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WAKING THE DRAGON: ROUTES TO FEMALE EMPOWERMENT IN FANTASY

A Thesis Presented

by

Claire Theoret

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

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Thesis Examination Committee:

Sarah Alexander, Ph.D., Advisor
Melanie Gustafson, Ph.D., Chairperson
James Williamson, M.A.
Cynthia J. Forehand, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College

ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I discuss the ways in which female characters in fantasy literature gain power. I argue that fantasy, as a genre with fluid boundaries and expectations, is a medium through which subversion of gender norms and social structures is necessary to female empowerment, and that no power, magical or otherwise, can be gained without defying the social norms and expectations in some way. Many traditional systems of power advantage men; women must work harder and via different routes to achieve power.

In my first chapter, I examine the intersection between female power and sexuality as shown in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* and George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Throughout the *Earthsea* series, the depiction of women's magic evolves greatly. In the first novel, the few female characters are depicted as temptresses whose purpose is to disempower men by seducing them until they follow a path of evil. Witches are believed to practice an impure form of magic; their power is seen as lesser because it is different and subversive. By the fourth novel, women's magic, now more positively linked with their sexuality, is shown to be equal in strength to men's magic, despite coming in a different form. The connections made between the power of women and the power of dragons further separates them and classifies them as an "other". In George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, multiple female characters have had others use their sexuality against them in a predatory and disempowering manner. In order for the feminine to be powerful in a patriarchal world, the female characters must oppose the systems of oppression within their society by resisting the impulse to emulate their oppressors.

In my second chapter, I examine the intersection between female power and religion as shown in C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*. In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, there are countless allegorical representations of biblical scenes and ideas, from Genesis to the Passion to Revelation. The female characters are mere archetypes; they are either Eve or Lilith. The series sets up a system in which questioning religious faith and being other than the feminine ideal is demonized and punishable. In *His Dark Materials*, power is given to female characters when they question and challenge the dominant religious system. A separation from indoctrination is characterized as healthy and beneficial, and the greatest power is the autonomy to think and act for oneself.

I lovingly dedicate this to Joseph Ciraulo. Great-Grandpa, you always knew the value of learning and of a good education. This one's for you.

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For months, I have had to postpone plans with friends because I've been stressed and busy. It has been on the surface of my mind for a very long time and I have whined about it so much, to anyone who will listen and even some who won't. Mom and Dad, you have been incredibly patient with my frustration, procrastination, meltdowns, and primal need for late-night chocolate. Honestly, you both are superheroes. Samwise, you have been an amazing kitten ever since you showed up on our porch. You provide comic relief when you chase your own tail, and a welcome distraction when you bite my laptop and break the screen, even if not in the way I would prefer. Stay fluffy, my boy.

After all the blood, sweat, and tears, everyone who is still here deserves applause.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1: SEXUALITY AND FEMALE POWER IN <i>EARTHSEA</i> AND <i>A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE</i>	8
<i>EARTHSEA</i>	17
<i>A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE</i>	30
CHAPTER 2: RELIGION AND FEMALE POWER IN <i>THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA</i> AND <i>HIS DARK MATERIALS</i>	46
<i>THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA</i>	53
<i>HIS DARK MATERIALS</i>	62
CONCLUSION	78
BIBLIOGRAPHY	79

INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I examine four popular fantasy series from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* (1968-2018), George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-), C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956), and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000). I will be addressing the ways in which characterizations of the female characters in fantasy reflect the larger purpose of and trends in the fantasy genre.

First, I will discuss how critics have defined "the fantastic," the key element of the fantasy genre. In *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Tzvetan Todorov defines the fantastic as "the hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (Todorov 25). According to Todorov, what is essential is the supernatural, and that it is recognized as supernatural. Rosemary Jackson goes further, in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, she claims,

The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'. The movement from the first to the second of these functions, from expression as manifestation to expression as expulsion, is one of the recurrent features of fantastic narrative, as it tells of the impossible attempt to realize desire, to make visible the invisible and to discover absence. Telling implies using the language of the dominant order and so accepting its norms, re-covering its dark areas. Since this excursion into disorder can only begin from a base within the dominant cultural order, literary fantasy is a telling index of the limits of that order. Its introduction of the 'unreal' is set against the category of the 'real' – a category which the fantastic interrogates by its difference. (Jackson 4)

Jackson here defines the fantastic in terms of marginalization within a "dominant cultural order" (Jackson 4); she uses phrases such as "the unsaid and the unseen" (Jackson 4) and "mak[ing] visible the invisible" (Jackson 4). Like Todorov, she sees a contrast between

the real and the laws of nature, and the supernatural difference that questions it. Later, she claims, “The fantastic gives utterance to precisely those elements which are known only through their absence within a dominant ‘realistic’ order” (Jackson 25). Difference and absence are key to the fantastic, especially when contrasted to a normative order. The fantastic is the acknowledgment of difference, absence, and, by extension, marginalization.

Many critics in the field point out how difficult fantasy as a genre is to define. Jackson described it as “an enormous and seductive subject” (Jackson 1) and pointed out the “resistance of fantasy to narrow categorization and definition” (Jackson 2). Jackson defines the genre largely by what it is not, claiming, “There is no abstract entity called ‘fantasy’; there is only a range of different works which have similar structural characteristics and which seem to be generated by similar unconscious desires” (Jackson 7-8). These desires concern “inverting elements of its world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and apparently ‘new’, absolutely ‘other’ and different” (Jackson 8). Once again, fantasy and the fantastic are linked to difference more than to any other defining factor.

In his book *Strategies of Fantasy*, Brian Attebery begins the first chapter by trying to define fantasy. He provides two definitions, numbered in the original text,

1. Fantasy is a form of popular escapist literature that combines stock characters and devices – wizards, dragons, magic swords, and the like— into a predictable plot in which the perennially understaffed forces of good triumph over a monolithic evil.
2. Fantasy is a sophisticated mode of storytelling characterized by stylistic playfulness, self-reflexiveness, and a subversive treatment of established orders of society and thought. Arguably the major fictional mode of the late twentieth century, it draws upon contemporary ideas about sign systems and the indeterminacy of meaning and at the same time recaptures the vitality and

freedom of nonmimetic traditional forms such as epic, folktale, romance, and myth. (Attebery 1)

The first definition is not necessarily incorrect, yet it is reductive. Fantasy often does deal with wizards, dragons, etc., and the series examined in this piece are no exception.

However, to use a predictable formula as a marker for lesser importance or quality is wrong. The second definition is stronger. It draws attention to the “subversive treatment of established orders of society and thought” (Attebery 1) and the “indeterminacy of meaning” (Attebery 1), making Attebery yet another critic who highlights difference as key to the nature of the genre. Fantasy resists society at the same time as resisting being neatly labelled and categorized. In calling fantasy “the major fictional mode of the late twentieth century” (Attebery 1), Attebery acknowledges its importance, and the importance of the larger umbrella category of genre fiction or popular fiction. Fantasy is typically excluded from the canon of literary fiction, yet this does not mean that it is of lesser importance. Fantasy novels are widely read, and therefore can have a large part in shaping the perspectives of their readers, and by extension the larger culture. In examining a fictional society and its failings, the door is opened to examine the failings of one’s own society.

A problem with Attebery’s first definition of fantasy is its focus on the “stock characters and devices” (Attebery 1), because not all fantasy will have the exact same formula. There is not a hard and fast rule for where science fiction, SF for short, ends and where fantasy begins; the critical conversation differs. In *Science Fiction*, Brian Baker includes some definitions that his students provided for science fiction, one of which reads “A rationally extrapolated genre where imaginary worlds and realities are creatively constructed in order to explore abstract concepts” (Baker 7). This is a

reasonable definition, but it is one of many of equal validity. The nature of SF is that it defies definition and often bleeds into other categories. The same is true of fantasy.

Not every element of the fantasy genre is making groundbreaking social commentary; the form is often traditional. Attebery continues the discussion of the formulaic nature of fantasy,

A strength and weakness of fantasy is its reliance on traditional storytelling forms and motifs. By making its conventional basis explicit and primary, rather than submerging traditional tale types or character functions beneath a surface of apparent reported reality, fantasy is empowered to reimagine both character and story, as we have seen. But a willingness to return to the narrative structures of the past can entail as well an unquestioning acceptance of its social structures. (Attebery 87)

As he previously acknowledged, fantasy often uses “nonmimetic traditional forms such as epic, folktale, romance and myth” (Attebery 1). It is through these traditional forms that Attebery argues the opportunity “to reimagine both character and story” (Attebery 87) can be found. A familiar and well-known form is more likely to not be dismissed out of hand. However, “a willingness to return to the narrative structures of the past can entail as well an unquestioning acceptance of its social structures” (Attebery 87). It makes sense that a familiar form may invite familiar ideas, ones that may be old-fashioned and regressive. On the topic of form, Jackson claims, “As a critical term, ‘fantasy’ has been applied rather indiscriminately to any literature which does not give priority to realistic representation: myths, legends, folk and fairy tales, utopian allegories, dream visions, surrealist texts, science fiction, horror stories, all presenting realms ‘other’ than the human” (Jackson 14). With such a wide-ranging set of forms that can be called fantasy, a question that arises is when all of these different types of literature became known as fantasy.

This is addressed in *The Evolution of Modern Fantasy: From Antiquarianism to the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series* by Jamie Williamson, who claims, “That fantasy was indeed constructed is borne out by the notable dearth of critical discussion of it in any capacity prior to the 1970s” (Williamson 15). This is a good point, the earliest critic cited in this thesis, Todorov, wrote his book in 1973. In this sense, it is the criticism that created and defined the fantasy genre, and the criticism defines it in terms of difference and the impossible.

The topic of femininity and the role of female characters in the fantasy genre are largely excluded from the critical conversation of the broader genre. Attebery does touch on the topic, writing that female fantasy writers are “refurbishing the archetypal images of the goddess, redefining the qualities of heroism to include female experience, and reaffirming women’s access to the narrative storehouse of the past” (Attebery 89). As Jackson writes, “Like any other text, a literary fantasy is produced within, and determined by, its social context. Though it might struggle against the limits of this context, often being articulated upon that very struggle, it cannot be understood in isolation from it” (Jackson 3). In a patriarchal “dominant cultural order” (Jackson 4), the literature cannot help but reflect the patriarchal exclusion of women.

In a patriarchal society, women and other oppressed groups often face an upward battle to make a place for themselves. This extends even to the terminology used. In the introduction to *A Quest of Her Own: Essays on the Female Hero in Modern Fantasy*, Lori M. Campbell specifies the difference between the “female hero” and the “heroine,” writing,

Since the female hero is only recently coming into her own, while the male version has been the standard and ideal for centuries, her representation of

heroism must be considered in its own terms. While as Pearson and Pope argue, “on the archetypal journey to self-discovery is the same for both the male and female hero” (vii-viii), the obstacles she must overcome for her journey to be recognized as heroic are different, and, like it or not, negotiating difference must be taken into account as inherent to her journey. (Campbell 6-7)

As a result of this difference and the struggles that surround it, the female heroes in these stories may not be traditional fantasy heroes. Not all female heroes wear armor and wield swords, though some do; their battle is the battle to even be recognized as heroic. To find power in a world that actively disempowers you is an act of rebellion.

In a thesis full of abstract ideas and terms, it is essential that I provide definitions of these terms. The nature of power is critical to my argument, yet it is tricky to find an all-encompassing definition of it. In *Women and Power in American History*, historians Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin write,

What do historians of women mean by “power”? The newness of the term’s application to women can be seen in historians’ tendency to leave the term undefined. Many dictionaries define power as the “possession of control, authority or influence over others,” yet an important aspect of women’s power has been expressed in their ability to exercise control over their own bodies, to limit men’s access to their sexuality, and to control their reproductive lives. (Sklar and Dublin 2)

This is a solid definition of the term as I apply it in this piece. I define power as the ability to have free will and choice over the events of your own life, without being unduly influenced by outside forces. A key aspect of this is that there must be multiple options available; it is not empowering to live a certain way when there are no alternatives. To further my definition of power, I here define empowerment and agency as the ability to choose and affect events at minimum in one’s own life, and sometimes in the lives of others as well. Disempowerment is the lack of power to make those choices.

Subversion is another key term throughout this piece. I here define this as in some way undermining the roles that women are expected to fulfill in their society, as choosing to do something different that destabilizes and questions the ideal.

In sum, the critical conversation largely agrees that the fantasy genre is wide-reaching, characterized by difference, by the supernatural and impossible. Few discuss the role of women in the genre and what the texts suggest with their female characterization. In a conversation that discusses the genre as “mak[ing] visible the invisible” (Jackson 4) and as employing “a subversive treatment of established orders of society and thought” (Attebery 1), a discussion of female characterization is essential. I argue that, in all four of the fantasy series examined in this thesis, the texts use their female characters as examples of how to exist in a patriarchal society that actively disempowers women. All of them are characterized as having some form of power, magical or not, but these texts suggest that the only true form of power must be gained through working against society’s gendered expectations; conforming to them only provides an illusion of empowerment. The key to empowerment is the difference and the otherness that the critics highlight as essential to the fantasy genre; difference is just as essential to the empowerment of the female.

CHAPTER 1: SEXUALITY AND FEMALE POWER IN *EARTHSEA* AND *A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE*

In this chapter, I examine the intersection between sexuality and female power in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* and George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*. I grouped these two series together under this topic because *Earthsea* and *Westeros* are both patriarchal societies, with all of the institutional misogyny and rape culture that this implies. Sexuality is often used to disempower the female characters. The interpretive question of this chapter is what these texts suggest about the nature of fantasy and the nature of power through the female characters and their sexualities.

The critical conversation about the roles and power of women in *Earthsea* largely centers around *The Tombs of Atuan* and *Tehanu*, the second and fourth novels in the series, respectively. In "Unlearning Patriarchy: Ursula K. Le Guin's Feminist Consciousness in *The Tombs of Atuan* and *Tehanu*," Holly Littlefield observes, "All characters with any real authority or power in *Earthsea* are men. Two of the three novels do not even have a single significant female character. Women are rarely seen, almost never speak, and none but the most traditional of roles are prescribed for them" (Littlefield 2). Littlefield is correct to point out that there are few characters in the far more-male dominated first book *A Wizard of Earthsea* and third book *The Farthest Shore*. Both books center around the character of Ged, and the female characters are there primarily as plot devices in his story.

Littlefield also writes on Tenar in *The Tombs of Atuan*. Tenar is a girl who is taken as a young child to become the First Priestess of the Tombs of Atuan, because she was born at the same time that the old priestess died. Her identity is sacrificed and her

soul is “eaten” in a religious ritual where she becomes the reincarnated priestess, and she becomes Arha, the Eaten One. As Arha, she serves the Nameless Ones and is a vessel for their magic. However, Littlefield points out that Arha still has power of her own when she saves Ged in the Place of the Tombs, writing, “When a fifteen-year-old girl [sic] single-handedly manages to outwit, entrap, and control the most powerful wizard in the land, it should be obvious that she is not a simpering, helpless female needing some knight in shining armor to rescue her” (Littlefield 3). Littlefield here claims that *The Tombs of Atuan* subverts the traditional story mode where a man rescues a damsel in distress.

While Ged’s appearance at the Place of the Tombs is the catalyst for her escape to an outside world, it is not so simple as him saving her. Lynette Douglas and Deirdre Byrne write in their “Womanspace: The Underground and the Labyrinth in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Earthsea* Narratives,” “We contend, by contrast, that Tenar’s courage is not compromised by her interaction with Ged, and that in this relationship Le Guin establishes a dialectic synthesis between masculine and feminine forces that is the foundation of social harmony” (Douglas and Byrne 2). It is Arha who saves Ged, without the power that her knowledge of the layout of the Tombs gives her he would never have made it out alive. Neither is weakened by this; it can only make them stronger.

