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A Quiet War:  
Revising Heroism in Tamora Pierce's Tortall

Tess H. Grogan

submitted to the Department of English Language and Literature  
of Smith College  
in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts

William A. Oram, Honors Project Advisor

April 4, 2014

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper began in the A-West section of the William Allan Neilson Library, where I furtively spent my workstudy hours reading instead of shelving. There, I found “On Fairy-Stories,” Tolkien's still incomparable defense of fantasy, as well as some source texts: Margery Hourihan’s *Deconstructing the Hero* foregrounded my approach to this thesis, and Deborah O’Keefe’s *Readers in Wonderland* was the first place I encountered the male hero in drag.

It also began much earlier, as my perception of the contours of the fantasy genre was shaped not only by Taran and Garion and young Arthur, but also by Sorcha's rape and Aerin's burning and Therru's renaming. Are these latter not equally heroes?

I have exposed my heart to be shot at, as Tolkien puts it. Fathomless gratitude to all those who made the exposure a little easier:

Foremost to Bill, peerless mother and commander: for Kesh wealth, for keen pine-pitch eyes, for praising the creation unfinished. Heya heya heya.

Margaret Bruzelius insisted on scaffolding, which permitted a late climb.

Alice Hearst's "State Power and Regulation of the Family" course and Carrie Baker's "Gender, Law, and Policy" were key to my understanding of both the Big and the Small.

Naomi Miller, for anchoring in deep seas.

Michael Thurston assured me early that all manner of things shall be well.

Jeff Hunter, for infinite patience and trust.

Friends: for strong opinions and difficult questions, for borrowing my books, for a phenomenally well-timed bag of espresso beans and kale.

Lastly or firstly: MPG for fantasy, THG for feminism, and JEG for Ursula K. Le Guin.

Goddess bless.

For Bailey Hall and Ruby Mahoney,  
the reasons this nonsense matters.

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This paper is cited according to MLA Style, with two major modifications:

- The primary eight texts discussed are cited internally in a (volume.page number) format. The four volumes of the *Song of the Lioness* series are numbers 1-4, while the four volumes of the *Protector of the Small* series are numbers 5-8.  
e.g. A quotation on p. 176 of *Page*, the second volume of *Protector*, appears as (7.176).
- Quotations from *The Immortals*, Pierce's interim Tortall series, appear using abbreviations. *Wild Magic* is cited as WM, *Wolf-Speaker* is cited as WS, *Emperor Mage* is cited as EM, and *The Realms of the Gods* is cited as RG.  
e. g. A quotation on p. 34 of *Emperor Mage* will appear (EM 34).

All other citations use standard formatting.

## INTRODUCTION

### *Beyond the 'male hero in drag'*

To enter certain fictional landscapes, young female readers must become men. Girls follow male protagonists and identify with allegedly neutral narrative perspectives that in fact normalize a masculine<sup>1</sup> point of view. This cross-gendered reading becomes habitual; Jonathan Culler notes that even women must learn to read as women (*Strategies ix*)<sup>2</sup>. Often, girls read stories that overtly or implicitly devalue women; in these cases, "the female reader is co-opted into participation in an experience from which she is explicitly excluded... required to identify against herself" (xii). This identification is particularly difficult<sup>3</sup> for the female reader of heroic adventure and fantasy fiction, realms generally reserved for male heroes and catering to male readers<sup>4</sup>.

Fantasy, with its roots in folk and fairy tale, ancient epic, and medieval romance, is a particularly potent and compelling genre for many young readers. In *Deconstructing the Hero*, Margery Hourihan claims that the "fantasy hero story... presents a particular problem because of the gendered nature of the protagonist's role, and because it is this story structure which inscribes and naturalizes the ancillary role of females" (206). Margaret Bruzelius, author of *Romancing the Novel*, agrees: "Adventure conditions the narratable, and one of the things that it finds very difficult to narrate is a female hero" (15). In traditional heroic fantasy, both the protagonist and the plots through which he moves are intrinsically and oppressively gendered. For some feminist

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<sup>1</sup> When I refer to male, masculine, female, or feminine roles, spheres, modes, traits, or behaviors, I am always referring to gender as it has been assigned and constructed by dominant culture, not to the actual diverse behaviors

<sup>2</sup> In *Strategies*, Attebery suggests that it is subversive for girl readers to identify with strong male protagonists rather than with passive female supporting characters (94); it is difficult to say which is more problematic, since both identifications reinforce the superiority of masculinity.

<sup>3</sup> Although there is a large body of sociological and psychological work mapping the effects of literature on the development of young readers, I will take this influence for granted and focus instead on textual analysis.

<sup>4</sup> Maria Nikolajeva notes that "boys normally like to read stories about boys, while girls make no distinction" (*Rhetorics* 7); unlike girls, boys rarely have to identify with a protagonist of a different gender in order to access popular fiction.

authors, the gendered limitations of fantasy make the genre a kind of final frontier. It is extremely difficult to introduce an effective female protagonist into the territory traditionally inhabited by the male hero.

The contours of the heroic fantasy adventure story should be familiar<sup>5</sup>. The hero rescues a damsel from a tower, fights a primitive manifestation of the land for dominance, finds a magical and/or expensive object, returns to defeat an evil usurping uncle, recovers a throne, kills a dragon, marries a princess. His parents are absent, ineffective, or dead. He trains with a wise mentor in order to win a series of single combats along the way to his goal. He resists sexual temptation, but marries his true love. He fulfills his destiny, triumphs over his archenemy, comes into himself. Women are his helpers and prizes when they are not wild, malicious, and sexually threatening witches. The hero carries a set of talismans that aid him on his journey and signify his patronage by a deity or powerful mortal. His success is prophesied. His actions have consequences. His story is written in binary oppositions between dark and light, evil and good, passion and reason, the heart and the head, nature and civilization, woman and man, slave and master (the hero is always associated with the latter component in these pairings). His truths are naturalized, his authority reified, his violence accepted. His heroism is "ascendance, domination, power over others" (*Revised* 13). His story is certain and resolved (Hourihan 58).

Are other visions of heroic fantasy possible? Genre fiction depends on the invocation of known patterns (Mendelsohn xvi), though many works invoke these motifs in order to challenge them. If an author uses the familiar topography that makes the realm of fantasy fiction so compelling, she risks being pulled back by the gravity of this world, subjecting her story and

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<sup>5</sup> These contours have been exhaustively outlined, most notably in Joseph Campbell's sweeping study of archetype, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Lord Raglan's *The Hero* takes a quantitative approach, ranking heroic narratives according to their conformity to twenty-two plot elements: Oedipus includes twenty, Arthur sixteen, etc. (Noel 14). A good contemporary rendering of this list appears in Peter Hunt and Millicent Lenz's *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction*, p. 153.



heroine<sup>6</sup> to its oppressive mechanisms<sup>7</sup>. If she passes up these conventions, introducing plot and character elements that do *not* meet the expectations of the genre, she sacrifices a smooth, easy story for what Ursula K. Le Guin calls the first stumbling efforts of the new subversive (*Revised* 10). Her tale feels awkward, choppy, unrefined.

In the wake of second-wave feminist efforts, a number of female fantasists began writing stories with feminist principles explicitly in mind (Paul 116). Out of this consciousness grew a set of reversed stories wherein brave princesses rescue helpless princes, charismatic dragons defeat foul knights, and kind stepmothers save young girls from wicked huntsmen<sup>8</sup>. These attempts include witty extensions of traditional tales like the picture book *Rumpelstiltskin's Daughter* (1997), in which a young woman outwits a greedy king and rights a kingdom. There are folk tale compilations like Ethel Johnston's *Tatterhood* (1993), which collects international stories about strong women. There are also a number full-length fantasy novels functioning in this mode, such as Patricia C. Wrede's *Enchanted Forest Chronicles* (1990). In this quartet, a princess abducted by a dragon comes to prefer cooking and cleaning for the dragon to the attentions of her wimpy prince.

Margery Hourihan discusses a number of these feminist tales in the final chapter of *Deconstructing the Hero*, concluding that most are "facile inversions of traditional fairy tales"

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<sup>6</sup> Most feminist critics prefer the term "female hero" to "heroine," citing the passivity and diminution that "heroine" has come to connote (Pearson vii; *Revised* 8; Paul 117; Noel 107). I elect to use these terms interchangeably. Although I recognize that the word "has become loaded with the message that the character is never independent of male control or influence" (Noel 107), 'heroine' has not always born this message. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a heroine is a "woman generally admired or acclaimed for her great qualities or achievements," sometimes possessing "superhuman qualities or abilities." These descriptions come very close to the corresponding entry on "hero." As many critics note, the passive "heroine" is largely a concession to the film industry. Recognizing that language is dynamic, I propose to use the term as it was used prior to its denigration. In this area, academic opinions seem to lag behind popular usage - juvenile publishers and authors have been using 'heroine' for the female hero for decades, leading young readers to associate the term not with swooning film beauties but with forceful female protagonists. My terminology reflects this shift.

<sup>7</sup> H. Aram Veesser writes that "every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practices it exposes" (*Understanding* 32).

<sup>8</sup> Brian Attebery sees "the invention of original stories drawing on the motifs and structures of the traditional tale but introducing reversals of expected character roles" (*Strategies* 94).

which ultimately do nothing to challenge or alter the dualisms that are the primary building block of the heroic adventure story (224). Hourihan's principle example is *The Dragon of Brog* (1994), a picture book in which a tomboy princess despairs of the incompetent knights who attempt to slay a dragon and win her hand, and ends up going into business with the dragon in order to secure financial independence. In Hourihan's view, this reversal remains a celebration of "self-interest, of ruthless, unconsidered individualism" (206), with an "arrogant, self-centered know-all" heroine continuing to embody the stereotypical masculinity that characterizes a traditional heroic narrative. Evil is still opposed to good, strength is still defined by dominance, and a narrow bravery is still valued over imagination, empathy, and contemplation. For Hourihan, "the trouble with a dualism is that if you simply turn it on its head it is still a dualism. Inversion is not the same as subversion." She complains that this "ridicule of gender stereotypes is ultimately nihilistic... offer[ing] no alternative, positive models of behavior" (205).

