Recognition was abrupt, and exquisitely painful. *Oh – God –* She was, in that
 moment, very like her father, who had met adversity with the same determination,
 the same intensity, save for one blatant fact: Marian FitzWalter was unequivocally
 alive.

(Roberson, 1992, p. 302)

465 Robin is unnerved by Marian's sudden resemblance to her father, whose death he
 witnessed while on crusade. While Marian does not have to *be* a man socially in order to
 acquire distinction, unlike Alanna (or Silence), this is some of the highest praise, offered at
 several points, that the novel can give her: that she is, in female form, just like her father.
 470 Thus where her father, on crusade, confronts Saracens (like Horn of *King Horn*, or of
 course, like Robin in this novel), Marian confronts abductors and would-be rapists, and
 defeats them or escapes with her virtue intact. Abduction and attempted rape: these are the
 woman's adventures. Unlike her father, Marian survives her adventures – a remarkable
 achievement, considering that she is abducted not once but twice, threatened with forced
 475 marriage(s) throughout the novel, threatened with rape during both abductions and also by
 the heir to the throne, and accused of witchcraft. Though external criteria (the exclusion of
 women from the public realm) prevent her from going on crusade, there are many violent
 things to occupy her at home, and it remains the highest praise for her to be like her father.
 It is through this motif that we see her most clearly as being like a son, just as Alanna
 pretends to be a son, just as Silence is raised as a son, just as Hervör claims the inheritance
 480 of a son, her dead father's sword. Marian's admirable characteristics are developed in
 tandem with nostalgia for the dead Sir Hugh, and once again it is clearly patriarchy itself
 that shapes the adversities encountered by extraordinary people. For men, it is often war
 that defines them, as is the case when Robin is knighted in the field by King Richard
 himself. For women, definition comes through abduction, forced marriage and rape.

485 To return to the metaphor of the coin that purchases female participation in discourse:
 is the insertion of feminist disapproval into familiar situations in some respects a cheap
 alternative, in terms of imaginative expense, to the much more difficult and unusual
 creation of alternative fantasies, or radically new or revolutionary fantasy? Whose job is
 490 it to save the world, anyway? The fantasy genre has conservative tendencies: it sells
 fast, moves fast, repeats itself. Individual authors return again and again to the same
 theme or the same series. In some respects this market is slow to absorb new story-lines
 and ideas. It is often about popularity, not originality. Perhaps a small change, a new
 disapproval, is the best change. Perhaps the small changes teach us what we already
 495 know from the medieval sources but need to learn and re-learn in every generation:
 beyond a certain point, meaning collapses when the exception is so much more
 compelling than the rule.

Feminist disapproval inserted into familiar situations has a number of fascinating side-effects. One such is a strong sense of temporal disjunction. Such disapproval decontextualizes not only historical data but also political discourses. This makes fantasy novels even more unfixed in space and time. In terms of the insights made available through analogy, fantasy novels often make a Victor Turner-esque move, in which the liminal space or group enables profound insights into the community. Turner observes that:

Liminality, marginality, and structural inferiority are conditions in which are frequently generated myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems, and works of art. These cultural forms provide men with a set of templates or models which are, at one level, periodic reclassifications of reality and men's relationship to society, nature and culture. But they are more than classifications, since they incite men to action as well as to thought. Each of these productions has a multivocal character, having many meanings, and each is capable of moving people at many psychological levels simultaneously.

(Turner, 1969, pp. 128–129)

This revelation-through-indirection can be, as discussed, highly didactic, and it is often feminist thought, making its disjunctive presence known, that produces the most loaded moments. Alanna's confrontation with the king would not be satisfying to the modern reader if she remained silent, nor would the protesting and resisting voices of so many contemporary fantasy heroines have force or appeal without this further injection of temporally-isolated energy. While fantasy writers inevitably invoke both what is desired (the exception) and what is rejected (the general case), and while this interdependence is a problem that they continually struggle with, it is also true that it is dislocation itself – temporal, political, social – that makes possible so many of the most exciting associative and thematic moves of the genre.

Alanna's confrontation is satisfying, however, in more ways than one. Another defining characteristic of feminist disapproval within fantasy novels is the encouragement of a form of reader satisfaction that denies complicity in oppressive structures while still relying on such structures to provide meaning. It becomes possible to disapprove while still, at some profound level, approving and feeling pleasure. Feminist critique is just one side of the coin that purchases reader pleasure – and just one side of the coin that purchases a particular kind of female participation in the realm of fantasy. The obverse remains the pleasure of encountering, again and again, a stable, predictable world – one in which the disenfranchisement of women is still the general condition against which exceptions are defined. Clover comments in 'Maiden Warriors and Other Sons' that:

It should be noted that the surrogate son, the woman I have argued is the historical prototype of the maiden warrior, does not herself choose the male role, but is, by custom and circumstance, chosen for it. This essay began with a discussion of the fantastic quality of the maiden warrior tales, so it is fitting to close it by suggesting that the real fantasy here is the dream of female autonomy.

(Clover, 1986, p. 49)

While so many fantasy writers remain dependent on inherited plots and choices, Clover's observation maintains its relevance. Given the ongoing interlacing of pleasure and disapproval in many contemporary fantasy novels that depict the disenfranchisement of women, given my own complicit pleasure in these depictions, it seems the fantasy heroine must be content, for a while yet, to have patriarchy itself as her adventure.

Note

¹ All individually named or cited novels appear in the references, and all series currently available in omnibus. I have not listed all books in every series mentioned. For example, I have not listed all of the many *Darkover* books, nor all of the individual books in each of Tamora Pierce's various series, just the ones individually cited or available in complete sets.

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