The criticism also notes how even the geography in the Tombs is female. Perry Nodelman writes about this in “Reinventing the Past: Gender in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Tehanu* and the *Earthsea* ‘Trilogy,’”

For instance, the dark powers worshipped by women in the tombs of Atuan clearly relate to Jungian archetypes of the feminine—they are irrational, passive, silent, and below consciousness, and their place is dark, labyrinthine, womblike. Their worshipper Arha is then the anima as a distorted representation of

femininity that must be discredited, to be replaced by the individual person Tenar. Seen in this way, which is hard to avoid in the context of strategies of reading texts for unconscious assumptions about gender that feminist criticism has taught us in the past decade or so, *Tombs* seems to be the story of how Tenar learns to be whole by rejecting femininity as conventionally defined. (Nodelman 184-185)

The Labyrinth has female anatomy; the rooms are uterine, the tunnels vaginal. When Arha eventually leaves the tombs with Ged, it is a second birth, an emergence from a dark feminine space as Tenar once again, a coming of age into a world where there is much more than celibacy and a cloistered life of religious observance. Likewise, Douglas and Byrne claim,

Le Guin's writing consistently identifies the earth as feminine, in keeping with the archetype of 'Mother Earth', and we find that subterranean spaces and labyrinths are depicted as sites of power and empowerment for women. Nevertheless, we argue that Le Guin's affinity for gender equity and balance prevents these tropes from becoming another tired revisioning of an easy equation of earthy forces and 'the feminine.' (Douglas and Byrne 1)

In studying how the feminine is represented in *Earthsea*, both Nodelman and Douglas and Byrne acknowledge the association with earth and the underground, yet they also agree on the greater importance the text gives to "rejecting femininity as conventionally defined" (Nodelman 185) and "gender equity and balance" (Douglas and Byrne 1).

The fourth book in the series, *Tehanu* was published in 1990, eighteen years after *The Farthest Shore* was published in 1972. Many critics comment on Le Guin's efforts to reimagine the world of *Earthsea* through a more feminist lens in this addition to her series. While the previous books show the patriarchal nature of Earthsea largely from a male perspective or the sheltered and isolated perspective of the child Tenar, *Tehanu*, in the words of Richard Mathews in *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination* "makes clear the violations, degradations, and divisions wrought primarily through men's various attempts to wield male power over other men, women, and the world" (Mathews 151). In

Tehanu, male power has a visible impact on the bodies of the female characters, especially Therru, the child whose face and arm have been burned to the bone, with one eye blinded. Central to *Tehanu* is the power women have in a world controlled by male power, and what changes when the male power at the center of a patriarchy fades. Ged loses his magical power in *The Farthest Shore*, and the grief he feels for his loss of power is shown in *Tehanu*. In “The Power of Women in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Tehanu*”, Susan McLean writes, “Ged himself is devastated at first by the loss of his power because, like the other mages, he assumes that the power he has lost is the only kind of power, and that power is the key to his own worth” (McLean 112). Ged and men in general are not insignificant in *Earthsea*, but the “indictment of patriarchy... death of fathers, both literal and metaphoric” (McLean 111) is a key theme that critics comment on when analyzing *Tehanu*.

Melanie Rawls’ essay “Witches, Wives and Dragons: The Evolution of the Women in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea*--an Overview” examines this theme in depth and expands on it. She claims, “The texts move from masculine hierarchy to feminine web, from the tower to the house. The meek have inherited *Earthsea*, but they are dragons and therefore not meek: they are women who speak and act from their own values and perspective” (Rawls 148). *Tehanu* shows a shift in power dynamic, but it is not men being removed from the top of an oppressive structure so women can be put in place; it is meant to be a system of freedom and not oppression. Tenar, for example, continues to live a life of farming and caring for others, a lifestyle that is unlikely to win glory, but, as Rawls writes, “Only in a system that does not value the ordinary life, especially as lived by women, can Tenar’s decision be regarded as a submission to patriarchal norms”

(Rawls 132). Just because Tenar lives a domestic life does not mean that she is a tool of the patriarchy. Tenar practices heroism in an untraditional way, by living a traditional life. In “‘Weak as woman’s magic’: Empowering Care Work in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Tehanu*,” Erin Wyble Newcomb argues,

...the prominence of Tenar and her care work in *Tehanu* simultaneously destabilizes the male monopoly of heroism and elevates ordinary women’s work to the potentially extraordinary. Tenar is a female hero, however seemingly unlikely, precisely because her commitment to care and her efforts to achieve justice through care. Care work is not merely the back-story or invisible support of the hero, but it is work that can define the female hero and transform her world. (Newcomb 96)

The work that Tenar does can be considered women’s work, yet Newcomb points out that this type of work is greatly valued in the text. Tenar finds value in the life she has chosen, particularly in that she had the power to choose it for herself.

For transition into the second section of the critical conversation for this chapter, I will now discuss criticism relating to George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*. *A Song of Ice and Fire* has hundreds of diverse characters, so I focused my research on three prominent female characters: Brienne of Tarth, Cersei Lannister, and Daenerys Targaryen.

Firstly, Brienne of Tarth is often discussed in the critical conversation in terms of knightly virtue, chivalry, and the courtly love tradition. Brienne has had some traumatic experiences with her father trying to arrange a marriage for her and with falling in love with Renly Baratheon, who died in her arms. In “A New Kind of Hero: *A Song of Ice and Fire*’s Brienne of Tarth,” John H. Cameron points out the precedent for unrequited love in Arthurian legend and the courtly love tradition, writing that Martin’s “knight is not a man in love with an unapproachable maiden but a female knight in love with a king, one

who is both married to another and engaged in an affair with his wife's brother" (Cameron 192). Renly was always kind to Brienne, but he was gay, and could never love her back. Brienne must carry this burden of grief and sadness with her as she performs her knightly duties.

Diana Marques analyzes Brienne in "Power and the Denial of Femininity in *Game of Thrones*." She writes that, despite Brienne and multiple other female characters shedding traditional gender markers, "it is obvious that power is still connected to men and to a patriarchal structure that they cannot seem to discard completely" (Marques 62). Brienne subverts the patriarchy by not getting married, dressing in men's clothes, and behaving as a knight. However, this is still not enough to counteract the norms of society entirely. Going further, Marques writes,

My choosing of these characters has to do with the fact that while they are of noble classes, they nonetheless disrupt gender norms by displaying few feminine traits, acting out displays of violence, and attempting to perform traditionally masculine roles. Underlining the depiction of all three women seems to be the notion that a woman must forfeit her femininity to be taken seriously in a male-dominated world and to perform deeds mostly ascribed to men... And, above all, does the self-disavowal of feminine traits translate to power and authority, or are the female characters marginalized and mocked? (Marques 47-48)

To partially answer the question that Marques asks, the truth is that Brienne is marginalized and mocked by the vast majority of people that she encounters. She is different, she is an "other." Marques' criticism points out that even subversion and difference have limits in granting power to female characters in a world that values male power so much more highly.

Iain A. MacInnes, on the other hand, emphasizes Brienne's power in "All I Ever Wanted Was to Fight for a Lord I Believed in. But the Good Lords Are Dead and the Rest Are Monsters': Brienne of Tarth, Jaime Lannister, and the Chivalric 'Other'." He

discusses the complicated representation of honor in the series, which often presents the knights as the worst perpetrators of violence against the innocents. Those who are supposed to be the most honorable are often the least, and honor is repeatedly shown to lead to disaster when not tempered by shrewdness and sense. He claims,

Brienne of Tarth's view of honour is opposite to these examples. It is visible in her determination to deliver Jaime Lannister to King's Landing, in spite of all they go through along the way. It is similarly visible in her resolve to carry on with her search for the Stark daughters, even though she is ignorant of their survival. Brienne possesses honour, and is aware of its importance, but she more often seeks to protect that of others and gains worth by honourably keeping the oaths she swears. Hers is not a self-serving form of honour, and it is through her own agency that she accumulates that which she possesses. (MacInnes 81)

Brienne is different not only because of how she defies gender norms, but because she actually follows the rules warriors are supposed to follow. She is arguably the most consistently moral character in the series. Men abuse their power; for Brienne to help others and not harm them is itself subversive in the cruelty of Westerosi society.

Cersei Lannister, in sharp contrast to Brienne's humility, believes that she is superior to everyone else. However, as Joseph Young writes in "Enough About Whores": Sexual Characterization in *A Song of Ice and Fire*," there is a "chasm between her self-image as a Machiavellian strongwoman and her mismanagement of the kingdom" (Young 52). Cersei is correct to point out that the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros are extremely misogynistic and patriarchal. The problem is that she is not nearly as intelligent or strategic as she believes herself to be. She is angry at a world that is deserving of that anger but fails to realize or ignores her own role in perpetuating the cruelty and injustice in that world. Young also writes that, "Her comments about other women demonstrate her inability to connect her own proto-feminist frustrations to any broader pattern" (Young 55) and that she "feels the pain of medieval injustice, but her

seemingly disordered mind responds simply by perpetuating it” (Young 55). In truth, every way that Cersei believes herself to be subversive and powerful has been done before by powerful men; she is not different from them. There is nothing subversive about her actions and they can only further disempower her. Emulation is not rewarded with power in the fantasy genre.

Sylwia Borowska-Szerszun writes in “Westerosi Queens: Medievalist Portrayal of Female Power and Authority in *A Song of Ice and Fire*” that “women of the transmedial Game of Thrones universe can be interpreted as either feminist or antifeminist, subversive or subdued, empowered or disempowered” (Borowska-Szerszun 53-54). About Cersei in particular, Borowska-Szerszun claims,

The Cersei of the novels is highly sexualized and consciously uses her body to achieve the ends she desires, which conforms with misogynistic beliefs expressed in the Middle Ages and well beyond the period. Later, when she acts as queen, she rejects any virtues archetypally ascribed to women, such as nurturance, caring, compassion, empathy and collaboration, and fashions herself as a self-centered, aggressive, and violent tyrant. Her attempts to ‘act like a man’ seem grotesque even in the chapters focalized from her perspective, in which she increasingly resembles gluttonous, sottish, abusive, and foolish Robert Baratheon. (Borowska-Szerszun 57-58)

Cersei spends so much time on her vitriolic hate of her late husband, King Robert Baratheon. Somehow, she doesn’t realize that her lust for power makes her become him, “a short-sighted tyrant in skirts” (Borowska-Szerszun 57). Borowska-Szerszun here argues that Cersei is neither subdued nor subversive. She also believes that Cersei’s characterization is sexist, as shown in her Walk of Shame in *A Dance With Dragons*, where she is forced to walk the streets of King’s Landing naked for all the people to see, supporting this by writing, “The striking point in Martin’s narrative is that although

Cersei has indeed made grave mistakes as a political leader, she is disciplined as a harlot, not a monarch” (Borowska-Szerszun 59). Furthermore, she claims,

In her attempts to emulate hyper-masculine behaviour, Cersei has gained nothing but has instead exposed all the vices attributed to women by misogynists – shallowness, lust, irrationality, instability, jealousy, and petty vengefulness. Such a depiction of one of the most prominent female characters in the novels clearly conforms to the most unfortunate stereotypes that perpetuate misogynistic ideas about women’s ability to rule. (Borowska-Szerszun 59)

Borowska-Szerszun repeatedly emphasizes that Cersei conforms to misogynistic stereotypes of female power, and that it is this and the shaming she faces for her sexuality that lead to her characterization as such a contemptible villain.

Borowska-Szerszun also wrote about Daenerys Targaryen, arguably the most powerful character in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Borowska-Szerszun claims that Daenerys, unlike Cersei, is the powerful female subversive, writing,

While not flawless, the character of Daenerys could be interpreted not so much as an exemplary queen, who is traditionally defined by her reproductive and intercessory capabilities, but as an exceptional she-king – a leader, who sometimes errs as all humans do, but knows the costs of personal sacrifice and chooses to work for the common good, not her personal interest. (Borowska-Szerszun 68)

Cersei tries to be a king like the kings and strong male leaders she has known and envied; Daenerys becomes her own kind of leader, and this is much more successful. Borowska-Szerszun claims that Daenerys is not punished for her sexuality, as she is “operating on the outskirts of civilization” (Borowska-Szerszun 69), and she is “a more positive vision of female rule” (Borowska-Szerszun 69). While Cersei only reproduced the cruelty and brutality of her society, Daenerys saw it and chose to rise above it, to not become that kind of ruler, but to create something new with a different form of power that challenges and threatens the oppressive hierarchy.

Karin Gresham also writes about Daenerys' sexuality in "Cursed Womb, Bulging Thighs and Bald Scalp: George R.R. Martin's Grotesque Queen." Sexuality and reproduction are central to Daenerys' storyline, with her being sold into an advantageous marriage by her brother at a very young age. To try to address the unequal power dynamic in her marriage to Drogo, Daenerys eventually seeks advice from her handmaid Doreah, a former prostitute. Gresham writes,

Soon after, she seduces her husband outside in front of the khalasar. Instead of being a shameful moment, it is life-affirming, for in this moment she becomes pregnant. Moreover, she "tops" her husband in a public display of a shifting power dynamic that anticipates her rise to dominance (198). Again, we are met with deeply positive and socially regenerative allusions to the grotesque each time Dany achieves a degree of upward social mobility. (Gresham 157)

Gresham claims that Daenerys' different expression of sexuality connects her with the grotesque and the liminal, which gives her a chance to have "upward social mobility" (Gresham 157). Daenerys does gain more respect, and even once much of that is lost, she retains the grotesque liminality with the loss of her fertility and the birth of her dragons, and she can be upwardly socially mobile again.

In both *Earthsea* and *A Song of Ice and Fire*, sexuality is used to disempower the female characters but also provides an opportunity for growth. I argue that the texts suggest that female power must be gained through subversion of the gendered social pressures related to sexuality, and that conforming to those social pressures can only be disempowering.

EARTHSEA

The character of Serret in *A Wizard of Earthsea* is an example of the text providing a female character who only has an illusion of power. The first book in the

series is largely ignored in the feminist criticism in favor of *The Tombs of Atuan* and *Tehanu*, apart from critics often quoting, “There is a saying on Gont, *Weak as woman’s magic*, and there is another saying, *Wicked as woman’s magic*” (Le Guin 10). I disagree with Littlefield’s statement that there isn’t “a single significant female character” (Littlefield 2). There are very few female characters and they are not fully fleshed out, three-dimensional characters, but they are significant to the construction of Earthsea’s patriarchy. Serret is the daughter of the Lord of Re Albi and of a witch, and she manipulates the thirteen-year-old Ged’s naïveté and plants the idea in his mind of summoning the spirits of the dead. Ged’s eventual use of the spell brings disaster, and it can all be traced back to Serret. Serret is linked with wickedness because she is the temptress, the girl that Ged wanted to show off to and impress. Ogion points out to Ged that the girl is dangerous because her mother is a witch and she likely is too, but this casts her power as bigger than it is. It is not Serret that opens that book to find that spell; it was Ged that made that choice. Also, the link between Serret’s power and her mother’s power keeps Serret’s power from really being her own. Serret is not dangerous or powerful on her own. She fits into the Gontish stereotype of female magic users being wicked, but she is also weak. Her power is just an illusion, a scapegoat for male decision-making that goes wrong.