Several authors moved beyond parodic reversals into more complex revisions of conventional heroic fantasy aimed at older children or young adults. Their attempts rarely satirize traditional devices outright, and are generally respectful of generic paradigms. These authors explore the bounds of heroic stories in general, rather than re-working particularly well-known fables. For the most part, these revisions favor one of two distinct approaches: shattering conventional structures, or subverting them (Hourihan 206). Ursula K. Le Guin is perhaps the most representative example of the former mode, asserting in her *Earthsea Revisioned* lecture that "strength and salvation must come from outside of the institutions and traditions...must be a new thing" (19)<sup>9</sup>. She urges a complete break from claustrophobic conventional narrative models

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<sup>9</sup> In other talks, Le Guin states that she "find[s] reversing stereotypes a simple but inexhaustible pleasure" ("Assumptions" 15), that she sees subversion in "old men who aren't wise, witches who aren't wicked, mothers who don't devour" (*Revisioned* 13). One major departure of Le Guin's *Earthsea* books is a simple inversion: her hero Ged is dark-skinned.

in creating women's fantasy fiction - revolution rather than gradual evolution. In *The Other Wind*, the final book of Le Guin's *Earthsea* series, the scarred heroine Therru metamorphoses into a dragon, freed once and for all from human burdens and expectations.

This is a radical, transformative feminism, heavily influenced by Le Guin's utopian writing. "Beyond all the bargains and the balances, there is freedom" (*Revised* 18). Yet the dragon-freedom proffered at the conclusion of *Earthsea* may seem inhuman, contrived, impractical. Other authors have chosen to leave many traditional structures intact, not inverting or shattering the skeleton of the heroic story but subverting it, beginning with "inherited story structures and direct[ing] them toward unexpected ends" (*Strategies* 103). This feminist approach sees use and potentiality in defective conventional narratives. Young adult authors like Robin McKinley and Diana Wynne Jones have sought to rejuvenate old forms such as the quest and the adventure story, formulating new hybrid tales. Instead of employing obvious reversals (amiable dragons, helpless princes) as the parodies do, these stories combine complex inversions with challenges to the binary value system itself and the assumptions that dictate traditional stories. What does it mean to be brave? Where does evil come from? What kind of strength is meaningful?

Most feminist fantasy critics favor Le Guin's radical approach. Many conclude that if the hero of a conventional story is female, she becomes a mere "male hero in drag," upholding the problematic values of the traditional form. Margery Hourihan claims that "female warriors... are little more than honorary men who undertake male enterprises in a male context and display 'male' qualities: courage, single-minded devotion to a goal, stoicism, self confidence, certitude, extroversion, aggression. Heroism is gendered" (Hourihan 68). Diana Wynne Jones distinguishes between female characters who act like women and those who act like "pseudo m[e]n" (135). Le Guin writes that "A woman, as queen or prime minister, may for a time fill a man's role; that

changes nothing. Authority is male" (*Revised* 11). Lissa Paul calls female heroes "men tricked out in drag" (117). A few writers disagree; Charlotte Spivack lauds heroines who take on conventional male roles as "warriors, priests, and politicians," who demonstrate the "strength, courage, and aggressive behavior.... physical courage and resourcefulness" typical of male heroes, noting that often these women direct these traits toward "not power or dominance but rather self-fulfillment, protection of the community" (8). Spivack expresses a minority opinion; most critics seem convinced that women in conventional heroic roles are failures.

This position risks reifying the false gender binary that these same feminist critics oppose. Lissa Paul accuses the editor of the *Tatterhood* collection of feminist tales, Ethel Johnston, of writing the "same old male type" because in her preface, Johnston states her preference for active heroines with "extraordinary courage and achievements" (117). In placing courage, strength, confidence, and resourcefulness off-limits to a successful female protagonist, these critics reinforce the impression that stereotypically male qualities are *actually* male qualities. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler "oppose[s] those regimes of truth that stipulate[ ] that certain kinds of gendered expressions... [are] false or derivative, and others, true and original" (viii). Paul and her fellow critics' allegation that most fantasy heroines are 'men tricked out in drag' risks agreeing with this stipulation. Why is a heroine's strength necessarily derivative? Must her courage always be "quiet courage," small and domestic (Flanagan 78), to be meaningful? A persuasive hero of either (or neither) gender may be both brave and compassionate, adaptable and stoic, certain and humble. Margery Hourihan recalls that "there are no human qualities or skills which belong exclusively to one sex or the other... both men and women are physically strong, active, and brave" (215). I agree that confining a female (or male) hero to conventionally masculine qualities is problematic, but so is a strict exclusion of these traits because of their historic association with

a narrow and dubious male heroism.

This paper explores the problem of the 'male hero in drag,' assessing whether heroine narratives that retain many of the structural elements, plot devices, and motifs of their male-centric predecessors are necessarily failures. Some feminist critics dismiss these attempts as mere reversals that leave problematic systems intact; while some female heroes do little to alter the gendered valuations of the conventional heroic fantasy story, feminist heroines are capable of profound revisions of heroism.

I considered two models for judging the success of my selected texts. In *Romancing the Novel*, Margaret Bruzelius illuminates how the adventure stories of Scott, Dumas, and Verne enable male readers, who see a hapless gentleman adventurer succeed through no particular effort of his own. He need not be courageous, tenacious, or particularly intelligent; his triumph is the result of ordinariness combined with a modicum of luck. In Bruzelius's view, a successful girl's adventure story would provide female readers with a similar model; that is, an unremarkable heroine who prevails because the world's odds are stacked in her favor. Bruzelius notes that this sort of story does not yet exist: "We regularly require young woman heroes to be clever, conscientious, and hard-working simply to arrive at the male hero's stepping-off place" (213). While I agree with Bruzelius's observations, her criteria for a successful female hero are not well suited to my subject of inquiry. The predecessors of the juvenile heroines who interest me are not the undistinguished gentleman of Scott and Verne, but the driven, ordinary-to-extraordinary protagonists of the fantasy *bildungsroman*. In contemporary juvenile fantasy fiction, these are Le Guin's Ged, White's Arthur, Herbert's Paul Atreides, Eddings's Belgarion, Alexander's Taran - which in turn have origins in the Gawains and Yvains of medieval romance. Any female equivalent of these characters will be far from hapless.

Margery Hourihan evaluates success in terms of challenges to structure rather than enablement of the hero-protagonist and reader. She sees the hero's story in children's literature as a collection of binary oppositions which inscribe white, Western, male dominance. Hourihan proposes that while reversals of these binaries (the good is dark, the evil is fair; wilderness is restorative, civilization is destructive) can be subversive, directly disrupting these polar attitudes is more effective. This involves a reexamination of certain key concepts of the hero's story, such as the way in which Le Guin's later *Earthsea* books suggest a more nuanced understanding of victory than conventional triumphal violence, or how Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books and Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker* series propose heroes whose journey is constituted by a centripetal weakening rather than strengthening of identity (Hourihan 47). Hourihan's model is flexible, allowing for reversals, mixtures, and explosions of traditional dualisms.

In establishing my own criteria for a subversive fantasy adventure story, I draw on a number of feminist critics, including Bruzelius and Hourihan. I look for independent connections between women, as well as for heterosexual relationships conducted with equality and respect. I am interested in truths that are exposed and denaturalized, aspects of the traditional tale that are questioned, both/and rather than either/or oppositions. I see a subversive heroine as perhaps having the "sense, benevolence, and self-possession" of Carroll's Alice (Hourihan 207), who does not seek to impose her will on everything she meets, whose sense of identity is in flux, who stands up for herself without dominating others. She can be confident and courageous, but also contemplative and creative. She might value pragmatism above pride. She sees sexuality as power rather than weakness, taking one lover or many. She prefers creation to destruction, yet conventionally masculine traits are not off-limits; she can be stoic, gallant, and brave.

## *Tamora Pierce*

In this paper, I examine how two popular, deliberately feminist juvenile fantasy series attempt to revise and subvert the masculine conventions of traditional heroic fantasy, and the ways in which the first series still fails in some ways to escape the gravitational pull of these structures. Tamora Pierce's *Song of the Lioness* (1983-1988) and *Protector of the Small* (1999-2002) tetralogies are ideal candidates for exploring the construction of new female heroisms. Pierce's feminism is frank and deliberate; the five series that she has written within her medieval Tortall universe demonstrate a fascination with girls in non-traditional fantasy adventure roles (knight, mage, spymaster, guardswoman), a preoccupation with the consequences of what Maria Nikolajeva deems a "simple gender permutation" (*Aesthetic* 153). Pierce is aware of the gendered constraints of her genre, admitting in one interview that many heroines are "like guys in drag" (Spicer 26). In many instances, her fictional situations are clear analogues of actual social and political scenarios; Pierce takes literally Ursula K. Le Guin's assertion that "the politics of Fairyland are ours" (*Revisioned* 25). Pierce's recent short story collection, *Tortall and Other Lands*, includes thinly veiled reflections on genetic-based abortion ("Nawat"), the 1989 Central Park jogger case ("Huntress"), and hijab laws ("Elder Brother" and "The Hidden Girl"). Pierce is relentless in her exploration of these topics, rarely letting her own work stand without eventual rethinking and remaking. She revises ad infinitum.

Pierce is also suited to my investigation because of her similarity to Ursula K. Le Guin. While the two feminist authors do not compare in terms of complexity of prose or intended audience, both women have returned to revisit an old, highly successful story arc years after finishing it. Le Guin's well-known *Earthsea Revisioned* lecture explains her decision to pen a fourth Earthsea book, *Tehanu* (1990), eighteen years after supposedly completing her fantasy

trilogy. Pierce finished her *Song of the Lioness* quartet between 1983 and 1988, but returned in 1999 with the story of a second girl becoming a knight in her fictional Tortall.