Serret’s power as only an illusion is shown with her link to the Terrenon. Years have passed in the chronology of the story and Serret’s association with dark magic has only grown. Ged takes refuge at her home, the Court of Terrenon, which is centered around the protection of the Terrenon, a magical stone which derives its powers from the Old Powers. The Old Powers, later known as the Nameless Ones in *The Tombs of Atuan*,

do not give power to people; they use human beings as vessels. Serret herself is not described in human terms. She is an object and an animal, with Ged seeing her as “like the white new moon” (Le Guin 78) and “like a white deer caged, like a white bird wing-clipped, like a silver ring on an old man’s finger” (Le Guin 80). With such language used to describe a person, it is almost as if Serret herself is the magical stone the keep contains. The Terrenon is an item of dark magic that tempts people to use it and fall under its control, but it is not granted a personality. The Terrenon’s power is seductive,

If he had once touched the Stone, or spoken to it, he would have been utterly lost. Yet, even as the shadow had not quite been able to catch up with him and seize him, so the Stone had not been able to use him – not quite. He had almost yielded, but not quite. He had not consented. It is very hard for evil to take hold of the unconsenting soul. (Le Guin 83)

With language of consent and yielding, resisting the desire to touch and use the Terrenon is like refusing a sexual experience. Serret, like the Terrenon, is an object in the story, meant only to be a source of temptation for Ged, intentionally using her beauty and sex appeal to convince him to surrender to the dark magic that she practices. She uses magic, but not well enough to survive, and her power was never really her own. The text puts Serret as the perfect example of the weakness and wickedness of women’s magic, this conformity to the stereotype creates only an illusion of power. She is not insignificant, but she is ultimately only a plot device to move Ged along his journey.

Young Tenar in *The Tombs of Atuan* is another example of a character who only has the illusion of power. She has only experienced life as Arha since she was very young. She accepts her fate of isolation and confinement because she sees power and purpose in her role. However, this is an illusion, the power in the Place of the Tombs belongs to the Nameless Ones, the bullying priestess Kossil, and the patriarchal society of

the Kargad lands. For Arha, her position of prestige is mostly disempowering. She holds dominion over the Labyrinth, a “spiraling tangle of tunnels” (Le Guin 171); it is a place that others can only go with her explicit permission. Men are forbidden, with the exception of prisoners and eunuchs with permission. The power of the Nameless Ones is “irrational, passive, silent, and below consciousness, and their place is dark, labyrinthine, womblike” (Nodelman 184). Arha’s dominion over the Labyrinth does not negate the fact that it is very dangerous, and that, when the mysticism and indoctrination are removed, it is a series of dark tunnels in the ground where Arha spends her formative years alone. There is magic there, but is it not necessarily good magic, and the power to be found there is not healthy. While she holds a position of power and privilege, she is also a young girl who is constantly isolated from others. The fact that only she can go there gives her power, but also deprives her of socialization and the outside world. Arha is just a vessel; she is not empowered because she lacks both knowledge and autonomy.

Arha slowly gains power to replace the illusionary power when she begins to question her position in the greater power structure. She thinks more critically when she has a conversation with Penthe, another novice at the Place of the Tombs, asking her,

“How did you come here, Penthe?”

“Oh, I was the sixth girl my mother and father had, and they just couldn’t bring up so many and marry them all off. So when I was seven they brought me to the Godking’s temple and dedicated me. That was in Ossawa. They had too many novices there, I guess, because pretty soon they sent me on here. Or maybe they thought I’d make a specially good priestess or something. But they were wrong about that!” Penthe bit her apple with a cheerful, rueful face.

“Would you rather not have been a priestess?”

“Would I rather! Of course! I’d rather marry a pig-herd and live in a ditch. I’d rather anything than stay buried alive here all my born days with a mess of women in a perishing old desert where nobody ever comes! But I do hope that in my next life I’m a dancing-girl in Awabath! Because I will have earned it.” (Le Guin 165-166)

Penthe keenly feels what she lost when she was given to the temple, she understands that she can never have what she wants because she is female. The text is strongly suggesting here that to be “a dancing-girl in Awabath” (Le Guin 166), or even living in poverty as a pig-herd’s wife, is a better life than a life you have no say in. If Penthe were to have autonomy, she would choose a life that includes men and sexuality, and that would be empowering for her. To Arha, this new way of thinking is an uncomfortable challenge to her worldview. Arha now must think about all the things that she could see, be, or do, if she were not the First Priestess, and begins to feel what it means that Tenar has been eaten, she can never marry a pigherd, even if that’s what she wants, and she can never be her own person and live her life for herself. In acknowledging that the system has disempowered her, she can start to think about how she can become empowered.

Arha becomes genuinely empowered when she subverts the laws at the Tombs of Atuan to save Ged. While, as Littlefield previously noted, Ged does not save Arha like a knight would save a damsel, meeting Ged is instrumental in Arha’s journey to empowerment. When Ged enters the Labyrinth, he is breaking the rules in many ways. He is trespassing, he is male, and he is lighting his way with his wizard’s staff, a phallic symbol of male magical power. Arha’s first encounter with Ged is a literal illumination for her, she is seeing her realm for the first time without the cover of darkness, and she is starstruck, it was “strange beyond thought, beyond fear” (Le Guin 179). The Painted Room, a cavern in the Labyrinth is incredibly beautiful,

It was jeweled with crystals and ornamented with pinnacles and filigrees of white limestone where the waters under earth had worked, eons since: immense, with glittering roof and walls, sparkling, delicate, intricate, a palace of diamonds, a house of amethyst and crystal, from which the ancient darkness had been driven out by glory.

Not bright, but dazzling to the dark-accustomed eye, was the light that worked this wonder. It was a soft gleam, like marshlight, that moved slowly across the cavern, striking a thousand scintillations from the jeweled roof and shifting a thousand fantastic shadows along the carven walls. (Le Guin 179)

She had never been able to fully appreciate it because she could not see it without light, which was forbidden. Ged eventually admits to Arha that he did come to the Labyrinth to steal something, but this something is the second half of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe, and he is looking for it in the hope that it will bring peace to Earthsea. He already has the first half and Tenar has the second, they can only join them and have peace if they are willing to unite and work together for it despite differences in race, gender, religion, and magic. This is Douglas and Byrne's "dialectic synthesis between masculine and feminine forces that is the foundation of social harmony" (Douglas and Byrne 2), the text here suggests that the combination of male and female is essential to a full understanding of the world. Women may possess the wombs to bring forth life, but they cannot produce that life without men. For either to exist, so must the other.

Tenar fully becomes empowered when she not only subverts but abandons the life that society has forced upon her at the Place of the Tombs. On her path to autonomy, Arha must sacrifice the life that has been forced upon her by her society. She chooses to reclaim her identity and agency and reclaim the name Tenar. This choice is incredibly risky for her, she leaves behind a life of safety and prestige for the unknown, knowing that Kossil and the others will try to kill her before they let her leave. Ged lays her choices before her,

You must make a choice. Either you must leave me, lock the door, go up to your altars and give me to your Masters; then go to the Priestess Kossil and make your peace with her – and that is the end of the story – or, you must unlock the door, and go out of it, with me. Leave the Tombs, leave Atuan, and come with me

oversea. And that is the beginning of the story. You must be Arha, or you must be Tenar. You cannot be both. (Le Guin 217)

To choose to remain Arha is to choose darkness, isolation, celibacy, and confinement. To choose to become Tenar once more is to choose light, freedom, sexuality, and independence. The text strongly favors the choice to leave. Of course, choosing to be Tenar is not choosing an easy or simple life, she does not know what the future holds, and surely not everything will be perfect or happy; *Tehanu* shows that the adult Tenar has plenty of conflict and sorrow in her life. However, her choice of a life that may contain things beyond what she has previously known, including sexuality, is an empowering one, she is “rebellious against the patriarchal structure that has imprisoned her all her life” (Littlefield 2-3). She may no longer be the vessel of the Old Powers or the keeper of the Labyrinth, but she gains the more precious power of choice in how she will live her life. Nodelman writes, “Traditionally, male maturity represents the freedom to wield power, female maturity a regressive acceptance of dependency and lack of power” (Nodelman 186), but maturity here is a good thing. She may have to rely on men at some point, but her choice is not regressive or powerless. Her choice is subversive and dangerous; her choice, and her ability to make that choice, empowers her.

In *Tehanu*, Tenar’s subversion continues to be empowering, even with her negative experiences of being a woman in a patriarchy. Subversion of the dominant social norms is central to *Tehanu* in a subtler and more poignant way than in the previous books. Many years have passed, and Tenar is now middle-aged with two grown children who have already left home. She was raised by Ogion after the events of *The Tombs of Atuan*, he gave her some magical training, but she decided it wasn’t right for her, saying to Moss, “What did I want with his books? What good were they to me? I wanted to live, I wanted

a man, I wanted my children, I wanted my life” (Le Guin 430). She wanted to experience a different kind of existence, one that was not possible at the Place of the Tombs. Taking over the farm after her husband’s death, Tenar has different responsibilities than in her childhood,

She had a foreign name, but Flint had called her Goha, which is what they call a little white web-spinning spider on Gont. That name fit well enough, she being white-skinned and small and a good spinner of goat’s-wool and sheep-fleece. So now she was Flint’s widow, Goha, mistress of a flock of sheep and the land to pasture them, four fields, an orchard of pears, two tenant’s cottages, the old stone farmhouse under the oaks, and the family graveyard over the hill where Flint lay, earth in his earth. (Le Guin 399)

Tenar, unlike Ged and unlike herself when she was Arha, is not in a position of prestige or visible power; after leaving Ogion’s care she lived as a wife, mother, and farmer. Her life centers around domesticity and caring for others. However, as Mathews points out, she is “a widow unable to inherit her husband’s farm because the social order requires that it pass instead to the eldest son” (Mathews 147). This is a conundrum, especially since Tenar’s son looks down on his mother, resents Ged, and refuses to wash dishes because he feels it is not the job for a man. Tenar’s women’s work and feminine knowledge is fulfilling for her; it is what she chose. As Tenar herself describes it, “...all I understand about living is having your work to do, and being able to do it. That’s the pleasure, and the glory, and all” (Le Guin 461). She is very different from the typical hero of a fantasy novel, nothing in her daily life is likely to win her glory. She does not wield a magic sword, but she is still empowered by living autonomously.

In many ways, *Tehanu* is a story of what is left when male power fails and dies away. Tenar has been recently widowed and has to reassess what is important in her life and where to put her time and energy. Ogion dies of old age at the beginning of the novel.

Ged arrives on Gont, but he is unconscious and greatly weakened, having sacrificed his magical powers at the end of *The Farthest Shore* to restore peace; he has been reduced from the Archmage to just a man, not a mage at all. He never learned how to be a man without being a mage first. He feels empty and powerless. Ged in *Tehanu* is like Tenar in *The Tombs of Atuan*, their original identity was consumed to become something else, but now that the something else is gone, they must figure out what comes next. The sheer amount of freedom can feel paralyzing. Ged once wielded great power and no longer can. He is mourning and doesn't know what can possibly come next for him. Through Ged's disempowerment, the text shows how both men and women are victims in a patriarchy. With a shift away from male power, there is a shift from "masculine hierarchy to feminine web" (Rawls 148). This shift is essential, it is social change and the introduction of difference. Rawls also claims, "Under the developing new world order, women, dragons and the dead choose freedom over power. They do not want to rule; they do not want to be singular, heroic or at the top. They only wish to go their own way, in relationship with others, but not oppressing or being oppressed by others" (Rawls 145). Not only does this change bring a difference in how it is gendered, but it is also the hope for a structure that will be a positive change. This is an interesting and compelling thought; it is true that the shifts in Earthsea society are subtler than a woman becoming monarch. However, it is imperfect, as it implies a difference between freedom and power, which is not what the text suggests. Tenar's expressions of her free will are her most empowered moments. Freedom is power.

The biggest way in which *Tehanu* is a subversive text is how it calls into question the structures that had previously been accepted without question in the earlier books in

the series. As previously discussed in connection to *A Wizard of Earthsea* and *The Farthest Shore*, mages are celibate, and Ged began to train as a mage when he was thirteen years old. As a result, he is a middle-aged man who has never had sex. Moss, an eccentric village witch, explains to Tenar that the mages make this sacrifice for their power, saying, “You don’t get without you give as much” (Le Guin 461). Tenar points out that Moss has not been celibate, and this does not weaken her power, but Moss says that it is not the same. Their conversation continues,

“I don’t know,” Tenar said. “It seems to me we make up most of the differences, and then complain about ‘em. I don’t see why the Art Magic, why power, should be different for a man and a woman witch. Unless the power itself is different. Or the art.”

“A man gives out, dearie. A woman takes in.”

Tenar sat silent but unsatisfied.

“Ours is only a little power, it seems like, next to theirs,” Moss said. “But it goes down deep. It’s all roots. It’s like an old blackberry thicket. And a wizard’s power’s like a fir tree, maybe, great and tall and grand, but it’ll blow right down in a storm. Nothing kills a blackberry bramble.” (Le Guin 465)

Moss firmly believes in the difference between men and women and their respective magical powers, she believes in the duality that is central to the earlier books. Her argument is compelling and poignant, but other parts of the text make the reader question if this is really telling the whole story. Ultimately, the text favors Tenar’s side of the conversation, that the differences between the genders are constructed and then proclaimed to be natural.

The text also suggests that sexuality can be a source of power in a positive way.

When Tenar left her life as Arha behind, she was stepping into the world where she could experience sexuality if she so chose, and she did, getting married a few years later.

Likewise, Ged no longer has any obligation to be celibate. In *The Tombs of Atuan*, Tenar was only a young teenager when Ged was a grown man, but now that they are both

grown adults and Ged is already staying in Tenar's house, it is not long until the relationship between the old friends becomes sexual. The next morning, Tenar teases him, saying, "Oh, Ged, don't fear me! You were a man when I first saw you! It's not a weapon or a woman can make a man, or magery either, or any power, anything but himself" (Le Guin 523). This scene shows how having sex with Tenar is healing and empowering for Ged. However, it is very clear that Tenar did not miraculously make him into a man, he was one well before that. In a refreshingly nuanced look at the topic, the text shows the potential sex and sexuality have to enrich and empower, but it is not the only thing of value.

In *Tehanu*, Le Guin questions and critiques not only the real world but the world that she has constructed; the opposition between good men's magic and bad women's magic is examined and ultimately discarded. Men's magic, women's magic, and the fraught duality between them are not the only kinds of magic in *Earthsea*. There is also dragon magic. Dragons are present in three of the first four books in the *Earthsea* series, excluding *The Tombs of Atuan*, but they are always surrounded by mystery. Some of this is demystified in *Tehanu*, and it is shown that there is a link between women's magic and dragon magic. When the dragon Kalessin delivers the injured Ged to Gont, they have an interesting interaction with Tenar,

The dragon looked at the woman who stood there within reach of its scythe-blade talons. The woman looked at the dragon. She felt the heat of its body.

She had been told that men must not look into a dragon's eyes, but that was nothing to her. It gazed straight at her from yellow eyes under armored carapaces wide-set above the narrow nose and flaring, fuming nostrils. And her small, soft face and dark eyes gazed straight at it. (Le Guin 422)

Tenar and Kalessin approach each other as equals. The rule to not meet a dragon's gaze is shown to be made by men, and seemingly to apply only to men, or at any rate, not to her.

Later, Tenar considers her own power and believes that she doesn't have any. However, she can speak to dragons and she asks herself, "Was that the new thing, the folded knowledge, the light seed, that she felt in herself, waking beneath the small window that looked west?" (Le Guin 437). She feels a new power within her, and knows that it is connected to dragons, the mysterious natures of women's magic and dragon magic are somehow connected. She cannot be a dragonlord, as she is female; there is no word that is a female equivalent, so this power is undefinable. The linking of female power with dragon power further supports that female power is subversive and an expression of difference.

Tenar is not the only empowered female character that the text presents that must learn how to survive in a society that is engineered against them and which actively oppresses and harms them. Tenar adopts and cares for a wounded child, Therru. Therru is living with her vagabond parents when she is raped by her father, beaten, and thrown in the campfire. Lark describes her family as, "Not working, any of 'em. Filching and begging and living off the woman. Boys from downriver were bringing them farmstuff to get at her" (Le Guin 400). Early in her childhood, at the age of six or seven, Therru is living in a reality where sexuality is a marketable commodity and a way to forcefully assert power over others, even innocent children. This horrific abuse is not an anomaly, increased violence is one of the symptoms of the magically caused unrest and tension throughout Earthsea. The effects of this on women in particular are described, "Women did not like to go alone in the streets and roads, nor did they like that loss of freedom. Some of the young women ran off to join the gangs of thieves and poachers. Often they came home within the year, sullen, bruised, and pregnant" (Le Guin 407). While this

period of turmoil is detailed in *The Farthest Shore*, the experience of it is very different for women than for Ged and Arren. Even for the male protagonists, it was a serious problem, but it does not have the same tangible effects on their bodies. The gang members suffered from feelings of powerlessness, and that is what rape is, a move to feel powerful by taking away the power of others. The way that these men express their sexuality actively disempowers and hurts women.

Therru's power is, like the dragon's power, subversive and difficult to define. Tenar and Ged discuss if and how she should be trained. They believe that a prediction made by the Master Patterner on Roke may apply to her, but, as Ged notes, "A woman on Gont' can't become archmage. No woman can be archmage. She'd unmake what she became in becoming it" (Le Guin 527). Later, when Ged and Tenar have been kidnapped and beaten by Aspen, Therru's perspective is shown for the first time. She instinctively knows the true names of Aspen and Moss and thinks to herself that "She needed to fly, but she could not fly; she was not one of the winged ones" (Le Guin 542). The True Language of the dragons comes to her naturally, and she knows herself to have an affinity with them. She calls Kalessin to them to save her adoptive parents, and the dragon calls her by her true name, Tehanu, and calls her "my child" (Le Guin 546). Kalessin gives her the option to come with them to the distant lands where the dragons live, but she declines so she can stay with Ged and Tenar. Ogion, of all characters, recognizes the potential for great power in the child Therru, and tells Tenar that she must be taught about magic and trained to use it, but not by the wizards of Roke, as "they will fear her... they are afraid" (Le Guin 411). He does not elaborate, always a man of few words who is only hours from death, but the implication is clear. It is not that Therru is incapable or ill-suited for the

kind of education taught on Roke, it is that the mages of Roke will not teach a female student, regardless of how powerful she may be. The text uses this to further illustrate a misogynistic society.

Tehanu's liminality is what gives her power in her society. She exists on the margins because her extensive injuries mark her as other; it now transpires that this marginalization has given her a kinship with the dragons and may have sprung from such a connection that was already there. About the connection between dragon power and women's power, McLean writes, "By revalidating female anger and linking women to the natural wisdom and power of dragons, Le Guin gives her female readers, in particular, a myth of their own, a metaphor of empowerment in their search for a better self-image in our own patriarchal world" (McLean 116). Her rapist may have sexually asserted power over her, but her own power is not diminished because it comes from a different source, the subversion itself is powerful. Unlike in *The Tombs of Atuan*, female forms of magical power are not characterized as evil; they are powerful and mysterious, like the dragons. Tehanu is already different, a pariah in a patriarchy, so she exists in a different system.

A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE

Cersei Lannister is an example of a female character who struggles with power. Ironically, the least empowered of the three women is the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms. Cersei, the wife and later widow of King Robert Baratheon, is a villain from the beginning of the story. Her marriage to Robert was a disaster before it even began. Robert wanted to marry Lyanna Stark and Cersei wanted to marry Rhaegar Targaryen; Rhaegar and Lyanna ran off together, started a war, and both died. Cersei and Robert's

marriage was advantageous, but deeply unhappy and toxic, full of manipulation and resentment. Robert would sometimes rape her when he was drunk and then deny it in the morning, though she could tell that he remembered, thinking in *A Feast for Crows*, “She could see it in his eyes. He only pretended to forget; it was easier to do that than to face his shame” (Martin 481). As a result of these rapes, his drunkenness, and serial infidelity, Cersei was never able to respect Robert. He could never be what Rhaegar seemed to her to be. The conventional route for Cersei to experience sexuality, via marriage, was not a good one.

Cersei believes herself to be subverting the patriarchy with her sexuality and reproduction, but she doesn't actually subvert anything. Cersei's marriage to Robert did not produce a legitimate heir. Robert had sixteen illegitimate children, referred to in the series as bastards, with many women, usually prostitutes. In *A Game of Thrones*, Littlefinger tells Ned Stark that when Robert fathered twins several years before, Cersei had them murdered and the mother sold into slavery, with Ned thinking “He could believe it of Cersei Lannister readily enough...” (Martin 319). Cersei resists being cast as a pitiable victim of her marriage, she murders children because she finds their mere existence insulting. She has as many of Robert's bastards murdered as possible. Arranging the murder of children is something that Robert has done, he ordered Daenerys to be murdered because he is threatened by her existence. Cersei arranged for Robert to be given stronger wine than usual when he went on a boar hunt, successfully setting him up to be gored to death. The only time that Robert got her pregnant, she never told her husband, and quickly had an abortion. Robert was a bad person and a worse king, but Cersei is a hypocrite. She too was unfaithful throughout the entirety of their marriage, all

three of her children, Joffrey, Myrcella, and Tommen, are bastards by her twin brother Jaime. Cersei condemns Robert's bad behavior yet is proud of her own. She often justifies her relationship with Jaime by saying that it's what the Targaryens did. A common trend throughout the works analyzed in this thesis is that conforming to the social norms and emulating previous examples is ultimately disempowering. For female characters, difference is requisite in acquiring genuine power.

Cersei gains an illusion of power when she emulates Robert's sexual abuse. In the fourth book, *A Feast for Crows*, Cersei, remembering the abuse that Robert inflicted on her, has sex with her companion, Lady Taena Merryweather. She performs the sex act to try to see what Robert got out of it, by intentionally hurting Taena, but claiming that "It's just the wine...I am the queen, I need to claim my rights" (Martin 485). It is not a true reenactment of Robert raping her, as Taena consents, but Cersei intended it to be perverse. She wanted to know if she could get the same feeling of power that she knows Robert experienced, but she cannot. Earlier, Jaime notes that his sister is "in her cups" (Martin 231) and that she "always seemed to have a flagon of wine to hand, she who had once scorned Robert Baratheon for his drinking" (Martin 231). Robert was a promiscuous, abusive drunk, and now so is she. Cersei is not being subversive after Robert's death and she is not rebelling against his legacy; she has become him in female form. The text suggests that she is falling down the same dark path her husband did, she cannot become empowered in the patriarchy if all she does is become the patriarchy.

The text sets Cersei up as a woman who believes herself to be disadvantaged by society. Her biggest conflict is that she is never given the respect she feels that she deserves. She always feels that she, not her brothers Jaime and Tyrion, most takes after

their father Tywin. She believes that the only difference is that she is female, and that all of her difficulties stem from that. In *A Game of Thrones*, she challenges Robert's masculinity and competence,

“I took you for a *king*... This man dishonors you with every breath he takes, and yet you stand there meekly, asking if his leg pains him and would he like some wine.”

Robert's face was dark with anger. “How many times must I tell you to hold your tongue, woman?”

Cersei's face was a study in contempt. “What a jape the gods have made of us two,” she said. “By all rights, you ought to be in skirts and me in mail.” (Martin 358)

Cersei is arrogant, ambitious, and proud; there is nothing that someone else does that she does not believe that she could do better. *A Song of Ice and Fire* does portray female characters in positions of great power, and Cersei is one of them. Yet, even if she were male, she would never be Tywin come again. Tywin Lannister is Machiavellian, a brutal warlord who organizes massacres and allows cities to be sacked, condemning innocents to horrors without a second thought. However, he also had a keen eye for politics and when subtlety is required, something that Cersei never understood. In trying to be Tywin, Cersei always falls short, she only manages to emulate his cruelty and his underestimation of people believed to be inferior. Furthermore, in her “shallowness, lust, irrationality, instability, jealousy, and petty vengefulness” (Borowska-Szerszun 59), Cersei only lowers her chances of respect from the men around her because she is perfectly filling their misogynistic stereotypes.

Cersei's primary illusion is that she believes that she is powerful when she emulates the system of oppression, rather than subverting it. Sexuality has been used to violently disempower Cersei in the past; she is a victim of marital rape. She uses her sexuality as a weapon and a tool of manipulation; she uses it to disempower others

though she was herself disempowered. In *A Clash of Kings*, when the city is under siege, Cersei provides an illuminating glimpse into her psyche when talking to Sansa Stark, telling her, “Tears are not a woman’s only weapon. You’ve got another one between your legs, and you’d best learn to use it. You’ll find men use their swords freely enough. Both kinds of swords” (Martin 638). The casual way that Cersei discusses this is alarming, it is clear that she has no qualms over flirting or having sex with someone to manipulate them.

Perhaps the most notable victim of Cersei’s struggle for power through weaponizing her sexuality is her twin brother, Jaime. Cersei has had a life-long incestuous relationship with Jaime, yet when he is at war with the Starks in *A Game of Thrones*, she has sex with Lancel Lannister, a cousin that resembles the twins, showing that she doesn’t care about being faithful to Jaime, though he is faithful to her. In *A Storm of Swords*, Jaime notices that his appearance has significantly changed after his long imprisonment and thinks, “*I don’t look as much like Cersei this way. She’ll hate that*” (Martin 20). Sure enough, when Jaime returns to King’s Landing, Cersei rejects him, horrified by his change in appearance and personality, even though he has gone through a lot of emotional growth. Their relationship does not recover. In *A Feast for Crows*, she thinks to herself that she loved him because “*He was your twin, your shadow, your other half*” (Martin 175). Cersei claims to love Jaime, yet it is a narcissistic, egotistical love. What she likes about him is how he reminds him of herself, if she could marry herself, that’s what she would do. Cersei chooses partners that remind her of herself; she repeatedly chooses similarity over difference, to her own and others’ detriment.

Cersei’s delusional belief in her own invincibility is finally broken in *A Dance with Dragons*. Her reckless political maneuverings gave power back to the Faith Militant,

a religious organization of zealots, who imprison her for her many crimes and force her to walk naked through the city as atonement. The poor of the city scream insults at her and throw rotten food, and she has to walk through sewage and other refuse. She starts the walk proud and regal, telling herself, "*I am a lioness. I will not cringe for them*" (Martin 853), yet this does not last,

She felt old, used, filthy, ugly. There were stretch marks on her belly from the children she had borne, and her breasts were not as firm as they had been when she was younger. Without a gown to hold them up, they sagged against her chest. *I should not have done this. I was their queen, but now they've seen, they've seen, they've seen. I should never have let them see.* Gowned and crowned, she was a queen. Naked, bloody, limping, she was only a woman, not so very different from their wives, more like their mothers than their pretty little maiden daughters. (Martin 858)

It's hard to feel sympathy for Cersei throughout the series, she does truly horrible things. However, in this scene she is thoroughly dehumanized and abused, and it is difficult to read. She was in a position of great power, yet has that power brutally seized from her by a group that reinforces gendered double standards for sexual behavior. Borowska-Szerszun believes that this scene is evidence of the text itself perpetuating a sexist message, but the evidence for this is lacking. It is true that her punishment is cruel and deeply based in sexism, but the text does not want the reader to side with the mob; it suggests that even such a deeply flawed woman is not inhuman. The text is critiquing the theocratic system of shame and humiliation that hurts its female characters. However, Cersei, for all of her anger at the corrupt Westerosi patriarchy, actually reinforces rather than subverts the oppression through her actions. She looks down on everyone that isn't her and refuses to acknowledge her own errors.

Daenerys Targaryen starts off *A Song of Ice and Fire* as a completely powerless child. The last two Targaryens, Daenerys and her brother Viserys are the two surviving

children of the Mad King Aerys, and they have lived their lives on the run after their family was murdered and ousted from Westeros in Robert's Rebellion. Viserys is bitter, sadistic, and ambitious, and he has raised Daenerys as the closest thing to a parent that she has. He hurts her emotionally and physically, pinching her arms and breasts as a sign of ownership and control. The Targaryens had the sigil of a red three-headed dragon, symbolizing Aegon the Conqueror and his two sister-wives, who conquered Westeros on three dragons. Since that precedent was set, the dynasty had a tradition of incest, with siblings marrying each other to keep pure "the kingsblood, the golden blood of old Valyria, the blood of the dragon" (Martin 26). Dany had always assumed that she would eventually marry Viserys once her menstruation began, signaling her viability for marriage. She has always known that she too would inevitably become a victim of her family tradition. Dany has no power to stop this from happening.

Dany must do what Viserys tells her, she has no opportunity for subversion while under his control. A disempowered young girl in a patriarchal society, Daenerys' fertility and royal birth become bargaining chips. Viserys arranges Daenerys' marriage to Khal Drogo of the Dothraki, using her sexuality as a commodity to gain favor, with no regard for her safety or wellbeing, nor any attempt to hide his priorities. He tells her,

"We go home with an army, sweet sister. With Khal Drogo's army, that is how we go home. And if you must wed him and bed him for that, you will." He smiled at her. "I'd let his whole *khalasar* fuck you if need be, sweet sister, all forty thousand men, and their horses too if that was what it took to get my army. Be grateful it is only Drogo. In time you may even learn to like him. Now, dry your eyes. Illyrio is bringing him over, and he will *not* see you crying." (Martin 31)

The constant threat is that she will ignite his wrath, something he constantly refers to as "waking the dragon" (Martin 24). She has been trained to be meek and deferential to avoid him hurting her, he controls every part of her.

In order to become empowered, Daenerys must become something different and go against what her brother expects from her. She marries Drogo, so Viserys loses ownership over her. She slowly and painfully gains self-confidence, connected to her improved sex life with Drogo and her eventual pregnancy, and enough distance to see clearly just how toxic and weak her brother truly is. Once under the protection of her Dothraki bodyguards who would kill Viserys at one word from her, Daenerys is finally protected from his abuse. When the khalasar travels to Vaes Dothrak, a holy city where no steel or bloodshed are allowed, Viserys gets drunk and draws a sword. This ceremony in Vaes Dothrak is a marker of how far Daenerys' power has come, she is a pregnant khaleesi whose son is prophesied to be "the stallion who mounts the world" (Martin 413), and no disrespect or threat to her will be tolerated. Khal Drogo kills Viserys without spilling blood, by dumping a pot of molten gold on his head, and Dany reflects, "*He was no dragon...Fire cannot kill a dragon*" (Martin 418). Dany's discovery of her sexuality and the esteem that she gains as a result of her marriage to Khal Drogo give her power, enough power to set herself above the brother who had abused her for years, to see herself as the dragon he never was. The text suggests that the respect Daenerys receives is a power she has only because she is no longer controlled by Viserys; she had to rebel against him or she would have been a victim forever.

Daenerys's marriage to Khal Drogo is an essential part of her journey towards power. Their marriage is certainly not without its problems. She is only thirteen, and Drogo is a grown man around thirty-years-old, a warlord who has taken what he has with force. Surprisingly, on their wedding night, Drogo is tender and gentle, and waits for her verbal consent before consummating their marriage. However, this does not negate the

inequal power dynamic between the two, nor that the succeeding nights are far rougher, with Dany crying herself to sleep every night and considering suicide. Fortunately, things do get better for her, especially when she upsets the power dynamic by asserting her dominance, conceiving her son and changing her sex life. Gresham describes the scene as “life-affirming” (Gresham 157) and as “deeply positive and socially regenerative” (Gresham 157). Daenerys is different, she is a grotesque. If she is not a typical Westerosi wife and she is not a typical Dothraki khaleesi, then logically she can set her own precedent. Like the genre of fantasy, she is not easily categorized, so there are far more options for her. This change in their relationship allows for Dany to bribe Drogo with sexual favors; her sexuality is how she gains power over the man who is in charge of a khalasar of a hundred thousand people. She takes sexuality, which was once used against her, that made her weak, and uses it to her own advantage to make her strong and to wield her own power.