Market pressure pushes popular authors to return to a successful story without altering its fundamental vision (Mendelsohn 52). Pierce could have easily given readers more of the same, either continuing with the adventures of her first heroine Alanna, or embarking on new storylines as in the *Immortals* (1992-1996), *Tricksters* (2003-2004), and *Provost's Dog* (2006-2011) series. Instead, *Protector of the Small* is a deliberate risk, a revision of one of Pierce's existing arcs (a girl becoming a knight) suggesting that she had become dissatisfied with the earlier version. Le Guin has claimed in lectures and interviews that the final two Earthsea books arose out of her dissatisfaction with what she saw as an affirmation of the problematic norms of conventional heroic fantasy within her original trilogy. I propose that *Protector of the Small* is the result of a similar impulse; in the third volume of *Protector*, the protagonist of Pierce's first series visits her successor, baldly admitting to the younger woman that the earlier story was not enough.

Pierce's Tortall is the dominant kingdom of the Eastern Lands. Its society is feudal, with noble and common classes, and strict gender roles. Noble sons train as knights or enlist in the King's Own guards; those with the magical power called 'the Gift' can attend University or study with priests in the City of the Gods. Knighthood is established by entry into the mystical Chamber of the Ordeal, which tests potential knights by confronting them with their worst fears. Noble daughters are often educated in convents before coming to Tortall's capital city Corus to find a husband. Tortallans honor a pantheon of gods led by Mithros (god of war and justice) and the Great Mother Goddess (patron of women and healing). The kingdom is ruled by the Conté line; *Song of the Lioness* concludes with the coronation of Jonathan, whose rule is considered unusually progressive.



Each Tortall series focuses on one or two foreign realms. *Song of the Lioness* introduces the Bazhir of the Great Southern Desert, a formerly independent tribal nation that was conquered by Tortall several hundred years before the events of Pierce's first series. Pierce's second Tortall series, *The Immortals*, involves threats by the Carthaki Empire, a powerful domain located across a saltwater strait. In this series, characters also enter the Divine Realms; Carthaki mages have punctured the barrier between human and celestial territories, allowing the mythical beasts called 'immortals' to cross into Tortall. The heroine of *Protector of the Small* grows up in the Yamani Isles, an approximation of feudal Japan, and goes to war against a collection of warlords in Scanra, a vaguely Nordic country. The *Tricksters* series sends a noble Tortallan girl to the Copper Isles, where she aids revolutionaries in dismantling an apartheid system. Pierce uses these nations to explore issues of race, slavery, gender, violence, and class.

Pierce's typical approach - followed in all five Tortall series – is to introduce an adolescent heroine into a male-dominated or otherwise unorthodox vocation. Whether knights, mages, spymasters, or guardswomen, these protagonists fit a common mold. They are skilled but modest, with a strong work ethic. They are usually more serious than their peers, but are attracted to jokers as friends and as lovers. They are often accomplished mathematics students. All avoid alcohol. While Pierce retains a basic template for her heroines, she varies some characteristics from prototype to prototype. She plays with size, introducing an unusually small protagonist in *Song* and an unusually large one in *Protector*. Some of the heroines are passionate and blunt (in *Song* and *Immortals*) while others are reserved and collected, always weighing their words (*Protector*, *Tricksters*, *Provost's Dog*). The set includes three nobles, a rural villager, and a poor city-dweller. The basic template and these variations suggest a process of deliberate revision, a conscious exploration of the female hero.

The *Song of the Lioness* and *Protector of the Small* series are ideal for a semi-controlled comparison because they share so many elements; their heroines pursue the same vocation within the same fantasy world. Pierce's many visits to her Tortall universe over the course of thirty years have given her room for regression, fluctuation, and progress in her exploration of heroism - far more maneuvering space than an author has in a single novel or even series. Her five series resemble carefully planned and deliberately executed prototypes of the female hero. While the basic premise of *Song* and *Protector* is the same, the two quartets represent two vastly disparate models of heroic fantasy; Pierce's work, like Le Guin's, expresses her evolving feminism.

*Song of the Lioness* follows Alanna of Trebond as she switches places with her twin brother Thom, disguising herself as a boy to train as a knight, accompanied by her manservant Coram. In *Corus*, Alanna is befriended by the heir Prince Jonathan, along with his companions Gary and Raoul, the knight Sir Myles of Olau, and the Rogue (king of thieves) George Cooper; she makes an enemy of Duke Roger, powerful sorcerer and next in line for the throne. In *First Adventure*, she conquers the palace bully Ralon; Alanna and Jonathan together defeat the Ysandir, ancient beings dwelling in the arid Black City. During the fight, Jon discovers his friend's true sex; he selects Alanna as his squire regardless of the revelation. The second volume of the series concerns Alanna's courtship by George and love affair with the Prince. She is given personal development tasks by the Goddess, and acquires a supernatural cat named Faithful. She wins a decisive duel against a foreign knight, briefly goes to war, and becomes increasingly suspicious of Roger, whose designs on the throne become clear. Alanna defeats Roger in single combat, as her sex is revealed to the Court. After her ceremony of knighthood, Alanna travels into the Southern Desert and is adopted by a Bazhir tribe, the Bloody Hawk, as well as by Sir

Myles; she trains her own magical Gift, instructs two young girls and a boy in becoming shamans of the tribe, and ends her affair with Jonathan after a disastrous marriage proposal, finally entering into a relationship with George. In the final volume of *Song*, Alanna quests for the legendary Dominion Jewel. She travels with Liam the Shang Dragon, a martial arts master, and the expatriate princess Thayet, who eventually becomes Queen of Tortall. Upon returning to Corus, Alanna discovers that Roger has been raised from the dead by her sorcerer brother Thom. Roger orchestrates a final attempt on Jonathan's life, and Alanna kills him conclusively.

*Lioness Rampant*, the fourth book of Alanna's series, ends with the suggestion of a changed world: Bazhir girls "shock[ing] the elders" by devoting themselves to "warrior arts" (4.300), children in the streets of Corus pretending to be Alanna (4.230). The city recovers from a magical earthquake with strong natal overtones, taking time to "repair, and rebuild" (4.298). One character remarks that the atmosphere is like "the land when spring is coming" (4.306). Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope write that "Even when the narrative ends with the promise of a kingdom transfigured, however, the author usually fails to include any detailed account of the world that the new vision promises" (260). Sixteen years after beginning Alanna's story, Pierce returned to confront the problems of the transfigured kingdom, the post-spring world. Her second prototype of a girl becoming a knight builds on *Song's* successes, and learns from its failures. Alanna's pioneering efforts have made it possible for a successor to enter training openly, as a woman; thanks to *Song*, Tortall's second female knight is in a position to challenge the truths inscribed by the conventional heroic fantasy structure in ways that were impossible for the first.

Given Pierce's frequent incorporation of current social issues into her fiction, it is likely that the analogues between her stories of female pages entering all-male knight training and the turbulent integration of the American military colleges in the 1990s are no accident. Although

this is speculation, the parallels are striking. Catherine Manegold's description of Shannon Faulkner, the first female cadet to attend The Citadel in South Carolina, strongly resembles Pierce's descriptions of her second heroine, Keladry of Mindelan. The two women are physically similar: Faulkner was a "tall, large-boned teenager" like Kel (20), male cadets called her "the divine bovine" and "the whale" just as boys nickname Kel "the Cow" and "the Lump." Opponents of Faulkner's admission spray-painted her parents' house with epithets (21); Kel arrives at the palace to find her rooms vandalized and her walls covered with nasty remarks. Like Kel, Faulkner "faced the world with an unvarnished bluntness" (20); cover illustrations of Kel recall photographs of Faulkner. The adversity that Kel faces during her first years as page resembles the harsh 'adversative training' program employed by The Citadel and the Virginia Military Institute, which "tested the mettle of the entering [cadets] by making them subservient to the largely unsupervised upper-class cadets" (Bartlett 140). In the same way, "Hazing is the way new boys become pages," as an older page informs Kel (1.211).

Feminists were divided over *United States v. Virginia* (1996), the case that finally mandated integration of the public military colleges; some just sought an end to the exclusion of women from the ranks of cadets at The Citadel and VMI, while others advocated for broader institutional reform. Katherine Bartlett notes that the court case failed to resolve "unanswered questions about whether a state should be allowed to fund an educational program defined by particular, hyper-masculine norms" often predicated on degradation of females (137): derogatory language and playacting around the rape and humiliation of women are staples of the schools' culture (174). As in Pierce's series, "coarse and demeaning characterizations of women as a whole" conflict with "chivalrous standards of behavior toward particular women" - those few deemed ladies (141). Bartlett argues that the courts should have focused on the legitimacy of the

schools' adversative training methodology (164); the case "reinforced the notion that the only changes to be expected from gender equality are expanded opportunities, not changes to institutional structures and societal attitudes (166). Pierce's two series exemplify a shift from the former to the latter attitude toward integration; while *Song* focuses on expanded opportunities, *Protector* delves deeper into society's organization and norms.

Keladry of Mindelan is the first girl to take advantage of the opportunity for females to enter page training, twenty years after Alanna. Unlike male pages, Kel endures a year's probation from the conservative training master Lord Wyldon. She is alienated from her peers by her gender and her Yamani demeanor (having grown up an ambassador's daughter abroad); the older page Joren of Stone Mountain and his conservative cronies make life difficult for Kel from the start. Kel sets herself against this group's hazing and abuse of younger pages. She finds a friend in Neal of Queenscove, a gentle boy with healing magic who dropped out of University training to become a page; friendships with other pages form gradually. Several times a year, she receives expensive, useful gifts from an anonymous benefactor. Kel acquires strays: the abused destrier Peachblossom, the mutt Jump, and a troupe of friendly sparrows. In *Page*, the second volume, Kel hires an abused maid, Lalasa. The kidnapping and rescue of Lalasa make up the climax of Kel's page training. Kel is chosen as squire by Raoul of Goldenlake, one of Alanna's school friends and commander of the King's Own guard. Through bandit hunts, tournaments in the Royal Progress, and a brief stint on the border, Raoul grooms Kel for a command position. In *Squire*, Kel explores her feelings for a fellow squire, Cleon; she also encounters "killing machines," mysterious magical devices sent over the border from Scanra. During Kel's Ordeal of Knighthood, the Chamber of the Ordeal gives Kel the task of finding and defeating the necromancer Blayce, who powers the killing machines with the spirits of dead children. In *Lady*

*Knight*, Kel commands Haven, a refugee fort on the edge of the Scanra-Tortall conflict. When the necromancer abducts her people, Kel defies orders and leads a group into Scanra to recover the missing and confront Blayce.