The most important and most subversive thing about Daenerys Targaryen is her dragons. It would not be a fantasy without some form of magic and the supernatural. In *A Game of Thrones*, three eggs are gifted to her at her wedding by Magister Illyrio, who believes them to be inviable, telling her that, “the eons have turned them to stone, yet they still burn bright with beauty” (Martin 86). Viserys sees them only for their monetary value, at one point attempting to steal them so he can trade them for a mercenary army. Dany, on the other hand, has strange and prophetic dreams containing dragons. While pregnant with Rhaego, the connection only strengthens,

Dany curled up on her side, pulling the sandsilk cloak across her and cradling the egg in the hollow between her swollen belly and small, tender breasts. She liked to hold them. They were so beautiful, and sometimes just being close to them

made her feel stronger, braver, as if somehow she were drawing strength from the stone dragons locked inside.

She was lying there, holding the egg, when she felt the child move within her... as if he were reaching out, brother to brother, blood to blood. “*You* are the dragon,” Dany whispered to him, “the *true* dragon. I know it. I know it.” (Martin 331)

Before they even hatch, Daenerys has as strong a maternal connection to her dragon’s eggs as she does to her unborn son. In criticism about *Earthsea*, dragons are for women “a metaphor of empowerment in their search for a better self-image in our own patriarchal world” (McLean 116). This equally applies to *A Game of Thrones*. These eggs are the only known dragon eggs still in existence, and they give her a power that nobody else can have. Dragons do not conform and do not obey, and neither will Daenerys.

Daenerys fully embodies the subversive woman of power with the birth of her dragons. The dragon eggs were, of course, never just stone. Previously, when speaking of Viserys’ anger, she asks her loyal knight,

“Ser Jorah, do you think... he’ll be so angry when he gets back...” She shivered. “I woke the dragon, didn’t I?”

Ser Jorah snorted. “Can you wake the dead, girl? Your brother Rhaegar was the last dragon, and he died on the Trident. Viserys is less than the shadow of a snake. (Martin 195)

Viserys never reached the Seven Kingdoms and he never would have woken dragons. Yet their brother Rhaegar was not the last dragon, Daenerys now is able to wake what was once believed to be dead. She places her dragon eggs on Drogo’s funeral pyre before walking into the fire herself, despite Jorah trying to stop her, and emerges as a grotesque, but as a mother at last,

She was naked, covered with soot, her clothes turned to ash, her beautiful hair all crisped away... yet she was unhurt.

The cream-and-gold dragon was suckling at her left breast, the green-and-bronze at the right. Her arms cradled them close. The black-and-scarlet beast was

draped across her shoulders, its long sinuous neck coiled under her chin. (Martin 673-674)

Daenerys came into her sexuality and gained power in that way, using it to her advantage rather than allowing others to use her. The text suggests that her power is unique, like her unique route to power; she has a magic of a kind that no one else has. Daenerys' greatest form of power is her dragons, a magical form of reproduction that is subversive of a system where she had, only months before, been sold into slavery so that her brother may have troops for a war.

Daenerys' subversion of the patriarchy of the societies she has lived in is also shown at the beginning of the second book, *A Clash of Kings*. It is revealed that she has named her dragons Drogon, Rhaegal, and Viserion, after the husband and the two brothers that she lost, commenting, "Viserys was cruel and weak and frightened, yet he was my brother still. His dragon will do what he could not" (Martin 145). Rhaegar died before Dany was born, but, despite her love for both Drogo and Viserys, they both abused her. In naming her dragon children after them, she puts herself in a position of power over them, at least while the dragons are small. She is a mother, not a sister, daughter, or wife. She has lost so much, but she will not be the scared girl that she once was; she has woken dragons after all this time. Moving forward into the later books, she uses her sexuality for her own pleasure and to gain political respect through marriage; she is no longer a victim of it. With the unique power that her dragon children give her, she will do all in her power to take back the Seven Kingdoms that her family died for.

Brienne of Tarth, first appearing in *A Clash of Kings*, is another subversive female character in a patriarchal society. Like Daenerys, she is a grotesque. Her grotesqueness is tied to her physical appearance; she is tall, muscular, and considered ugly by Westerosi

beauty standards. When Catelyn Stark sees Brienne remove her helmet after defeating Loras Tyrell in a tournament, she thinks,

The hair beneath the visor was a squirrel's nest of dirty straw, and her face... Brienne's eyes were large and very blue, a young girl's eyes, trusting and guileless, but the rest... her features were broad and coarse, her teeth prominent and crooked, her mouth too wide, her lips so plump they seemed swollen. A thousand freckles speckled her cheeks and brow, and her nose had been broken more than once. (Martin 259)

As the highborn daughter of a lord, like Catelyn herself, Brienne is expected to be a lady, to exhibit courtesy, beauty, and grace and make a good marriage to gain connections for her father. However, unlike Catelyn, Brienne does not fit the mold and will not be molded into a shape that is pleasing for any suitors. In the next book, *A Storm of Swords*, Brienne is forced to wear women's garments at Harrenhal, and Jaime Lannister thinks to himself, "It was obvious at once that the gown had been cut for someone with slimmer arms, shorter legs, and much fuller breasts.... All in all, the garb made the wench look ludicrous" (Martin 420-421). Brienne does not have the expected "feminine" body, this is part of the reason that she prefers to wear androgynous clothing. Due to factors beyond her control, Brienne can never thrive in the role her society expects her to fill; to have any chance at respect she must become something different. The text suggests that her grotesqueness gives her power because, with fewer men taking interest in her, she can do something besides marry and bear children.

Brienne's subversion is based in how she is caught between being a lady and being a knight. She is a strong and skilled fighter, and her sense of honor and chivalry is far purer than most actual knights in the series. However, she cannot be a knight because she is a woman. Most of Brienne's traits are shown when put in contrast to her prisoner and eventual friend, Jaime Lannister. Jaime is an oathbreaker, known throughout the

Seven Kingdoms as the Kingslayer, a man with “shit for honor” (Martin 242). As a sworn brother of the Kingsguard, he is supposed to protect and serve the king and the royal family, but he killed the king. On the surface, Jaime is the perfect knight, handsome, strong, and talented, yet he breaks nearly all the rules of knighthood. Brienne strongly disapproves of Jaime, saying,

“Your crimes are past forgiving, Kingslayer.”

“That name again.” Jaime twisted idly at his chains. “Why do I enrage you so? I’ve never done you harm that I know of.”

“You’ve harmed others. Those you were sworn to protect. The weak, the innocent...”

“...the king?” It always came back to Aerys. “Don’t presume to judge what you do not understand, wench.” ...

“Why did you take the oath?” she demanded. “Why don the white cloak if you meant to betray all it stood for?” (Martin 127)

Jaime is a complex and damaged character with a long path to redemption, and he serves as a foil for Brienne’s virtuosity. They learn a great deal from each other, most important of which being to question their beliefs and assumptions. Brienne learns that honor comes in more forms than just the ones to which she has been accustomed. Westerosi society, here represented by Jaime, is deeply corrupt. The text suggests that Brienne’s radicality comes in the form of her own adherence to honor and morality in a world that only pretends to value them.

In the characterization of Brienne, the text shows a female character for whom sexuality has only ever been a disempowering prospect. She does not see a possibility for a life where sexuality and romance could be happy. As Marques observed, there is a trend in *A Song of Ice and Fire* where “a woman must forfeit her femininity to be taken seriously in a male-dominated world and to perform deeds mostly ascribed to men” (Marques 47). Brienne is seen by most as incredibly ugly, no man wanted to marry her,

and they have been cruel in expressing it. Her first fiancé died of a sickness as a child and her second rejected her because of her appearance. Her third betrothal to a much older man did not go any better,

She was sixteen and no stranger to a sword, but still shy despite her prowess in the yard. Yet somehow she found the courage to tell Ser Humfrey that she would accept chastisement only from a man who could outfight her. The old knight purpled, but agreed to don his own armor to teach her a woman's proper place. They fought with blunted tourney weapons, so Brienne's mace had no spikes. She broke Ser Humfrey's collarbone, two ribs, and their betrothal. He was her third prospective husband, and her last. Her father did not insist again. (Martin 142)

By this point, Brienne understands the sad truth that it is unlikely that any man will marry her based on her own merit. As a result, she would rather have no man. If getting married means sacrificing who she is and what she values, then she will not do it. She must either forfeit her femininity or her selfhood, and the choice she makes is subversive. As MacInnes wrote, "it is through her own agency that she accumulates that which she possesses" (MacInnes 81). Women in Westeros are not supposed to wield swords, they're supposed to wear gowns and bear children, but Brienne refused to be miserable under an existence that could only ever offer illusions of power. Her choice to stay authentic to herself is itself an act of power.

The harsh truth of Westerosi society is that women are very often victimized and disempowered, with most never getting the opportunity to be subversive. Brienne has to put up with constant heckling throughout her life. When she is traveling, she constantly has to be watchful because the threat of rape is very real. Jaime repeatedly has to save her from thugs. Brienne is a skilled warrior that can usually fend for herself just fine, yet she cannot change that she is a woman in a society that treats women with violence and contempt. It's hard to be powerful when the very nature of your body makes you

vulnerable. She has had it shown to her time and again that no man will love her or find her beautiful and that no man would ever want to have sex with her unless it is an assault. Sexuality and romance are not empowering prospects for Brienne, her power, limited though it may be, comes from her choice to be a warrior. When talking with Catelyn Stark in *A Clash of Kings*, Brienne says,

“Fighting is better than this waiting,” Brienne said. “You don’t feel so helpless when you fight. You have a sword and a horse, sometimes an axe. When you’re armored it’s hard for anyone to hurt you.”

“Knights die in battle,” Catelyn reminded her.

Brienne looked at her with those blue and beautiful eyes. “As ladies die in childbed. No one sings songs about *them*.” (Martin 490)

Brienne understands that there is no future in which she is all-powerful. As a woman existing in a patriarchy, she makes the choice to not fill the role of lady that she was supposed to, it never fit her anyway. As a knight, she can put on armor, both literal and figurative, to protect herself from the cruelty of the world, she can experience “the vitality and freedom of nonmimetic traditional forms” (Attebery 1). She knows that she may still be killed, but at least she finds meaning in her cause, and maybe one day someone will even sing a song for her. Through Brienne’s characterization, the texts place value on being true to oneself and true to your own values and that even this is rebellion in a cruel world. However, despite all the ways the texts empower Brienne, they also show that there are some ways that she will always be powerless.

In the oppressive patriarchies of Earthsea and Westeros, sometimes female power is just the will to exist in the manner of your own choosing. Tenar found power in choice and autonomy, choosing a world of sexuality and the sexism that is tied into it over a life where everything was scripted for her. Daenerys, once a victim, uses her role as a once

powerless reproductive figure to birth dragons and become arguably the most powerful of all the characters in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Brienne will face strife either way, so she chooses the route that will give her a chance to be authentic to her own personality and goals, requiring no small amount of bravery. Cersei tries to be subversive, but ultimately falls into the trap of imitation; just because something gave power to a man does not mean that it will allow a woman to be empowered.

CHAPTER 2: RELIGION AND FEMALE POWER IN *THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA* AND *HIS DARK MATERIALS*

In this chapter, I examine the intersection between religion and female power in C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*. I grouped these two series together under this topic because there is a lot of overlap in the criticism. It is widely known that Philip Pullman has strongly negative opinions about *The Chronicles of Narnia* and its messages, and that *His Dark Materials* is partially meant to be a response to Lewis' work. *The Chronicles of Narnia* relies heavily on religious allegory and uses it to reinforce a feminine ideal based in conservatism and Christianity. *His Dark Materials* also contains a great deal of allegory, but the "dominant cultural order" (Jackson 4) that must be resisted is organized religion and even God. The interpretive question of this chapter is what the texts suggest in the female characterization and how subversion and female power are linked, in terms of religion. As a quick aside, I refer to *The Chronicles of Narnia* in order of the chronology of the story itself, not by publication date, so *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is the second book.

The critical conversation surrounding *The Chronicles of Narnia* is mixed. Some of the critics express a fondness and nostalgia for C.S. Lewis and tend to gloss over or forgive his messages on gender. The author of *Milton, Spenser and The Chronicles of Narnia: Literary Sources for the C.S. Lewis Novels*, Elizabeth Baird Hardy, is one of these critics. She claims that the books are not "forcibly teaching Christianity" (Hardy 7), but that they use "elements of the Christian faith... [to] familiarize the reader with Christian concepts such as love, sacrifice, repentance, and forgiveness" (Hardy 7). She

describes the two witches of the series as “two of the most subtle and most carefully drawn villainesses in all literature” (Hardy 48). Hardy also claims that Lewis’ “female characters fulfill duties as diverse as catalysts, leaders, healers, rulers, and warriors....These varied and sometimes surprising roles reveal the freedom Lewis gives to his female characters and the ways in which such individuals combat sexism and stereotyping in the *Chronicles* and their predecessors” (Hardy 78). Hardy’s reading of *The Chronicles of Narnia* does not pick up on sexist and racist messaging, she sees them as full of empowered female characters and virtuous Christian morality.

Benita Huffman Muth also has a generous view of Lewis in “Paradise Retold: Lewis's Reimagining Of Milton, Eden, and Eve.” She claims,

Lewis, like many of his and earlier generations, is caught in a cultural contradiction, accepting wholeheartedly the Christian view of the equality of souls in which ‘there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave or free, nor is there male or female’ (Galatians 3:28), the subordination of all souls to God’s goodness, and the directive to love one’s neighbor while also accepting the prevailing cultural idea that men and women, in earthly existence, have different roles and social functions. Certainly Lewis was committed to the Christian ideal that values individual souls and individual free will, regardless of gender; but he had been born into a world of complex class and gender norms which took for granted the idea that men and women had different roles. Like Milton, he sought to blend his societal understanding with the spiritual equality given to all humanity. (Muth 28)

To Muth’s credit, she does acknowledge that there is a hierarchy present in the ideal world that Lewis describes in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. This hierarchy places men above women and places them in separate spheres. Muth is willing to give Lewis the benefit of the doubt, linking him to Milton.

Many other critics are less willing to ignore the problematic messages in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. A common point of negative criticism is Lewis’ characterization of Susan Pevensie, who is the only character to not die at the end of *The Last Battle* and go

to heaven, or, as it's called in Narnia, Aslan's Country. In "Whiner or Warrior? Susan Pevensie's Role in the Novel and Film Versions of *The Chronicles of Narnia*," Eleanor Hersey Nickel asks,

Why is Lucy's vanity passed over so lightly, while Susan's vanity will later exclude her from Heaven? Aslan does have a special bond with Lucy based on her extraordinary faith, but readers may wonder why he never took the time to give Susan the lesson that may have saved her soul. Readers are left to conclude that Lewis simply lost interest in Susan and chose to portray her as a destructive kind of teenage girl rather than the ideal mother that she had the potential to become. Perhaps his personal annoyance with vain young women overpowered his commitment to supporting traditional gender roles. (Nickel 261-262).

Nickel is not willing to overlook Susan's characterization and the sexism it implies.

Susan is excluded from salvation supposedly because she has become superficial, but it is really because she lacks the religious faith of her equally vain sister, Lucy. The text constructs difference between the female characters, but only to set one above the other.

In *The Fiction of C.S. Lewis: Mask and Mirror*, Kath Filmer claims, "What is disturbing in the Narnian Chronicles, as well as in the whole range of Lewis' literary corpus is the way in which ultimate good is depicted as ultimate masculinity, while evil, the corruption of good, is defined as femininity" (Filmer 110). This continues the critical conversation on the hierarchy and conservative worldview built into the foundation of Narnia. The High King of Narnia, Peter the Magnificent, Caspian X, and, of course, Aslan, the Narnian Christ, are all seen as moral role models, and they are the strongest and most masculine characters. Two of the most notable villains in *The Chronicles of Narnia* are both female witches, and, despite what Hardy writes, their characterization cannot be accurately described as subtle. In a fantasy series so heavily based in religious allegory, the witches are Lilith.

Canonically, the White Witch, Jadis, is a descendant of Lilith. In “Women, Sex, and Power: Circe and Lilith in Narnia,” Jean E. Graham describes Lilith,

The variations are well reported by Patai: Lilith is described as a beautiful woman with long loose hair and/or wings; as an old hag; as a warrior; or as a serpent. Associated with night, the moon, the owl, animals in general, the sea, the desert, and ruined cities, she has served as the consort of Leviathan the serpent and Samael the devil. She was created like Adam, only from filth rather than dust or earth; or she was Adam’s other half, sawed from his side... As Adam’s first wife, she refused his sexual overtures, asserting that she was his equal and thus should not have to lie beneath him. To escape Adam, she spoke God’s name and flew away to the Red Sea, where she took many lovers, producing demon children to plague mankind... She has been given authority to punish and kill children for the sins of their fathers and is associated with the flaming sword that guards Eden. (Graham 34)

This list of all the ways that the mythology paints Lilith as the ultimate figure of depravity and cruelty goes on for pages. Lilith is everything that women are not supposed to be in this tradition; she is liberated, connected with nature, and independent. Looked at through a modern lens, Lilith is quickly identified as a scapegoat for humanity’s problems, the first witch. She is demonized because she refuses to have sex with Adam and believes herself to be equal to him. Her sexuality and her reproduction are evil, they are not within the bounds of marriage and do not play by the rules. She has no children, or demonic ones, they all die, or she kills them. All of the power that she gained from her subversion is deemed wicked, and she is punished. She refused to be what others wanted her to be, she chose to be different and this gave her great and terrible power.

As previously mentioned, much of the criticism surrounding *His Dark Materials* contrasts it to *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In *Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials--a Multiple Allegory: Attacking Religious Superstition in The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe and Paradise Lost*, Leonard Wheat analyzes the religious allegory in both series in great detail. One example of many is that “Asriel symbolizes Satan – many

readers and just about all the reviewers and critics know this” (Wheat 23). He further writes, “In addition to creating forty-one character symbols, Pullman symbolizes sixty-two places, things, and events from Narnia. Were Pullman to selectively symbolize just half or even a third of the referents of his symbols, he would have a fine allegory. As it happens, though, he somehow conjures up 104 symbols that symbolize almost everything in Lewis’ story” (Wheat 105). Besides the fact that forty-one plus sixty-two equals only one hundred and three total symbols, Wheat’s point remains. Pullman clearly spent a lot of time in writing *His Dark Materials* as a more progressive, secular retelling not only of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, but of the story of Genesis.

Both Elisabeth Eldridge and Catherine Butler also connect Pullman and Lewis. In “Constructions of the Child, Authority, and Authorship: The Reception of C.S. Lewis and Philip Pullman,” Eldridge claims,

The age-old opposition of free will versus pre-destination, played out in the actions and fate of Lyra and Susan seems to relate to the question of reading these books as they demand to be read: allegorical writing constructs a didactic function even though it is possible to read against the text. However, by reading against the didactic demands of the allegory, a reader must acknowledge those demands and respond to them. (Eldridge 49)

Allegory is a form used to teach specific morals, and both Lewis and Pullman use it for that purpose, though to convey entirely different messages. Pullman’s disgust with the messages Lewis aims at children in *The Chronicles of Narnia* is well-documented. In her chapter “Modern children’s fantasy,” Catherine Butler writes,

Pullman finds C.S. Lewis to be a particularly grievous offender here, with the deaths of the Pevensie children at the conclusion of the Narnia sequence a definitive form of severance through which they are ‘saved’ from the temptations of teenage sexuality – a move that led Pullman to accuse Lewis of writing ‘propaganda in the service of a life-hating ideology’.¹⁰ (Butler 232)

My reading of both series aligns my interpretation with Pullman's, that Lewis weaponizes religion to further both sexist and racist conservative agendas through a form that is often considered innocuous: children's literature. This is not harmless because, even if typically not thought about, literature affects culture deeply, and children reading *The Chronicles of Narnia* don't pick up on authorial bias, they just internalize the message, that questioning society is bad and that femininity is sinful when aligned with sexuality, unless through an Eve-like, subservient reproductive ideal.

In "The Problem of Mrs. Coulter: Vetting the Female Villain-Hero in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*", Amanda M. Greenwell writes, "Mrs. Coulter's earlier search for power forced her into vassalage to the Church, but her later movement towards liberty has made possible her ability to transcend the roles of oppressed female and evil villain" (Greenwell 243). In the very essence of her character, Mrs. Coulter is subversive, she avoids being judged on a black and white, all or nothing scale. It is her free will, however associated with untrustworthiness and previous ill deeds, that allows her the power to transcend. In "Reconfiguring Nurture in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*," Amelia A. Rutledge also writes on Mrs. Coulter, arguing, "until Coulter *acts* on her resolve to aid Lyra— departing to seduce Metatron – her motivations remain ambiguous, which is part of the power of Pullman's characterization" (Rutledge 123). It's nigh impossible to judge Mrs. Coulter's character based solely on her words, she is a skilled liar like both her lover and her daughter, her actions are key.

There also is critical conversation surrounding Lyra and her prophesied roles. In "Fantasizing It As It Is: Religious Language in Philip Pullman's Trilogy, *His Dark Materials*," David Gooderham describes Lyra's time in the underworld,

In the process she finds herself at the head of a grand enterprise to set the myriads of dead free, assuming the Christ-role in an unmistakable “harrowing of hell.” The narrative of the liberation constitutes one of the “mighty works” of Lyra as new Eve. It is also framed as an answer to a fundamental question about the nature of the world of death, ““even the churches don’t know””; avers one of the angel characters, ““they tell their believers that they’ll live in heaven, but that’s a lie”” (AS 35). So Pullman’s task is to replace the old myths with a new, more honest story, written to replace the delusion of the afterlife. (Gooderham 161)

Gooderham here is claiming that Lyra has a messianic role in *His Dark Materials*, as shown when she sets the dead free; she is a female Christ. Tommy Halsdorf agrees that Lyra is a female savior figure in his chapter “Walking into Mortal Sin: Lyra, the Fall, and Sexuality” and he examines closer Lyra’s role as a second Eve, writing,

The original Fall of man was an unjust punishment for daring to acquire knowledge, which in Pullman’s story is seen as a positive act. The heroine Lyra Belacqua is, unbeknown to her, the subject of a prophecy casting her as Eve reborn, and her second Fall acts as a means of redemption not damnation of mankind. Her ‘fault’ becomes fortunate, and it will be argued that it represents a reestablishment of the male-female balance upset by the events related in the Book of Genesis. (Halsdorf 172)

This reading fits with Pullman’s text because it sees error not in Eve but in the gender dynamic, in the structure not the individual victimized by it.

In “Exploring and Challenging the Lapsarian World of Young Adult Literature: Femininity, Shame, the Gyptians, and Social Class,” Nicola Allen argues that feminine body shame is linked with social class, with Lyra being made to feel especially conscious of her body during the brief time that she lived with Mrs. Coulter in *The Golden Compass* but feeling liberated when she spent time with the Gyptians, who operate on a lower class in the social hierarchy. She writes, “female body shame is felt more keenly and perpetuated within the middle classes, while the working classes remain freer from the shame of a post-pubescent body, and are freer to partake in a less classical and therefore less restrictive body image” (Allen 120). This is an interesting viewpoint, though I do not

think that the topic of social class is explored deeply enough in Pullman's text to give ample evidence to support this claim. In Sarah Gamble's "Becoming Human: Desire and the Gendered Subject," she makes an interesting argument about how the gender of one's dæmon, the animal embodiment of one's soul, is only rarely the same as the gender of the person. She writes, "This suggests that Pullman's world is one firmly bound to dualistic conceptions of gender identity, no matter how independent, the female subject is always bound to the imperatives of desire. The result is that any move to destabilize heterosexual dualisms is baffled in these texts" (Gamble 193-194). It is true that *His Dark Materials* does not stray beyond heteronormativity. This is valuable, especially since the series is often championed as progressive since it takes on organized religion and the stigma around female sexuality.

In this chapter, I argue that conflating ideal femininity with religious devotion is disempowering, as conformity can only provide an illusion of power. The characters who question or disavow religion are the only ones who have genuine power gained from the subversion of their society.

THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA

The most prominent example of a female character who only has an illusion of power in *The Chronicles of Narnia* is Lucy Pevensie. Lucy is the youngest of the Pevensie siblings; she is the most curious and the one with the purest faith in Aslan. It is she who discovers Narnia in the wardrobe in Professor Kirke's house. In *The Horse and His Boy*, as a young adult Queen of Narnia, Lucy is a respected warrior, riding a charger, wearing armor, and carrying a bow and arrows. She leads the archers in battle, and

Thornbut comments that “The Queen’s grace will do as she pleases” (Lewis 192). The contrast between the sisters is illustrated most strongly by Prince Corin, who tells Shasta that Susan is “not like Lucy, you know, who’s as good as a man, or at any rate as good as a boy. Queen Susan is more like an ordinary grown-up lady. She doesn’t ride to the wars, although she is an excellent archer” (Lewis 196). Even before Susan was shamed and exiled, a contrast was set up between the two sisters, framing Lucy as superior because she has more masculine characteristics. This connects back to Filmer’s observation that masculinity is associated with good and femininity with evil. Even Lucy doesn’t truly rank highly enough to be a man, only a boy

Lucy’s illusion of power lies in her religious faith. Even when she is vain or jealous, Aslan always forgives her. In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Lucy is reading through his magic book, she comes across a spell that would make her beautiful,

Then it changed and Lucy, still beautiful beyond the lot of mortals, was back in England. And Susan (who had always been the beauty of the family) came home from America. The Susan in the picture looked exactly like the real Susan only plainer and with a nasty expression. And Susan was jealous of the dazzling beauty of Lucy, but that didn’t matter a bit because no one cared about Susan now. (Lewis 164-165)

Lucy is incredibly self-conscious of how she appears in Susan’s shadow, and is shortly thereafter proven to be insecure about her friendships. It is shown that Lucy is prone to jealousy, and the nastiness of Susan is shown to be not accurate to reality. Lucy, despite always being written as steadfast and faithful, shows herself to have doubts and flaws. She may have faith in Aslan, but she is insecure and lacks faith in her friendships, as seen when she performs a spell to see what her friends think of her. Aslan admonishes her for all of this, but it is soon in the past. This poignant scene, the one in which Lucy is shown to have more emotional depth than any other place in the entire series, is soon dismissed.

Lucy is faithful, so she is forgiven. She does not have even enough agency within the narrative for her bad decisions to stick and have consequences.

Susan Pevensie's characterization is unique because the text neither empowers her nor provides any illusion that she is empowered. She is not subversive enough to have power, even the perverse kind that the witches have. Yet she is also not faithful enough to have that comforting illusion that Lucy has. It is always Susan who worries, doubts, and questions throughout the books she appears in. An example is when the characters are discussing what to do of the problem that Jadis is owed Edmund's blood because of his betrayal, it is Susan that asks Aslan "Can't we do something about the Deep Magic? Isn't there something you can work against it?" (Lewis 156). Susan does not understand that to go against the Deep Magic is to defy God and the ways of the universe, and Aslan shows his disapproval of this line of thought. Later, when Aslan is bringing back all the creatures that Jadis turned to stone, it is the practical Susan, not Lucy, who worries that the strange creatures that she has never seen before might be dangerous. Edmund is redeemed for betraying his family to a murderous witch, yet Susan is never forgiven for doubting, because the text irrevocably links morality with purity of faith.

The characterization of Susan as disempowered and frivolous is strong in *The Horse and His Boy*. Susan is visiting her suitor Prince Rabadash in the city of Tashbaan in Calormen, accompanied by her brother Edmund and others, and they are all coming to the realization that Rabadash will marry her by force if they do not agree to the marriage. The Calormene people are racist and Islamophobic caricatures, and Susan fills the stereotype of the white woman whose male family and supporters must protect from the dangerous non-white men, as Prince Corin of Archenland admits to starting a brawl

because “a boy in the street made a beastly joke about Queen Susan” (Lewis 84). Susan continues to behave like a mother, fussing and scolding over Shasta, who she believes to be Corin. She spends most of her time in the story weeping and having other people figure out how to protect her. Nickel points out that Susan had the potential to be the ideal, Eve-like mother, but the message of the text is inconsistent here. Surely, a text that places so much weight on Christianity would forgive a character who cries and questions.

Kath Filmer writes about Narnia,

It forms a suitable background for fairy stories which double also as romances of the chivalric mode, allowing Lewis to showcase, as it were, particular beliefs and fancies of his own. Interestingly, these are not Christian, except by Lewis’s determined association of them with Christianity. In the Narnian Chronicles, as in his own life, Lewis draws under the rubric of Christianity his own idiosyncratic belief system. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in his treatment of the female characters. (Filmer 104)

The text does not forgive Susan because the text mirrors Lewis’ misogyny, not the forgiveness central to the Christian religion. It would have made a conservative kind of sense for Susan to be a quiet, dutiful wife and queen, like Helen in *The Magician’s Nephew*, but Susan is a young woman, and that is a punishable offense.

Susan is ultimately entirely disempowered and excluded from the events in Narnia. The contrasting fates of the Pevensie sisters are revealed in *The Last Battle*. King Tirian asks for help from the Friends of Narnia to save his homeland from impending doom. The seven friends of Narnia that appear to come to his aid are Digory Kirke, Polly Plummer, Jill Pole, Eustace Clarence Scrubb, Peter Pevensie, Edmund Pevensie, and Lucy Pevensie. Centuries of Narnian time have passed and the only living character to be excluded is Susan Pevensie. Jill and Eustace appear in Narnia to help Tirian, though not in the manner they intended, yet catastrophe cannot be avoided, and Narnia’s destruction

is unstoppable. At the end of the world, Tirian sees the Seven Kings and Queens, and Susan is once again absent, which he asks about. They respond,

“My sister Susan,” answered Peter shortly and gravely, “is no longer a friend of Narnia.”

“Yes,” said Eustace, “and whenever you’ve tried to get her to come and talk about Narnia or do anything about Narnia, she says, ‘What wonderful memories you have! Fancy your still thinking about all those funny games we used to play when we were children.’”

“Oh Susan!” said Jill. “She’s interested in nothing nowadays except nylons and lipstick and invitations. She always was a jolly sight too keen on being grown-up.”

“Grown-up, indeed,” said the Lady Polly. “I wish she *would* grow up. She wasted all her school time wanting to be the age she is now, and she’ll waste all the rest of her life trying to stay that age. Her whole idea is to race on to the silliest time of one’s life as quick as she can and then stop there as long as she can.” (Lewis 169)

And just like that, Susan is dismissed forever. She likes fashion and having a social life. She is likely interested in men, maybe even in sex. The text places high value on being a child and having child-like faith and devotion to Aslan. Susan is punished for not wishing to stop time and stay a child forever, she wants to enjoy being a young woman, which Polly puts down as being “the silliest time of one’s life” (Lewis 169). She never hurts anyone or is cruel, but she stopped believing in Narnia, and so she is damned. Susan always questioned things and doubted and didn’t believe as strongly, and Lewis makes these into markers of immorality rather than intelligence and practicality. She grew up and stopped being a child, a process that can only be stopped by death.