Pierce identifies strongly with each of her heroines; her narrative consciousness rarely detaches from the perspective of her protagonists. In *Song*, Pierce distances herself from Alanna only on two sets of occasions: when Alanna struggles with the tasks that the Great Goddess gives her, and when men watch or discuss her among themselves. In the first case, Pierce steps back in order to set Alanna's tasks, to measure her progress in coping with her fear of the Ordeal of Knighthood, of the villain Duke Roger, and of sex. In the second case, Pierce locates her narrative perspective with men who remark to one another that Alanna "looks softer when she sleeps" (3.14), or discuss her capabilities. In both of these cases, Pierce's estrangement from her heroine reveals the author's own limiting closeness to dominant norms. According to the Goddess, Alanna's major task is to become more receptive to male sexual advances. Pierce is unable to distance herself from the point of view of the conventional masculine narrative, easily relapsing into thinking through the eyes of men.

In *Kel*, Pierce identifies with a heroine who is herself estranged from masculine authority structures. This strong identification reflects Pierce's own emergent distance from the conventional masculine narrative, her shift from demanding an expanded role for women within the heroic structure, to questioning its norms and mechanisms. The few times that Pierce distances herself from Daine, the heroine of her interim *Immortals* series, the alternate perspective is inevitably male and inevitably sexualizing, as in Alanna's series.<sup>10</sup> In *Protector*, Pierce remains with her heroine throughout. She never steps away to look down on Kel through

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<sup>10</sup> The final volume of the series opens with Daine's teacher reflecting on her "soft lips" (RG 2) before shifting to the mind of Daine's nemesis, who ruminates on the girl's attractiveness and sexual prospects (RG 6-7).

the eyes of a higher authority, whether Goddess or man. When there is a choice, Pierce chooses the point of view of her heroine over the perspective of established authority.

While I will consider a wide range of topics, certain key themes and concepts recur. Both of Pierce's series are fundamentally concerned with gender, particularly the move away from a binary paradigm toward a continuum of gendered behaviors. Clothing and physical appearance provide a forum for discussing the tension between a performative and an essentialist view of gender in both series, a subject that is particularly relevant in light of many critics' use of the phrase 'male hero in drag' to describe the failed female hero. Pierce's heterosexual pairings evolve from one series to the next. The men of *Song* are often overbearing and condescending, and sexual liaisons are imbalanced; in *Protector*, behavior that is patronizing, aggressive, or otherwise hypermasculinized is devalued, and sexual relations are both less certain and more equal. There are few relationships between women in the first series, while the second is filled with female role models, mentors, mothers, friends, and adversaries. These threads add up to a reevaluation of conventional masculinity and femininity.

Both series explore the tension between generic norms and what Pierce presents as the quotidian knightly existence. Heroism metamorphoses, abandoning the exceptional and the inaccessible for the normal, the approachable, and the attainable. *Protector* disrupts the generic conventions of villainy, redefining the meaning and questioning the existence of evil. Although combat remains central to Pierce's knighthood, physical violence undergoes a comprehensive reassessment in *Protector*. The interrogation of these conventional aspects of the hero's narrative results in a discomfort with and revision of accepted chivalric norms, a differentiation between the oppressive rules and customs that constitute Tortallan chivalry on its surface, and a deeper sense of moral obligation that has been largely abandoned. In sum, Pierce concentrates on broad

systemic transformations in the latter quartet which are absent in the former - increased pragmatism, thinning social boundaries, identification with marginal aspects of society, the individuation of groups, heightened scrutiny of violence and death, distrust of authority.

My first chapter considers Pierce's first model of the female hero, Alanna. I discuss the challenges that *Song of the Lioness* makes to heroic convention, and the ways in which "the form... seems nevertheless to reassert its gendered norms even where [the author] is explicitly resisting them" (Bruzelius 75). I devote a short inter-chapter to Pierce's *Immortals* quartet, published between *Song of the Lioness* and *Protector of the Small*, which acts as a bridge between the two major series and introduces issues that are explored more fully in *Protector*. My second chapter examines the many ways in which Pierce's *Protector of the Small* series builds on and diverges from the *Song of the Lioness* quartet, resulting in a far more fruitful attempt at subverting many of the problematic structures of the conventional heroic fantasy narrative. "It isn't just that a girl is a squire," Kel's knightmaster informs her gravely. "We're all part of a quiet war that's taking place across the Eastern lands" (7.212). This "quiet war" is a major shift from the *Song of the Lioness* series, which pits an exceptional woman against the constraints of a fixed society, to *Protector of the Small*, in which an ordinary heroine contends with a world already in flux. Each main chapter is divided into two sections, the first focusing on disturbance of traditional gender norms, the second focusing on disruptions of conventional heroism; each chapter ends with a coda, pulling together themes in a sustained discussion of the concluding volume of each series. Finally, a brief epilogue revisits the overarching relation between Pierce's two feminist efforts.



## I. FIRST PROTOTYPE: ALANNA

### A. Gender

#### 1. *Gendered performances*

Many critics use the term ‘male hero in drag’ to describe a female protagonist who takes on a typically male role. The first two *Song of the Lioness* volumes focus on a literal drag performance; after switching places with her male twin, Alanna uses dress and body language to convince peers that she is the hotheaded page Alan of Trebond. If by embodying a masculine heroic role Alanna is essentially male regardless of costume, as these critics claim, then Page Alan could be understood as Ganymede in early productions of *As You Like It*: a male actor playing a female character constructing a male alterego. Yet it is precisely these shifts that prevent Alanna’s dismissal as a mere male hero in drag; Pierce uses Alanna’s deliberate construction of masculinity and femininity to suggest the performativity of gender.<sup>11</sup>

Secondary characters insist on essentializing Alanna’s gender, reminding the page of her ‘real’ female identity. During a visit to the healer Eleni Cooper to discuss menstruation, the older woman tells Alanna that she is female "no matter what clothing" she wears and "must become accustomed to that" (1.137). Like his mother, George Cooper asserts his friend’s essential femininity, privately calling her ‘Alanna’ because he thinks she ought to be reminded of who she is (1.140) The thief’s insistence implies that Alanna cannot be herself living as a male page, that there is a more authentic self keyed to her birth name. Even the Goddess informs Alanna that she will have to reveal her "true sex" because her nature abhors living a lie (2.8).

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<sup>11</sup> Critics dispute the significance of cross-dressing in juvenile literature. Maria Nikolajeva claims that "cross-dressing is another way of denying one’s body and gender" (*Rhetoric* 45), treating gender as biological. Victoria Flanagan assumes that cross-dressing necessarily "exposes the artifice of gender constructions," allowing the performer to contract a "unique gendered niche" not contained by the gender binary (79). While I do not agree that the act of female-to-male cross-dressing necessarily destabilizes gender, this exposure of artifice is one of the possibilities that it raises. Flanagan discusses Alanna’s male performance but makes no mention of her corresponding female performance.

From her first day in the palace, Alanna is aware that male clothing is more than a physical disguise. Her splendid royal uniform gives her the "courage to unbolt the door and step into the hall" (1.26); by dressing as a man, she accesses a boldness that has often been considered a male trait. However, Page Alan is not Alanna's most interesting disguise - as an adolescent, she begins to occasionally don women's clothing with the help of George's mother Eleni. This is a fourth layer of gender performance, not Ganymede stripping down to Rosalind but Rosalind playing Ganymede playing Rosalind. Unlike with the page uniform, female identity does not come immediately with the gown; at first, Alanna still feels like "Squire Alan in a girl's dress" (2.124). Her pragmatic approach to "hav[ing] to be a girl someday" is to begin practicing (2.123); in time, Alanna begins to feel "bold and wonderful" in dresses as well as in her page uniform (2.137).<sup>12</sup>

Both assumed male and assumed female identities are difficult: something to practice, to learn (2.126). Alanna's biological sex does not make this latter practice any easier; in fact, Eleni says that femininity will be harder for Alanna to learn than masculinity - making it clear that gender, for Alanna, is not tied to biology. It is performance. The women further complicate the dress-up by describing it in terms linked to masculine heroism; Eleni calls the dress and accessories "woman's gear" (building an equivalence to knight's gear), while Alanna calls this new cross-dressing "an adventure" (2.124). Although Alanna's female identity is presumably immutable, she still uses dresses and perfumes to "pass" as a woman (2.125), refuting the assumptions that other characters make about her real or natural identity.

Performance implies audience. Alanna's very first experience in a dress attracts immediate onlookers, as Jon and George unexpectedly barge their way into the kitchen. The men cannot immediately reconcile their knowledge of Alanna with the outfit. Even late in the third book,

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<sup>12</sup> Both Perry Nodelman and Maria Nikolajeva discuss how female dress has historically been considered a constraining costume, while male clothing is treated as absence of costume, natural and freeing (*Boys* 1; *Rhetoric* 275). The depiction of Alanna's female cross-dressing as liberating disrupts this attitude.

when Alanna is a veteran of female clothing, men still notice when she wears a dress. Jon asks her if her gown is "for anyone in particular," and she snaps "for myself" (4.239). This is not strictly true; though a dress may make Alanna feel "bold and wonderful," it also alters the way that others perceive her. She defends her gowns against the criticisms of her lover Liam, who sees a slippery slope toward conventional womanhood: "I suppose you'll want earbobs next, and bracelets and other frippery... A noble-born husband and Court intrigues" (3.109). Whether defensive or flattered by her lovers' attention to her clothing, these exchanges reinforce the way that the male gaze dictates and defines Alanna's female performance.