In a sick sort of way, the lack of respect for Susan is what saves her. Death is what happens to everyone else. All of the Seven Friends were either on a train or at the station when a horrible train crash happened, killing every one of them. Even the Pevensie parents are revealed to have coincidentally been on the same train. As Narnia comes to an end, all of the beloved characters from all seven books are reunited in

heaven, in Aslan's country. Susan is the sole survivor, excluded from heaven. She cared about beauty and how other people saw her, but so did Lucy and Jill, and they are forgiven. Polly took the ring, Digory woke Jadis, Edmund was once a traitor. All are forgiven, except for the woman who for some reason could neither be Eve, powerless but admired in her benign domesticity, nor Lilith, full of unholy power. She does not fit in well enough yet does not subvert well enough. Susan is damned not because of what she has done but because of what she is, a woman that didn't fit Lewis' conservative Christian ideal. Perhaps it can be argued that Susan's choice in what she prioritizes in her adult life is a subversive choice of difference that grants her power. If only it were so, but this goes against the spirit of the text. There is no way to read the ending of Susan's story in *The Chronicles of Narnia* in a way that is empowering for women, fictional or otherwise.

Jadis, the most notable villain in the series, is subversive and empowered but her power and personality are described as entirely evil. Jadis first appears in *The Magician's Nephew*. Polly and Digory find themselves in the throne room of the destroyed world of Charn, where all the kings and queens of the land are preserved on thrones in a large room,

When they had gone a little further, they found themselves among faces they didn't like: this was about the middle of the room. The faces here looked very strong and proud and happy, but they looked cruel. A little further on they looked crueler. Further on again, they were still cruel but they no longer looked happy...The last figure of all was the most interesting— a woman even more richly dressed than the others, very tall (but every figure in that room was taller than the people of our world), with a look of such fierceness and pride that it took your breath away. Yet she was beautiful too. (Lewis 54)

Even before she is awakened, Jadis, the last queen, is positioned as a villainous figure.

When she wakes, she is imperious and haughty, and she proudly points out dungeons and

torture chambers as they escape the crumbling ruins of her palace, telling them stories of past atrocities. Her own stories show her to be vain and egotistical, and to have no regard for the lives of others, as she believes them all to be inferior to herself. She disregards all laws of morality, and her power is evil, but she is by far the most powerful female character in the entire series.

Jadis' evil is set in harsh relief against the goodness of creation. After wreaking havoc in London, Jadis witnesses the birth of Narnia. This is a wondrously beautiful event for the other witnesses, with the exception of Uncle Andrew, but Jadis is not happy, "Ever since the song began she had felt that this whole world was filled with a Magic different from hers and stronger. She hated it. She would have smashed that whole world, or all worlds, to pieces, if it would only stop the singing" (Lewis 118-119). For Jadis, everything is about gaining power, and goodness is repellent to her. She is a character of pure evil, with no complexity or redeeming qualities. Later, in the walled Edenic garden in the newly created Narnia, while Digory is considering tasting the apple that Aslan told him not to eat, he sees Jadis,

She was just throwing away the core of an apple which she had eaten. The juice was darker than you would expect and had made a horrid stain round her mouth. Digory guessed at once that she must have climbed in over the wall. And he began to see that there might be some sense in that last line about getting your heart's desire and getting despair with it. For the Witch looked stronger and prouder than ever, and even, in a way, triumphant; but her face was deadly white, white as salt. (Lewis 190)

Facing the choice of eating the forbidden fruit, Jadis appears to have not hesitated; she knows it will grant her the immortality that she desires. The stain around her mouth is like blood, that combined with the extreme pallor of her skin makes her appear like a vampire, a creature that preys on others and to whom light and goodness are anathema.

She tries to tempt Digory to eat the apple too, like the Serpent in Eden, but Digory refuses because Jadis now repulses him. She is not human and not even human-like. She has broken the laws of nature to gain power, and this puts her beyond redemption.

In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Jadis continues to be a figure of evil and temptation. She is now called the Queen of Narnia and Empress of the Lone Islands by her supporters but is the White Witch to her enemies. She manipulates Edmund by bribing him with Turkish delight, specially enchanted to be addictive, to tell her everything about his siblings and what they all knew about Narnia. She plays off of his petty resentments until he agrees that he will try to bring them back to her; she does not tell him that she plans to kill them all. Once again, she is an immoral temptress, trying to convince children to eat magical food that they shouldn't and to disobey the will of Aslan, the allegorical Christ figure of the series. Jadis is unable to meet Aslan's gaze, she is so irrevocably separated from goodness and redemption within the narrative. Jadis is like the Serpent in Genesis, a Satanic figure who derives all of her power from immoral and impure acts of subversion. As Graham notes, she is not human, and therefore incapable of being redeemed. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Mr. Beaver says, ““But she's no Daughter of Eve. She comes of your father Adam's' — (here Mr. Beaver bowed) 'your father Adam's first wife, her they called Lilith. And she was one of the Jinn. That's what she comes from on one side. And on the other she comes of the giants. No, no, there isn't a drop of real human blood in the Witch'” (Lewis 88). Here, humanity is linked with goodness or at least the potential for it. When Hardy described the witches as “two of the most subtle and most carefully drawn villainesses in all literature” (Hardy 48), she seriously missed the mark. To have subtlety and complexity, a

a character must be granted more than one character trait, they must have some internal conflict, and Jadis does not.

Lewis is not critical of the sexism inherent to the Lilith mythology; he leans into it wholeheartedly, supporting the sexist tradition rather than questioning it. Jadis is just like her ancestress. Her first appearance in the chronology of the story is in a city that she destroyed, she is beautiful but terrifying, she defies Aslan repeatedly, and is constantly looking to gain more power. She has no qualms against murdering children, Aslan even acknowledges her right, given to her by the Deep Magic, to kill traitors when she demands that Edmund be given to her so that she may execute him. Lewis is heavy-handed in his use of allegory and religious motifs. A touch of subtlety and restraint would reduce the feeling that the reader is constantly being hit over the head by a Bible. Jadis feels more like a trope masquerading as a character, rather than an actual character with complexity.

The Lady of the Green Kirtle is also an empowered but evil female character in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In the sixth book, *The Silver Chair*, many centuries in Narnian time since the days of the White Witch, a very similar figure emerges. The Queen of Narnia, the unnamed wife of Caspian X and mother of Prince Rilian, is stung and killed by “a great serpent...great, shining, and as green as poison” (Lewis 57). Shortly thereafter, a beautiful woman described as “tall and great, shining, and wrapped in a thin garment as green as poison” (Lewis 60) enchants Rilian, who soon disappears. Evidently, the snake and the Lady of the Green Kirtle are one and the same. On the journey that Eustace, Jill, and Puddleglum take to find the lost prince they must make their way through a ruined city, a kind of domain associated with Lilith and with Jadis, until they

make it to Underland, an underground city of which the Lady of the Green Kirtle is Queen. A character already associated with Lilith is the ruler of an underground realm; the Lady is reigning in Hell. They resist her attempts to brainwash them, so she transforms into her snake form, and they are able to work together and kill her with their swords. Later, after they have escaped Underland, they untangle the Lady's motives,

And now they all saw what it meant; how a wicked Witch (doubtless the same kind as that White Witch who had brought the Great Winter on Narnia long ago) had contrived the whole thing, first killing Rilian's mother and enchanting Rilian himself. And they saw how she had dug right under Narnia and was going to break out and rule it through Rilian: and how he had never dreamed that the country of which she would make him king (king in name, but really her slave) was his own country. (Lewis 240)

The Lady of the Green Kirtle, like her predecessors, murders, bewitches, and plots. She is a manipulative temptress with a lust for power via conquest. Her plan to take control of Narnia would also have been a usurpation, taking the throne from the rightful king, taking power from the ruling patriarchal structure. The Lady of the Green Kirtle achieved great power that would not have been available had she been obedient, but she, like Jadis, is written to be flat evil, reinforcing the notion that subversive women are evil and, by extension, that critical thinking should be discouraged.

HIS DARK MATERIALS

Mrs. Coulter is the closest thing in *His Dark Materials* to an example of a female character who only has an illusion of power. The villainess of *His Dark Materials* is far more complicated than those in *A Chronicles of Narnia*. Mrs. Coulter is much scarier because she looks nice, she dresses fashionably, and she is a prominent member of the Church. When she first appears, she is a beautiful but menacing woman that lures a child

street urchin into her clutches with the promise of chocolate, the name in Lyra's world for chocolate. She is a temptress from the beginning, reminiscent of Jadis with her Turkish delight. The children are taken to the far north, where they are forced to undergo intercision, a surgical removal of their dæmon. All of this is for the purpose of research on dark matter, known as Dust, but intercision is irreversible, painful, and typically fatal. All of this torture and murder of children is sponsored and tolerated by the Church, and Mrs. Coulter is not only an agent of it, she is its mastermind. Asriel explains this to Lyra in *The Golden Compass*,

You see, your mother's always been ambitious for power. At first she tried to get it in the normal way, through marriage, but that didn't work, as I think you've heard. So she had to turn to the Church. Naturally she couldn't take the route a man could have taken—priesthood and so on—it had to be unorthodox; she had to set up her own order, her own channels of influence, and work through that. (Pullman 374)

Asriel gets to the point simply; Marisa Coulter wanted power and could not achieve it through the existing power structure. Ergo, she must create her own subversive path to power, and she is seemingly successful in this. However, she is ultimately only joining the oppressive establishment, not subverting it.

Mrs. Coulter may have joined the Church to find power, but eventually it stops serving her needs. She grows to have a fondness for her daughter, and when she realizes that the Church plans to kill Lyra, she decides that she must leave the Church to try and protect her. Once again, she must forge her own path to achieve her goals. She acknowledges that she was willing to do horrible things to other people's children with the Oblation Board but panicked when her own child was in danger. She tells Asriel and his council in *The Amber Spyglass*,

No, they're bound to kill her. If they could, they'd go back to the Garden of Eden and kill Eve before she was tempted. Killing is not difficult for them; Calvin himself ordered the deaths of children; they'd kill her with pomp and ceremony and prayers and lamentations and psalms and hymns, but they would kill her. If she falls into their hands, she's dead already. (Pullman 205)

Mrs. Coulter is selfish and hypocritical, ruthless and cruel, but she is a valuable tool in Asriel's war because she knows how the Church works. She knows that it is murderous, she has been one of the murderers. She abandons the Church when it will no longer provide the framework for her to achieve the power she needs to achieve her goals, so she must subvert it, as she once used it as a subversive route to empowerment.

Mrs. Coulter's subversion of the Church goes beyond calling them murderers behind their backs. She may have used the Church as a means to hold power, but she genuinely believed that the Authority and the Creator were one and the same, until King Ogunwe tells her differently. Mrs. Coulter may not have been pious or righteous, but she had some amount of religious faith, now that is gone. She goes to the Church in Geneva and insults them, saying things that they view as heresy. When speaking to Father MacPhail, she refers to the Church as "a body of men with a feverish obsession with sexuality, men with dirty fingernails, reeking of ancient sweat, men whose furtive imaginations would crawl over her body like cockroaches" (Pullman 326). She goes on to say how God is either dead of old age or "decrepit and demented...a rotten hulk" (Pullman 328). From her perspective, there either is no God, or they must kill Him out of mercy. Naturally, this gets her imprisoned, but the point is clear, she no longer cares whether she angers anyone, she is going to raise hell as needed to protect Lyra.

Mrs. Coulter was always a tricky character, dishonest, scheming, and difficult to accurately categorize. Much of what she says is insincere; she is deeply untrustworthy.

However, words turn into action when she seduces Metatron and helps Asriel kill him, all to give Lyra a fighting chance to do what must be done. Both of Lyra's parents are often villainous, but they take down Metatron together to help her; they are not flat evil. As Mary Malone phrases it, "good and evil are names for what people do, not for what they are. All we can say is that this is a good deed, because it helps someone, or that's an evil one, because it hurts them. People are too complicated to have simple labels" (Pullman 447). In light of Eldridge's criticism on the didactic nature to the series, this is an interesting moral to see being conveyed in a children's book, a pleasant contrast to the black-and-white morality in *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

A large part of subverting oppressive power structures is in education, so that you can recognize the injustice in the system and strive to make a change. In sharp contrast to *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* values critical thinking far more than faith. Lyra grows up at Jordan College, one of the colleges at Oxford University in her parallel universe. She believes herself to be an orphan of a count and countess, and that Lord Asriel, an imposing man that occasionally visits to check on her wellbeing and education, is her uncle. The first rule that Lyra breaks in *The Golden Compass* is to enter the Retiring Room of the college, one of several rooms in which women are not allowed. Growing up in a sexist system, Lyra has taken on some of these attitudes, "She regarded female Scholars with a proper Jordan disdain: there *were* such people, but, poor things, they could never be taken more seriously than animals dressed up and acting a play" (Pullman 66). At the beginning of the series, she is parroting the conservative attitudes to women, in a series that values knowledge and learning greatly,

showing much about the society she is living in. Organized religion plays a huge role in Lyra's world,

Ever since Pope John Calvin had moved the seat of the Papacy to Geneva and set up the Consistorial Court of Discipline, the Church's power over every aspect of life had been absolute. The Papacy itself had been abolished after Calvin's death, and a tangle of courts, colleges, and councils, collectively known as the Magisterium, had grown up in its place. (Pullman 30)

In Lyra's world, the Enlightenment and the Protestant Reformation never happened, Europe at minimum and likely other parts of the world are under the control of the theocratic Magisterium, and it influences every detail of life. Even Jordan College itself, a place of knowledge and learning, is associated with religion, specifically experimental theology. Lyra lives in a patriarchy, yet also in a place of learning and knowledge, where questioning the nature of the world is expected.

Lyra is a child surrounded by many prophecies; many people believe she has an important destiny before her, and that this gives her power. A Cardinal tells Mrs. Coulter in *The Subtle Knife* that her birth, the way that the Gyptians and witches refer to her, and what she has already accomplished suggest that Lyra is something special and will do great things. The nature of her future accomplishments are not yet known when the Cardinal says all this, but the talk of her birth and her success at bringing people together suggest that she is a messianic figure. Of course, there are lots of ways in which Lyra is not a Christ-figure; she is female and definitely not born to a virgin. However, later in the novel, Serafina observes a group of angels admiring her as she is sleeping in the grass:

She understood why these beings would wait for thousands of years and travel vast distances in order to be close to something important, and how they would feel differently for the rest of time, having been briefly in its presence. That was how these creatures looked now, these beautiful pilgrims of rarefied light, standing around the girl with the dirty face and the tartan skirt and the boy with the wounded hand who was frowning in his sleep. (Pullman 276)

Like Christ, Lyra is living in humble conditions, and a “multitude of heavenly host” (Luke 2:13) has come to see her in her grubby splendor. However, it is really the events of the final book that make her a messianic figure.

The Church considers Lyra a threat to their world order and they are correct to think so as they are the corrupt system that she is destined to undermine. In the third book of the trilogy, *The Amber Spyglass*, Father MacPhail of the Consistorial Court of Discipline orders that Lyra be killed. In yet another show of the ways that the Church is deeply corrupt, Father Gomez is chosen for the task because for years he has performed preemptive penance “for a sin not yet committed...to build up, as it were, a store of credit” (Pullman 72). This practice is used because “It was sometimes necessary to kill people, for example; and it was so much less troubling for the assassin if he could do it in a state of grace” (Pullman 72). Once again, the Church is shown to be unscrupulous and dangerous, something that must be rebelled against, that must be subverted. The Church is the dominant power in the society, controlling everything and acting with impunity. For power to be given to the people, especially to women who are discriminated against in the patriarchal society, subversion is necessary.