The immigrant princess Thayet is a veteran female performer, but her power also depends on male perceptions of her appearance. Thayet is the most beautiful woman in the world, an apparently objective and hereditary title passed on from her mother (4.84). *Lioness Rampant* hastens to distinguish Thayet's role in her native country from her reception in Tortall: "in Sarain she was the female who should have been a male heir; the Tortall courtiers accept[ ] Thayet for herself," greeting her entrance to the throne room with a "roar of applause" (4.223). The nobles may be applauding the princess "for herself"; more likely, they are applauding her hazel eyes and crimson lips, and the gown that leaves "shoulders and an expanse of bosom glowing against the muslin" (4.222). Thayet's appearance dumbfounds the men she meets, from the awe-stricken Jon (4.222) to George who "can't lie to a pretty lady" (4.196). Corus's chief herald is stunned by the princess and bows "As deeply to her as he would to a king," suggesting that female beauty confers an equivalent to male political authority (4.222). But is the authority really Thayet's? The princess's influence depends on the male gaze, on influential courtiers who catch a glimpse of creamy bosom and crimson muslin and genuflect.

Thayet's court presentation is also the site of Alanna's attempt to construct a costume that unifies her masculine and feminine identities. Preparing to formally give the Dominion Jewel to Jonathan, Alanna consults a seamstress. The conservative dressmaker suggests a lady's gown rather than the "indecent and disrespectful" tunic and hose. "I'm not a lady - I'm a knight," Alanna growls (4.214). Alanna's choice to identify as woman or as man is heavily dependent on context. Before the climactic coronation battle in *Rampant*, Alanna cuts her hair short as it was during her page years (4.254), perhaps recalling the moment in which she first stood in front of a mirror in her red and gold uniform and found that the clothes make the knight. Visiting George's house in Port Caynn, Alanna is all woman, wearing gowns and perfumes, allowing her lover to make her "rest from bein' a knight" (3.171).

While Alanna is able to shift between these roles, she maintains each in its entirety, leaving the binary characteristics of each mode intact. She does not engage in the negotiation and synthesis of conventionally male and conventionally female traits that is the mark of a truly subversive female hero. For the Dominion Jewel presentation, the women eventually help Alanna to adopt a hybrid costume: wide, draping breeches and a longer tunic, solemn black pearl earrings, combining masculine practicality with feminine grace (4.215). This is the physical manifestation of 'lady knight,' but it is ultimately illusory, symbolizing a simultaneous gender identity that Pierce's first heroine never quite reaches.

## 2. *Romantic pursuit*

Despite the overabundance of males in the palace training program and among the Bazhir Bloody Hawk, the primary men in Alanna's life are fathers (Myles of Olau and the manservant Coram) and lovers (Prince Jon, George Cooper, and Liam Ironarm). Indeed, Alanna implicitly rejects the possibility of male/female peer relationships. When the Bloody Hawk headman Halef

Seif mentions "a friend, a woman who is a sorceress" (3.212), Alanna assumes that his relationship with this woman is romantic, the reason that the bachelor headman never married (3.213). It is unsurprising that Alanna makes this assumption; in another conversation with Halef Seif, she mentions that George is her "best friend in the world, next to Prince Jonathan" (3.60). By Alanna's own admission, her best friends are her two lovers. While she claims that "men and women can be friends without lust" (3.61), this remains a largely unfulfilled promise in *Song*.

The later books of the series involve Alanna's choice between Jon, George, and a latecomer, the martial arts prodigy Liam. While Alanna's decision between the men is presented as determinative, scrutiny reveals that this is no real choice. The three lovers are slightly altered versions of the same character,<sup>13</sup> following the same patterns in their interactions with and attitudes toward Alanna. Each man is supreme in his chosen field: Jon is the heir to the kingdom, George occupies the throne of Tortall's criminal realm, and Liam is the best hand-to-hand fighter in the Eastern Lands. The parallels between Jon and George are particularly striking.<sup>14</sup> Though George appears as Alanna's disreputable, alternative lover, in many ways he is as reputable as the Prince. He is "a hard man to cross" (3.58), disciplining his underworld subjects according to a strict code of honor. The "legitimate Rogue" will not betray a fellow thief, nor employ thugs for murder or manipulation (3.166). He is respected by his supposed enemy the Provost and by his friend the Prince. George even instructs Jon in kingship, taking the younger man "under [his] wing" (4.242). When Jon offers to legitimize the thief with lands and a title, the move comes as no surprise. It changes little to nothing for George, who already "dare[s] carry a sword openly"

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<sup>13</sup> The 2011 Atheneum reprint of *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man* displays this "love triangle" prominently on the cover, with a willowy, kohled Alanna standing between two swarthy and indistinguishable young men. The illustration departs significantly from the original 1986 edition portraying an androgynous, cloaked youth on a horse. Maria Nikolajeva discusses book cover illustrations as paratexts that influence reader expectations over time (155); Anne Cranny-Francis calls them a "medium for the construction of patriarchal discourse," proposing that advertising often ignores the contents of a book in marketing to its expected audience (240). The market for this revised cover would presumably be young girls accustomed to books focusing on dating and sexuality.

<sup>14</sup> Annis Pratt discusses the choice between dark and light lover as a typical Romance archetype (81).

like a noble (3.190) and has trained his horse to fight "like any noble's war-horse" (3.191). George confronts Alanna's vanished rival, the bully Ralon of Malven resurrected as Claw, for succession; Jon battles Alanna's literally resurrected former foe Roger for the same (3.274). Though George acts insulted when Jon pardons and ennobles him, the thief has been in the straight-and-narrow for a long time.<sup>15</sup>

Alanna receives instruction from each of her lovers; this student-teacher relationship reinforces the men's superiority. Jon is several years older than she and acts first as one of her guides to palace life, then as knightmaster to her squire, whose official duty is to instruct her in the combat arts. Even their sexual relationship is at first one of student and teacher; Jon "t[eaches] her about loving" (2.142). George, even older than Jon, teaches Alanna hand-to-hand fighting skills to help her beat the bully Ralon. He assesses her progress, finally acknowledging her readiness with a tankard of ale, a man's drink (1.74). When she takes to the road with her oldest lover, Liam, the two experienced warriors do not exchange tips but institute morning lessons, wherein Alanna studies the rudiments of the Shang martial arts under Liam's eye.

The lovers are Alanna's superiors even outside of this official instruction. When a nervous Alanna tells a supposedly sleeping Jon that she loves him, Jon replies "I know... I just wanted to make sure you knew it, too" (2.169). Jon's arrogance is often complemented by Alanna's naiveté; when he discusses the burdens of ruling, she admits to being "in awe of him when he [speaks] of such things" (4.240). During a visit with Alanna's twin, George recognizes that his companion is distressed and rubs her shoulders. "Was there anything that George didn't understand about her?" Alanna muses (2.159). Rhetorical questions praising the thief's acumen are common; when George discovers that Alanna is traveling to visit Thom despite her evasion,

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<sup>15</sup> Paul McCabe fits Alanna and George's relationship to his own "Beauty and the Beast" model; as I outline, George undergoes no serious transformation, but is more Prince than Beast throughout (80).

the squire wonders "Would she ever outwit him?" (2.253). "It isn't fair. You know everything about me" (4.13), Alanna complains upon first meeting Liam. This complaint could be applied to all of Alanna's romantic connections and many of her platonic ones. Alanna is appalled by Jon's smile of "masculine superiority" when the Prince visits her in the desert (3.161); it is a smile that she would begin to notice everywhere, were she willing to look.

This superiority often manifests as overprotectiveness that diminishes Alanna and discounts her abilities. Conversations about Alanna's self-sufficiency take place between nearly every pairing of men; George and Liam, Coram and Liam, George and Thom, Jon and George, even Alanna's cat Faithful and Liam all discuss the subject. When Squire Alan orders the cat to stay in her tent during a battle, Jon says, "I guess I can't tell you the same, can I?" (2.89). Alanna is astonished by this "strange new protectiveness" (2.90) from her knightmaster; she will have to adjust to protective men equating her to a pet, as Jon does obliquely here and Liam does later with his nickname for Alanna, 'kitten.' Actually, the cat is presented as more capable than his owner. When Liam questions whether the Alanna "know[s] enough to stay out of trouble" (3.35), Faithful replies "We do, the man and I. She doesn't" (3.36).

Sometimes this solicitousness becomes direct infantilization. Jon smiles at Alanna as if she were a "willful child who'd thrown a very small tantrum" (3.123), while George takes pains to "amuse and divert" her (3.183). Liam substitutes the diminutive 'kitten' for Alanna's moniker 'Lioness' in a barrage of patronizing comments: "Don't scowl so, kitten. You've got me shaking in my boots" (3.59) and "I'll tell you someday, kitten - if you're very good" (3.13) are two representative examples. When Liam is not addressing Alanna as an infant cat, he is treating her like an infant human - lifting her onto his saddle "as if she were a child" (3.22) and telling her

“Past your bedtime, little girl” (3.43).<sup>16</sup> In fact, Alanna seems more of a child to her lovers than to her actual father figures. While both Myles and Coram are protective – Coram is notoriously difficult when he disapproves of his charge’s liaisons, and Myles makes the fretful squire eat before her Ordeal of Knighthood – they are generally respectful of Alanna's independence. Myles silences Jon when the Prince starts to reveal Alanna’s disguise to the older knight, saying that that he “would rather hear it from Alan” (2.109). He demonstrates his trust in Alanna and gently rejects the overbearing Prince's habit of making decisions for his young squire. When Alanna's friends tell Coram to look after her as she departs for the desert, the manservant replies that “the best part of ridin' with a knight [is] that *she* [will] be looking' after *me*” (2.209). This response exposes and refutes the men's assumption that Coram’s age and gender render him the protector. Alanna’s fathers are more likely than the men of Alanna's own generation to express support for her autonomy and belief in her capability.

Sometimes Alanna's friends and lovers act on their fatherly impulses. George and Jon usurp Alanna's financial control during her purchase of Moonlight, the mare for whom George charges Alanna less than a third of the asking price without telling the page. George attributes his generosity to Alan’s absentee father’s refusal to “get him a proper mount,” thereby partially assuming a paternal financial role (1.122). Jon confronts the thief privately, unwilling to let the other man “take a loss of... twenty gold nobles” and offering payment. Alanna pays in gratitude, telling George “if you ever want my life, you can have it” (1.122); prevented from evening the scales financially, she is left with an ambiguous sense of obligation. Men, by contrast, always pay back debts. Jon decides to circumvent his “small friend's pride” in this scene because he feels

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<sup>16</sup> The Dragon’s fear of the magical Gift eventually ends his relationship with Alanna (3.59). Liam may treat the knight as a child in part to compensate for this fear, to render her and the magic that she contains and represents manageable. He is afraid of a magic that challenges his control, unmans him, as when Alanna uses her Gift to put him to sleep and climb Chitral for the Dominion Jewel (4.142). Although ‘kitten’ remains belittling, Liam probably uses the term because the kitten is less terrifying than the cat.



indebted to Alanna for saving his life (1.122). George snaps at the Prince, "I don't take charity" (1.123), yet expects Alanna to.

"Were [Liam] and Faithful in a plot to make her feel young and ignorant?" Alanna asks in *Lioness Rampant* (4.79). This question, applied to men throughout the series, is perceptive. Men form bonds around Alanna, often at the expense of her privacy and dignity. Liam and Coram connect over jokes about Alanna's temperament and behavior (4.42). Bloody Hawk headman Halef Seif shares a smile with the spiritual leader Ali Mukhtab after the two Bazhir men quiz Alanna about her romances and she blushes, mumbles, and trips her way out of the tent (3.60).<sup>17</sup> George and Jon are friends because they had "loved the same woman; they both knew what kingship meant" (3.173); they bond over a shared woman and shared masculine authority. "In some ways Jon [is] closer to [George] than [to] Alanna" (3.174); even Alanna's proclaimed best friends are, by virtue of their maleness, closer to each other than to her.<sup>18</sup>

Scenes between Alanna and her lovers abound with sexual descriptions of the men - the thief's "broad shoulders" (2.41), "hard waist" (2.43) and "muscular grace" (2.44), the Dragon's solid body and "sensual mouth" (4.10). Meanwhile, Alanna is rendered petite, childlike, and passive in the presence of her lovers. At George's house in Port Caynn, the thief holds a "large handkerchief" up to sobbing Alanna's "small nose," preventing her from wiping mucus on her sleeve like a child (3.168). Other couples also reflect these contrasts; when the manservant Coram meets his future bride Rispah, he calls the usually domineering woman "lass" while she calls him a "strong-lookin' soldier" (3.166). Heterosexual relationships seem to require the

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<sup>17</sup> These male-male interactions coincide with Pierce's brief estrangement from Alanna's point of view, the narrative relocation to a male perspective that is discussed in the introduction to this paper.

<sup>18</sup> Discussions of the immanence of male-male relationships even among self-identified heterosexual men abounds, notably in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985). Many critics, including Annis Pratt, would add that these bonds reflect ancient cultures that allowed passion only between men (54).

intensification of polar sex roles, making men seem stronger and more aggressive, women younger and more vulnerable. Alanna avoids initiating contact at an inn, instead filling her eyes with a "pleading" that prompts Liam to buy her a drink and introduce himself (3.11). For the knight, courtship requires a temporary desertion of the masculine role<sup>19</sup>; she is unable to combine her two identities.

In *Woman Who Rides Like a Man*, this desertion is prompted by a direct attack on Alanna's femininity. When Alanna refuses to marry Jonathan, he compares her unfavorably to court ladies who "know how to *act* like women" (3.162; author's emphasis). Though Alanna initially tells Jon to find himself "someone more feminine" (3.163), his criticism of her unwomanly behavior clearly has an impact. She flees to George's house in Port Caynn, where she reacts to the thief's love "like a flower opening in the sun," enjoying being "coddled and treated like something precious" (3.80). She buys shawls and pretty underthings on her allowance from Myles (3.172) and "generally "rest[s] from bein' a knight" (3.171). Stung by Jon's insult, Alanna shifts roles; by the time she falls into George's bed, she is as feminine as any court lady.

This feminine role connotes passivity; as Alanna becomes more ladylike, the men around her begin to disregard her personal boundaries and autonomy. During Alanna's visit to Port Caynn, Thom purloins his twin's magical Gift to aid his resurrection of her archenemy, Roger. He belittles his sister in lieu of apologizing, claiming that his spells are "arcane and esoteric with no meaning for anyone but a Master" (3.182). In *Lioness Rampant*, another Mithran Master demonstrates a similarly "high-handed way of ordering [Alanna's] life" (4.279), expecting the

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<sup>19</sup> Alanna's wholesale abandonment of her knightly persona in the presence of her lovers has certain parallels to Joan Riviere's "Womanliness as a Masquerade" (1929). In her psychoanalytical practice, Riviere saw successful women in traditionally male vocations adopting hyper-feminine behaviors in domestic interactions with men, and suggested that these women were engaging in a "compulsive reversal of [masculine] performance," disguising their professional masculinity in order to avoid an expected reprisal (306). Although there is no indication that Alanna fears reprisal for her knighthood, her abrupt shift to a purely feminine mode around her lovers might well be a "device for avoiding anxiety" as much as a sexual response (307).

knight to open her mind to a barrage of corrupted magics without her consent (4.275). The non-mages prefer physical invasions, putting a hand over Alanna's mouth to "cork [her] up" (4.64), stroking and ruffling her hair (1.216; 2.199; 3.59), tweaking and pinching her nose (1.188; 3.55; 4.59). Innocent as these habits may seem, they lay the groundwork for more serious infringements of Alanna's boundaries. The night before Alanna's Ordeal of Knighthood, George drugs her with the approval of onlookers Jon, Gary, Raoul, and Faithful. His motives are kind - not letting the soon-to-be knight "fret [her]self sick" (2.176) - yet the action remains highly manipulative. There was no question of anyone drugging the male knights before their Ordeals; the men chose to fret themselves sick or not, according to their prerogative.<sup>20</sup> Alanna's permission is neither granted nor asked for.

Alanna's magical and physical autonomy is routinely subverted by the men around her; her sexual experience is also punctuated by questions of consent. When Alanna is a young adolescent, George admits to "takin' advantage" of her loaded arms to steal a kiss; the squire is "too shocked to do anything but let it happen" (2.45). Though George is a friend and Alanna's eventual husband, the language surrounding his behavior toward her is disturbing. Throughout the second book he "let[s] her know - with little touches, with softness in his eyes when he look[s] at her - that he [is] stalking her" (2.61). George is not alone. "Cross-dressing" as a woman on the evening of her seventeenth birthday, Alanna is accosted by Jonathan in the palace gardens. He propositions her and begins to unlace her bodice before noticing that she is unwilling. He does lace the bodice back up, but says, "You're fighting what has to be... and you know it as well as I do" (2.139).

Jon's comment reflects the assumption that sexuality and marriage are a woman's natural

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<sup>20</sup> Alanna's successor, by contrast, exerts strict control over the day preceding her Ordeal; she writes letters, makes visits, walks alone in the forest, and avoids her friends (7.374).

lot. Though he and Alanna eventually enter into mutual sexual relations, consent issues continue to surface, culminating in the desert marriage proposal fight referred to previously. "How dare you take my acceptance for granted?" Alanna demands. Jon answers that Alanna "certainly didn't give... any reason to believe [she'd] refuse" (3.162). The prince invokes a common and disturbing fallacy, conflating lack of resistance with consent. This is one of a number of disturbing assault myths that appear in *Song*. When Alanna resists Jon's advances in the garden, he tells her to "go away, before [he] change[s his] mind" (2.140). Jonathan makes Alanna leave rather than leaving himself, despite her earlier occupancy of the garden. He implies that if she stays he may "change his mind" and rape her whether she likes it or not.

Both in the garden and in the desert, Jon indicates that it is a woman's responsibility to keep male sexuality curbed. This attitude is reinforced by the male cat Faithful, who rebukes Alanna for provoking Prince in the desert (3.173), and Coram, who agrees that Alanna is culpable for Jonathan's behavior. *Song* implies that women eventually enjoy assault; every time the persistent George kisses Alanna, she struggles before relaxing into the forced kiss (3.177). After refusing Jon's advances in the garden, Alanna seeks him out in the bedroom. Nor does she recall these initial moments of resistance, remembering that when George flirted "to the point of flustering her, she'd simply ordered him to stop" (4.11). George rarely stopped when ordered to; this mis-remembrance contributes to the legitimization of discomfiting actions held out as normal sexual behavior in the series.

When Alanna hesitates before engaging in sexual relationships or considering marriage, other characters push her toward romance. The Goddess urges Alanna to conquer her fear of "the warmth of a man's touch" (2.11), but Alanna's trepidation is reasonable. She is afraid that she will "lose [her]self" in joining with a man (3.133) - an acute summary of woman's path within

the generic tradition to which *Song* belongs. She expresses similar worries to Myles about Jon's proposal, predicting that a royal marriage will "make[ her] into a thing... instead of leaving [her] a person" (3.129). These concerns are brushed aside. Not only Jon and George but the Goddess, Faithful, Coram, and Myles are invested in Alanna's marriage prospects; in a letter from beyond the grave, even her former lover Liam advises her to "raise lions and lionesses with a man who loves all of you" (4.305). This collective longing for Alanna's marital bliss apparently convinces her; by the middle of *Lioness Rampant*, she no longer fears losing herself in marriage, but she dreads becoming a spinster (4.238).

Jon's proposal forces Alanna to confront the narrative that the heroic fantasy provides for her as a woman. Major female characters marry powerful men. When Jon asks Alanna to marry him and become Queen, he has all the coercive power of the fantasy adventure tradition behind him. It therefore takes extraordinary will and self-knowledge for Alanna to refuse, to realize that "lately [she's] not sure [she] like[s] Jon very much" (3.146). At the same time, it is the tradition that Alanna invokes in her refusal; she reminds Jon of his generic imperative to "marry a princess who'll bring [him] power and gold... a virgin" (3.114). The Prince's actions are dictated by both the demands of his country and of his genre. During the couple's final fight, Alanna upbraids the Prince for assuming her acceptance (3.162). Ultimately, it is not Jon at whom she is shouting but the tradition itself, and its underhanded attempt to corral her into a role that she has long resisted. She continues to resist here, using her identity as Hero to reject the Princess narrative as inadequate.