Lyra’s most Christ-like moment comes in the underworld, when she changes how even death works. Lyra and Will enter the land of the dead to speak to several of their loved ones who have died, but they must first leave behind their dæmons, the animal companions that are the physical embodiments of their souls. The process of separating from your dæmon, even without it being done against you by force as in the Oblation Board’s intercision, is incredibly painful and unnatural. Will, who has never even known that he has a dæmon, as they do not have a physical form in his universe, describes it “as

if an iron hand had gripped his heart and was pulling it out between his ribs, so that he pressed his hands to the place and vainly tried to hold it in” (Pullman 285), combined with an intense emotional pain. If Lyra is a Christ figure, then this is her crucifixion. In Lyra’s “harrowing of hell,” she releases the spirits of the dead so that they might dissolve and become part of nature, one with the universe once more, rather than confined in what is more akin to a prison camp than to Elysium. Unlike the Christ of the Bible, Lyra’s goal, and the goal of those working with Asriel to overthrow the Authority, is not to show people what their rewards for a just life will be. The only afterlife they will have is to become one with the universe, to become “the night, the starlight, the air” (Pullman 364). Asriel’s war and Lyra’s journey is not just against the oppressive Church, it is against “God”, it is against the fundamental notions of religion. Ultimately, it is about bringing empowerment to their people. As Lyra tells Pantalaimon, “We shouldn’t live as if it mattered more than this life in this world, because where we are is always the most important place” (Pullman 518). Any consequences, whether reward or punishment, must be acted out on this plane. If there is no afterlife, then the actions one takes in life are all there is; in subverting and overthrowing the Kingdom of Heaven they create the Republic of Heaven, one where individual responsibility and choice are paramount.

Lyra is a messianic figure and she is also set to subvert the Church still further. It is explicitly stated by the witch Lena Feldt in *The Subtle Knife* that the prophecies surrounding Lyra tell that she will be “Eve! Mother of all! Eve, again! Mother Eve!” (Pullman 314). She takes on the establishment in a revolutionary way, but she is fated to be faced with the same choice in a reenactment of the Fall of Man in the Garden of Eden. The Church will do anything to stop her because they believe that she will bring all

humanity down with her when she inevitably falls. However, Mary Malone, who fills the role of the Serpent, shows through telling Will and Lyra her own stories, that the fall is ultimately good. The fall is the choice to know oneself and others on a deeper level, to choose knowledge over ignorance, to embrace inevitable maturation and adulthood. It is tied in with puberty, romance, and sexual awakening, and is shown to be deeply positive. For Lyra and Will, the fall is when they fall in love with each other, when they choose to touch each other's dæmons, to intimately understand each other's souls, to spend time "together as the earth turned slowly and the moon and stars blazed above them" (Pullman 499). While her romance with Will has a tragic end, as they are from different universes and must be separated, on the other side of Lyra's choice is endless possibility.

Unlike in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, growing up and change is shown to be a good thing. The Master of Jordan College notices when Lyra has returned to Oxford that her "child's unconscious grace had gone" (Pullman 514); she has fallen from grace because she has begun puberty, at the end of an era there is the promise of a new one. After her role as Eve has been completed, Lyra sees positivity in the character of Dame Hannah, the female Scholar head of St. Sophia's College that she previously had such internalized misogynistic disdain for, thinking that she was "much cleverer, and more interesting, and kindlier by far than the dim and frumpy person she remembered" (Pullman 511). Lyra's role in *His Dark Materials* is empowering in its subversion. She is a Christ figure, yet she is not male, she is not a child of God, and she destroys the notion of an afterlife. She is Eve come again, and she chooses to fall. In choosing to fall, she seemingly breaks the rules, and foils the Church's plans, yet she saves the world in the process. In choosing knowledge, she repeats the choice of her predecessor Eve, who is

implied to actually be more myth than real person and allows free will and democracy to rule in what was once an oppressive theocracy. She gives power not only to herself but to everyone in subverting the dominant system of power.

Mary Malone is empowered because she is a woman in a male-dominated field of physics and dark matter research. When Lyra first meets Dr. Mary Malone in *The Subtle Knife*, the first thing that strikes her is that she had expected a male Scholar, not a female one. In the Oxford in her world, she has been raised by male Scholars and had a prejudice against the few female ones, but she moves on, thinking “this was a strange world, after all” (Pullman 83). When she escapes the laboratory after destroying her equipment to keep the information from Lord Carlo Boreal, under the assumed name of Sir Charles Latrom, she must take on her own alias. She steals an old library card belonging to her colleague, Dr. Oliver Payne, and doctors it with her own photo, creating identification with the name Dr. Olive Payne. The policeman who has orders to detain Dr. Mary Malone is fooled easily, and makes a comment that, “seeing a woman, I naturally thought you might be her, if you see what I mean” (Pullman 254). The policeman assumes that there can only be one woman working in the laboratory, so the first one he sees must be her. He is correct, but the assumption shows the depth of the bias against women in science.

Mary comes up against opposition based not only on her gender but on the unique nature of her field of research. This is shown in her reaction when Sir Charles visits her laboratory to threaten her into giving him information about the whereabouts of Lyra and Will,

Dr. Malone looked at him clearly for the first time. She saw a man in his late sixties, prosperous, confident, beautifully dressed, used to the very best of

everything, used to moving among powerful people and whispering in important ears. Oliver was right: he did want something. And they wouldn't get his support unless they satisfied him.

She folded her arms. (Pullman 241)

Sir Charles is threatening Mary and her colleague Dr. Oliver Payne, using allusions to his connections to imply that he could shut down their research, which is already struggling to get funding. Payne wants to ingratiate himself in the hopes of securing the defense funding that Sir Charles is dangling before them, but Mary knows what kind of a person he is and refuses to cooperate, folding her arms and keeping them folded in an overt show of defiance. As a female physicist, Mary has had to work hard, rowing against the current, to get where she is, and she refuses to be bullied by a man who is so used to getting exactly what he desires without working for it. She has created a space for herself in an environment predisposed to discriminate against women, finding power and purpose in the career that she is passionate about, and she is not going to take the easy way out that would compromise her own values, just to please someone who embodies the patriarchy she has fought so hard against.

Mary is empowered in her choice of critical thinking over faith. She was once not only a Catholic, but a nun. After meeting Lyra and discussing the nature of dark matter, known as Dust in Lyra's world, she uses her equipment to speak to the conscious Dust, which tells her that angels are embodiments of the Dust. This stuns her, as "none of her faith was left to her now" (Pullman 249). The Dust tells her "YOU MUST PLAY THE SERPENT" (Pullman 250), and she does not figure out exactly what this means until later. Mary submitted to temptation and lost her faith; she has fallen from grace, and she must tempt Will and Lyra to do the same.

Mary is the Serpent; it is only appropriate that, in *The Amber Spyglass*, she spends time gaining knowledge in a prelapsarian environment evocative of Eden. The world of the mulefa, a strange species with wheels, is stunningly beautiful, “an endless prairie or savannah...covered in short grass in an infinite variety of buff-brown-green-ocher-yellow-golden shades” (Pullman 83), with bunches of trees similar to redwoods but at least twice as tall. It is one of these trees that she later goes up into to learn more about the Dust. She describes the beauty of the place:

In the dense green of the canopy, with the rich blue of the sky between the leaves; with a breeze keeping her skin cool, and the faint scent of the flowers delighting her whenever she sensed it; with the rustle of the leaves, the song of the hundreds of birds, and the distant murmur of the waves on the seashore, all her senses were lulled and nurtured, and if she could have stopped thinking, she would have been entirely lapped in bliss.

But of course thinking was what she was there for. (Pullman 365)

The mulefa’s world is idyllic, but it is not Eden, there is the problem of the disappearing Dust to solve. Mary mustn’t let herself bliss out, she has work to do and needs to think critically. In an Eden-like landscape, high in the trees and employed in a pursuit of knowledge, Mary is the Serpent come again. Her scientific research is morally imperative, and this is not Eden; knowledge is not evil, and neither is temptation.

His Dark Materials is full of references and parallels to the Bible; Mary is the Serpent, but there is also Satan. In *The Amber Spyglass*, Mary has a dream where she is told to expect the children to come to her in the mulefa’s world. To her mulefa friend Atal, she describes the being that spoke to her as “a woman, a female wise one, like us, like my people. But very old and yet not old at all” (Pullman 429). Earlier, the high-ranking angel Xaphania is introduced as one of Lord Asriel’s high commanders, whose face is “older than that of any living creature Mrs. Coulter had ever seen” (208). She is

revealed to have been one of the rebel angels, and she sees Asriel's war as the best chance to vanquish the Authority for good. At the beginning of the book, the angel Balthamos tells Will, "The first angels condensed out of Dust, and the Authority was the first of all. He told those who came after him that he had created them, but it was a lie. One of those who came later was wiser than he was, and she found out the truth, so he banished her. We serve her still" (Pullman 32). This is a revelation, the fallen angel who led a rebellion against God is female and her actions are not judged as evil. Xaphania is that fallen angel, the ultimate figure of subversion, and that subversion comes in an unexpected form. This is something that Wheat missed in his analysis of the symbols that make up the larger allegory; he cast Asriel as Satan. There certainly is validity to that claim, but Xaphania is actually Satan, not just Satan-like. Serafina Pekkala tells Mary when they meet in the mulefa's world,

"She told me many things...She said that all the history of human life has been a struggle between wisdom and stupidity. She and the rebel angels, the followers of wisdom, have always tried to open minds; the Authority and his churches have always tried to keep them closed. She gave me examples from my world."

"I can think of many from mine."

"And for most of that time, wisdom has had to work in secret, whispering her words, moving like a spy through the humble places of the world while the courts and palaces are occupied by her enemies." (Pullman 479)

It makes sense that Xaphania's mission to spread wisdom and open-mindedness is met with resistance by the Church and other elite, they get their power by controlling how people think. For other people though, especially women, power comes through autonomy and subversion of norms if they do not suit you.

In the reenactment of the Garden of Eden and the Fall of Man, Mary must tempt the new Eve and Adam, Lyra and Will. In *The Amber Spyglass*, she tells the children about the pleasures of the flesh that tempted her. She had been giving a physics paper at a

conference in Portugal when she was still a nun and had a dinner with colleagues where the food was delicious, the flowers smelled good, and there was an intriguing Italian man. Someone gave her a piece of marzipan and she had a flashback to her first kiss and first love when she was young and how beautiful the entire experience was.

And I thought: am I really going to spend the rest of my life without ever feeling that again? I thought: I *want* to go to China. It's full of treasures and strangeness and mystery and joy. I thought, Will anyone be better off if I go straight back to the hotel and say my prayers and confess to the priest and promise never to fall into temptation again? Will anyone be better for making me miserable?

And the answer came back – no. No one will.... And all that huge change came about as I had the marzipan in my mouth, before I'd even swallowed it. A taste – a memory – a landslide... (Pullman 445)

It is in this moment that Mary chooses to abandon her life as a nun, to submit to temptation so she can fully experience the delights of the world, the “treasures and strangeness and mystery and joy” (Pullman 445). She tells Will and Lyra this story right when they have begun to understand their romantic feelings for each other. They are right on the cusp between childhood's end and the start of puberty, this is their time to choose, and they choose to fall, to taste the marzipan. Interestingly, Mary in the role of a tempter is very different than previous portrayals of women as temptresses. She offers her own experiences and perspective, but she is not trying to sway them to evil. Key to the novel is that it places the “forbidden fruit,” so to speak, as something that is ultimately healthy and good and fulfilling. Questioning authority, gaining knowledge, and enjoying sexuality are things that are empowering; it is ultimately empowering to break free from organized religion.

The witches of *His Dark Materials* are a separate people different from humans, and therefore not subject to the theocratic Magisterium; their very existence is a subversion of that power structure. Their lifespans and lifestyles are very different from

those of the humans. Shortly after she is introduced in *The Golden Compass*, the powerful witch Serafina Pekkala discusses her worldview with balloonist Lee Scoresby, specifically the issues of fate and free will. Lee wants to be able to choose if he wants to be involved in the impending war or not, just as he likes to have choice in every aspect of how he lives his life. Serafina, on the other hand, believes that they “are engaged in a war already, although not all of us know it” (Pullman 308), and that, ““We are all subject to the fates. But we must all act as if we are not,’ said the witch, ‘or die of despair”” (Pullman 310). Serafina respects that Lee must feel that he exerts control over his own destiny and will only get involved if it is to his own benefit, but that is not part of her ethos. She tells him,

If a witch needs something, another witch will give it to her. If there is a war to be fought, we don’t consider cost one of the factors in deciding whether or not it is right to fight. Nor do we have any notion of honor, as bears do, for instance. An insult to a bear is a deadly thing. To us... inconceivable. How could you insult a witch? What would it matter if you did? (Pullman 309)

The fatalistic moral code of Serafina and the other witches is one based on neither a capitalist nor a Christian model. They don’t do good for the glory of God or for rewards in heaven, but because they see it as right and as their destiny. Serafina is one of the moral role models in *His Dark Materials*, and this position comes from a mode of existence outside of the norm.

The witches may not practice the same religion as the Church, but this does not mean that they do not have a religion of their own to question or undermine. One of the key pieces of the witches’ polytheistic religion is the goddess of death, Yambe-Akka. Shortly after her conversation with Lee, Serafina tells Lyra that Yambe-Akka “comes to you smiling and kindly, and you know it is time to die” (Pullman 314) and describes her

as “older than the tundra” (Pullman 314). Witches live for hundreds of years and experience lifetimes’ worth of love and heartbreak, it makes sense for them to have a more friendly relationship with such a deity. As an entirely female society, it also makes sense that this deity is female. In *The Subtle Knife*, Serafina is invisibly watching a witch being tortured by Mrs. Coulter for information when the witch calls out for Yambe-Akka:

And Serafina was ready. She became visible at once and stepped forward smiling happily, because Yambe-Akka was merry and lighthearted and her visits were gifts of joy. The witch saw her and turned up her tear-stained face, and Serafina bent to kiss it and slid her knife gently into the witch’s heart. The tern *dæmon* looked up with dim eyes and vanished. (Pullman 40)

It is significant not only to the character of Serafina that she performs the goddess’ task, but to the larger idea of the story. *His Dark Materials* focuses much attention on the nature of God and the question of if such a deity even ever existed, a question that is left open for the reader to ponder. Ultimately, the ending of the series and certainly the author favor a world where people are free to make their own choices without thought of an afterlife or of a higher power, a republic rather than a kingdom. The tortured witch, seeing a smiling woman appear to kill her after calling for Yambe-Akka presumably believed Serafina to be the goddess. This supports a reading in which the witch pantheon is just as fictional, or at least unreliable, as the Authority. Serafina must take matters into her own hands. The power of the story is not in any metaphysical presence, it is in the hands of individuals. For someone so invested in the idea of fate as incontrovertible, Serafina holds great power in actively choosing to do good, fulfilling the role of the goddess with no goddess being necessary.

Ultimately, power and religious faith are intertwined in *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *His Dark Materials*. Lewis writes female characters on a binary between good and evil, and all it takes to be put on the evil side of that binary is to lack belief in Aslan. Anything is forgivable except being faithless. The female characters that do subvert and have power in *Narnia* are characterized as evil and Satanic, there are no positive representations of female power that do not come from association with a powerful male. Lewis, a God in Narnia as the creator of the series, holds a harsh view on morality, specifically when applied to his female characters.

CONCLUSION

Overall, Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea*, George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* all support the idea that fantasy is a genre of subversion, magical or otherwise, and that this can be seen in the female characters of the genre. Empowerment cannot be found in imitation or in conformity, there must be some form of rebellion, however small, against the systems of power and oppression present in these fictional patriarchies. Conforming can only provide an illusion of power. The ability to make choices that create difference and subvert society is what is truly empowering.

Both sexuality and religion are used to hurt and disempower women, both in real life and in these magical worlds, but it is through these that female characters can also gain power, though they must do it differently than men because social prejudices place them at a disadvantage.

Power is not necessarily a good or virtuous thing. I made a point of including female characters that are villains, not just heroes. Serret, Cersei, Jadis, Mrs. Coulter all use their power for evil, whether it was gained through subversion or by association.

Fantasy is subversive by nature, it doesn't fit into a neat box and doesn't play by neat rules. Perhaps an apt conclusion to take away is that women must take the subversion in these novels into the real world, and see how it empowers them, even if they do not have the ability to wake dragons.

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