Alanna's second proposal is more egalitarian on its surface, but George's verbal slips reveal a set of conservative assumptions about marriage that in fact mirror Jonathan's. He admits that he wanted to fix up his castle at Pirate's Swoop before he "brought-" (4.307); the line is cut

off and George changes tack, but this is a clear reference to bringing Alanna to the castle as his wife. Alanna either does not notice this slippage or chooses to ignore it. The thief goes on to ask if she loves him "enough to bear my - our - little ones" (4.306); he hastily retracts a singular possessive that favors paternity. George asks if Alanna loves him "enough to give up roamin' and settle down," this time finishing the thought before replacing it with "Well, to roam with me along" (4.307). The final image is a positive one - raising children together, traveling together - but the mistakes, quickly caught, paint a different picture. George takes it for granted that he is fixing up Pirate's Swoop for Alanna, that she will cease roaming and begin bearing his children. When Alanna accepts the proposal, George says that has finally "tamed... a Lioness" (4.308). While Alanna takes this as a joke and resists only in jest, George's statement is rendered much darker by the pattern of mistakes riddling his proposal. This reading makes the final word of the series, "betrothed," constricting rather than triumphant.

### 3. *Eliding women*

In conventional heroic narratives, women appear as the hero's trophies or temptresses; their presence depends entirely on relations to male characters. Women's relationships with one another are "invariably hostile and destructive" (200); Margery Hourihan identifies autonomous female/female connection as a strong sign of subversion in traditional plots (232). Jon sums up conventional attitudes toward these relationships when he notices Alanna wearing a necklace given to her by the Goddess: "Why would a lady give you a charm?" he asks, frowning (2.128). Why would women interact independently in ways that men don't understand? Sounds dangerous. Alanna's tentative steps toward practicing her own female identity do not result in a sudden influx of female relationships; rather, Alanna's exploration of femininity is almost entirely predicated upon sexual entanglements with men.

Alanna is surrounded by men from infancy. She and her twin are "poor motherless things" (1.12); the Lady of Trebond died in childbirth, leaving Alanna to grow up with her father, her brother, the guardsman Coram, and the hedgewitch Maude. While Maude could be a substitute mother figure, her participation in Alanna's story is limited to the first chapter of *First Adventure*, after which she never reappears. Margaret Bruzelius discusses the "difficulty of including active mothers in romance fictions" (165), noting that heroes' mothers are often ill, dead, or simply absent. Since there is no direct equivalent in the male experience, mothers and childbirth add a complex and eminently subversive element that adventure plots tend to avoid. Mothers have no role in the conventional structure beyond the physical perpetuation of the line of heroic men and are therefore often omitted. Alanna never thinks about her dead mother; though Eleni Cooper and the Goddess sometimes give Alanna female advice (2.9), the only real substitute parents that Alanna gains are the fathers Myles and Coram.

Motherhood is not only absent but actively avoided in *Song of the Lioness*. Maternity threatens Alanna's male performance. She is displeased when the Bazhir refer to her apprentice shamans as her "chicks" and to her as a worrying "desert grouse" (3.131). The maternalization of this mentor relationship (the tribe refers to her having "adopted" the teenagers [3.94]) is perceived as insulting by a woman who deliberately shies away from interaction with children. Page training is an explicit separation of male children from maternal care; Duke Gareth informs motherless Alan that he is not there to be the boy's nanny (1.144). Though Alanna manages Trebond in place of her neglectful brother Thom (2.51), her oversight involves only the masculinized management domains of finances and land husbandry. Even this quasi-domestic role alarms Alanna, who eventually cedes management of the fief to her manservant Coram. Alanna is afraid of domestic and maternal responsibilities as a feminized antithesis of

knighthood, which in her eyes is characterized by freedom and lack of obligation (3.148). She resists connection with motherhood, aware that any association with the stigmatized maternal function will undermine her painstakingly constructed masculinity.

Despite these protestations, Alanna eventually bears children. *Wild Magic* provides a fleeting glimpse of a maternal Alanna; the later *Tricksters* (2003-2004) series follows her daughter Aly as she becomes a spymaster in the Copper Isles. Although Alanna is affectionate with her children, she seems more comfortable embodying a male breadwinner role, visiting home briefly before riding off to battle (WM 229). In fact, this is a role reversal: Alanna "leav[es] her children to be raised by her husband" while she is fighting (*Choice* 12). In *Wild Magic*, Alanna is deliberately lured away from home, leaving her husband and children vulnerable to a pirate raid. Alanna has a turbulent relationship with her only daughter, who resents her mother's absenteeism, Alanna's "never [being] around for [her] growing up" (*Choice* 20). When Alanna does involve herself in Aly's life, it is as the overbearing father; the lady knight intimidates boys who try to kiss her daughter (*Choice* 270). Aly is both awed by and dismissive of her mother's illustrious history,<sup>21</sup> running away from home to escape living in her shadow (*Choice* 18). Aly is closer to George, inheriting his magical Sight (not Alanna's Gift), his diction and mannerisms, his skills and profession, and his patron god. "I've been a bad mother to you," Alanna admits (*Choice* 21); a central thread of *Trickster's Choice* is Aly's realization that her distant mother in fact cares.

Young Alanna fears not only maternity but also assertive female sexuality. The minor female villains of *Song of the Lioness* are uniformly hypersexualized; the female Nameless Ones that Alanna and Jon fight in the Black City are red-gowned (1.199), with red fingernails "like

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<sup>21</sup> An incensed Aly tells her mother: "When you were my age you'd killed ten giants, armed only with a stick and a handful of pebbles. Then you went on to fly through the air on a winged steed, to return with the Dominion Jewel and the most beautiful princess in all the world for your king to marry. I'm not you" (*Choice* 17).



claws" (1.197), watching the humans with "hungry eyes" (1.202). These descriptors evoke a carnal, predatory female stereotype. Delia, temptress minion of Duke Roger, is also portrayed as a predator. Alanna dislikes Delia immediately, condemning her low-cut gown (2.48) and the "green-eyed flirt[']s" confidence in her own beauty (2.49). Because of Delia's villainy, Alanna's demonization of her sexual methods seems justified; for the girl, sex is indeed merely a "trick[ ]... to acquire power" (2.50). Yet it is easy to move from the instinctive loathing of an enemy to a broader vilification of women who enjoy sexuality. Squire Alan's "reluctance to meet young ladies" (2.47) is amusing to those in the know, but also contributes to the absence and dysfunction of female-female bonds throughout *Song*. The cross-dressing squire refuses to "flirt with the ladies as her friends [do]" (2.46),<sup>22</sup> a decision which results in Alanna's alienation from both her besotted male friends and the young women flaunting their sexual power. Alanna chooses to blame the girls for sowing discord among her friends; she agrees with Myles, who remarks that "some women like to break up men's friendships" (2.50). Part of this castigation is simple frustration; unable to participate in this kind of sexual expression, Alanna envies the flirtatious Delia her freedom.

Yet Delia is not an expression of liberating female sexuality. She is controlled by Duke Roger, who uses Delia's physicality as bait in order to manipulate his cousin Prince Jonathan. In scenes with Roger, Delia is submissive: usually kneeling, "fluttering her heavy lashes" and breathing with wide eyes as Roger strokes her hair (2.143). This suggestive positioning neatly summarizes the power disparity between male master and female minion. Delia may be a dominant femme fatale on the dance floor, but in encounters with the Duke she abandons this

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<sup>22</sup> Victoria Flanagan proposes that masculine desirability is one of the most difficult aspects of masculine performance for female-to-male cross-dressers to capture (88). Alanna solves this problem by ignoring it, as she ignores the latent implications of Page Alan's intimate relationship with Prince Jon and with George ("That sounds like him," George's cousin Rispah remarks, "telling' a bit of a boy t' come t' this place at night" [1.69]).

authority in favor of vacuous adulation: "Nothing could go wrong!" she exclaims, "Not when you have planned it" (2.143). In *Song*, even dangerous female sexuality serves rather than threatens masculinity.

Pierce devotes substantial space to her heroine's physical development. Alanna's early pubescent experiences are isolated, inflected with language of wounding and pain. When Alanna notices her breasts developing, she rages and uses a cloth bandage to bind her chest, as with a wound. She uses a swathe of the same bandage for her menstrual bleeding (1.132), reflecting the common psychoanalytical associations between femininity and injury. Alanna initially resists her body's changes, claiming that she will not "put up with it" despite being "born that way" (1.106). Resentment of menstruation is common, but carries particular weight for a girl who has already rejected traditionally female pursuits and behaviors in favor of male ones - as if womanhood itself is something to put up with rather than to embrace.

Alanna's sexuality is controlled by men. Male gaze defines and dictates Alanna's body; her fear and hatred of her own sensuality can only be redeemed by male lovers. As a girl in disguise, it is understandable that Alanna is "twice as careful about how far she open[s] her shirt" after developing breasts (1.107),<sup>23</sup> yet it remains striking that both revelations of Alanna's identity involve the forcible exposure of her body: the Ysander reveal Alanna's deception to Jonathan by magically removing her clothing (1.200), and her sex is announced to the court by the "curves of her breasts" (2.203) exposed by a swordstroke during her duel with Roger. Alanna begins to value her own body only within a man's embrace, as first Jon and then George "[eaches] her about loving" (2.142).

Alanna's resistance to female sexuality parallels her resistance to her magical Gift; at the

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<sup>23</sup> While Kel is candid about her sex from the beginning of her training, it is not until her breasts develop and she begins to wear lighter summer shirts that her young friend Owen blurts, "When did you turn into a real girl?" (6.125). In society's view, female identity remains located in the body.

same time as she begins to enjoy cross-dressing as a woman, she "wonder[s] if she [doesn't] enjoy using her magic sometimes," as well (2.134). Like femininity, the Gift is excluded from chivalric experience, considered "dishonorable" (4.87), "fighting dirty" (1.96), not "*real work*" (4.88; author's emphasis). It is opposed to normal heroic modes; Alanna uses her magic to contain a group of enemy fighters only when she realizes that she "can't exactly challenge them all to single combat," her preferred strategy (4.87). The non-Gifted fear magic as unknown. Kel, Pierce's first non-magical heroine, experiences discomfort around major enchantments: "Scanrans and killing devices she could face, but this was something different, something she didn't understand" (8.150). Alanna is initially "afraid of her magic" (1.4); as with her sexuality, no one has taught her to understand or to value it.

Like sexuality, the Gift is contradictory, perceived as both creative and destructive. In Tortall, healing is exclusively the realm of the Gifted, while Gifted warriors resort to blades and magical fireballs in more or less equal measure. Many characters have an aptitude for both, "hedgewitches whose Gift c[an] be turned to combat or medicine" (8.184), a woman who "ha[s] a magical Gift for healing... c[an] wield death as well," stopping the hearts of Scanran raiders (8.240). When Alanna leaves her home fief to train as a knight, the caretaker Maude advises her to heal in order to cleanse her soul, to pay for lives taken: "It's harder to heal than it is to kill... you've a gift for both" (1.9). For Alanna, reconciling these two aptitudes is difficult. She has trouble granting a soldier's request for euthanasia; though "healing [is] natural to her... she ha[s] never killed a human being with her Gift. She [doesn't] think she [can]" (2.97). Alanna has taken Maude's advice to heart, insisting on an oppositional relation between healing and killing. For Alanna, using the Gift to kill is not only dishonorable but also destabilizing; the action undermines Maude's promise that healing can atone for killing, that Alanna's Gift is an

unqualified path to absolution.

In *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man*, Alanna purportedly comes to terms with her own sexuality, her magical Gift, and with other women. She for the most part meets the first two objectives, but the third remains troubling. Among the Bazhir, Alanna establishes cordial relations with several Bloody Hawk tribeswomen. These include a midwife with whom Alanna shares healing knowledge (3.98), as well as Alanna's two female shaman students. Yet these friendships are fleeting; despite Pierce's fondness for pursuing details and connections, Alanna's relationships with Farda, Kara, and Kourrem last no longer than the middle of *Woman Who Rides*. In the final pages of the book, the headman Halef Seif asks Alanna if she has finally learned to appreciate members of her own sex. "How could I not like other women?" the heroine replies (3.212). This rhetorical question accurately captures Alanna's attitude toward women in the third book of *Song*: She does not *not* like them.

In *Lioness Rampant*, Alanna develops her first lasting female friendships with the expatriate princess Thayet and her guardswoman Buri. Although her most prominent relationship as Queen of Tortall is with her husband Jonathan, Thayet insists on establishing connections between women despite the constraints of her role. It is Thayet who orchestrates the all-women dressmaking scene that produces Alanna's sole hybrid gender performance. Following the coronation battle at the end of *Rampant*, Thayet sits not with her future husband but with a "new friend," a noblewoman who also fought; the two women lean on each other, a shattered sword on their laps (4.294). Thayet founds the Queen's Riders, a military organization accepting both men and women. She is involved in practically every scene in *Lioness Rampant* wherein women claim or are granted independent space. During the presentation of the Dominion Jewel, Liam has the option to pair off with one of his female companions, but instead precedes them down the

scarlet runner solo. This leaves Alanna to face her king and kingdom with Thayet and Buri, the three women walking arm in arm in arm toward the throne (4.222).

Despite the promise of Thayet's character, her relationship with Alanna is troubled by Alanna's manipulation of her new friend's romance. The fugitive princess is excited to enter Tortall without rank or title, planning to open a public school and create her own life (4.136). Alanna has "different plans" for Thayet, matchmaking between her and Jonathan (4.137). The match is successful, but remains a circumvention of Thayet's own initial plans. When the princess meets her future husband, she reminds him of her wish to become his "loyal, low-born subject" (4.203). Jon ignores the implication, greeting her as fellow royalty and seating her beside him. Observing the pair's blossoming attachment, a smug Alanna decides that she was "right to bring [Thayet to Tortall]," dismissing her friend's desire to escape a marriage of state as a residual, pre-Jonathan impulse (4.203). In this context, Alanna acts on behalf of patriarchal interests, reinforcing the idea that marriage is a woman's natural lot.

Alanna pushes Thayet into the marriage that she herself evaded. In *Woman Who Rides*, Alanna lists the drawbacks of marrying Jon: she would forfeit bad behavior, comfortable dress, magical healing, freedom of movement, adventure, and risk (3.147). Myles reminds her that the "first duty" of a noble wife is to bear a son, and that childbirth is often fatal (3.145). Alanna firmly rejects this future for herself. She then proceeds to force it upon her friend Thayet, compelled by the narrative that she invoked when she refused Jon's proposal: "marry a princess who'll bring you power and gold... a virgin" (3.114). The success of this union does not deproblematize its genesis. Jon and Thayet's mutual attraction and subsequent flourishing marriage cannot erase the possibility that Alanna's machinations crushed: the vision of a perpetually confined woman who aspired, briefly, to the challenges of a different social role.

#### 4. *Rejecting femininity*

Pierce's heroines share a fundamental modesty. For Alanna, this self-effacement hints at the way in which her acceptance of male superiority and devaluation of femininity becomes a devaluation of self.<sup>24</sup> Her self-criticizing tirades often seem disproportionate to the offense: "There were words for people who fell asleep and dropped from their saddles! I can only blame myself... I could've gone to a convent" (4.20). Much of Alanna's insecurity is framed in terms of gender. She "doubt[s] that she w[ill] ever believe herself to be as good as the stupidest, clumsiest male" (1.78). She "d[oesn't] feel worthy of being someone's squire. She [is] a girl, and she [is] a liar" (1.172). The Ysander sorceress Ylira echoes this attitude, telling Jon that his companion "is a girl. She is weak. She will give way" (1.201). Alanna knows that her opponent is using these statements strategically to undermine the connection between her and the Prince; at the same time, she recognizes "the same small voice that taunt[s her] from within" (1.201), the part of her that is "always wondering" whether she is as good as the boys (1.74).

Alanna recognizes her internal deprecation in the voice of another woman. When Alanna lives with the Bloody Hawk tribe, it is the tribeswomen who are suspicious and slow to embrace the young knight; the men accept Alanna after she defeats a tribesman in single combat. The men become similarly supportive of Alanna's female shaman students. When the girls hesitate to act as legal witnesses to Alanna's adoption, the men of the tribe "urge[ ] them forward" (3.135). Many women, by contrast, follow the conservative shaman Akhnan Ibn Nazzir, and continue to resist the girls' participation in male-dominated council meetings even after he is dead. The contrasting attitudes of the Bazhir men and women place the devaluation of femininity that is typical of conventional heroic narratives with women themselves, assigning them primary

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<sup>24</sup> Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope postulate that while hubris is the traditional fall of the male hero, the female hero, who is not bred to power or belief in her own superiority, is trapped by insecurity and self-doubt (10).

responsibility for the construction of their own inferiority.

The contrast between female insecurity and male affirmation in *Song* implies that any positive valuing of females is dependent on men. Like the Bazhir tribesman, Tortallan males appear surprisingly supportive of Alanna and her goals. When Alanna disparages herself, her doubts are routinely challenged by her male friends. "I didn't ask to be born a girl. It's not fair," she complains; George remarks that being a girl has not slowed Alanna down yet (1.139). She laments that she will never be as skilled as Liam; Coram informs her that she is "just as quick, with a sword" (4.35). As the pages compete for squireships, Alanna removes herself from the pool because she is "shortest, skinniest," a terrible wrestler, and "not that good a swordsman"; once again, her male friends remind her that she is "best on horseback... best at archery and tilting and staff-fighting and weapons" (1.171). Yet as discussed in the previous section, explicit male support is often accompanied by behaviors and attitudes that inevitably contribute to Alanna's distorted sense of worth.

Men provoke and control Alanna's few moments of self-advocacy. It is Bazhir spiritual leader Ali Mukhtab's mocking recitation of sexist creed that prompts Alanna to retort that "Men don't think any differently than women - they just make more noise about being able to" (3.43). After battling the Ysander in the Black City, Jonathan plays devil's advocate to incite Alanna to assert her own eligibility for being a prince's squire. She cites her accuracy in archery, her brilliance in mathematics, and the training master's praise of her swordsmanship as evidence that she is Jon's best choice for squire. She immediately feels "different inside her own skin" (1.214-15). Yet Alanna is only able to access this confidence through Jon's manipulations. The prince tells Alanna that he had already made his decision before her little speech; while Alanna's nascent assertiveness retains symbolic importance, it has no practical effect on the situation.

Despite Alanna's basic unconventionality as a female knight, expressions of and attitudes about gender remain fairly conventional in Pierce's first series. Although masculinity and femininity are revealed as constructed performances, these sex roles are left intact - complete binary sets to put on and take off at will. Alanna's relationships with men affirm masculine superiority and authority. For women, romance and marriage are presented as inevitable, although most forms of adolescent female sexuality are vilified. While *Lioness Rampant* makes a late gesture toward autonomous relationships between women, these bonds continue to inscribe patriarchal concerns. When femininity is valued, it is on male terms.



## B. Heroism

### 1. *Glory and splendor*

*Song of the Lioness* refers directly to heroic conventions, which dictate the storyline in spite of characters' awareness of them. The Great Mother Goddess seems to represent the coercive generic tradition itself in her arrangement of Alanna's mortal destiny. As Alanna becomes embedded in Goddess-given tasks, her story comes to resemble a vision of heroism steeped in convention, tending toward the cliché and the melodramatic: an enigmatic letter from a mysterious dying sorceress entreating “the one” to protect the kingdom (3.22), a tainted crystal sword, a journey to the Roof of the World for a magical jewel. These plots do not come naturally to Pierce, who seems more comfortable describing the ordinary and extraordinary of everyday life (albeit in a medieval fantasy kingdom); quest and destiny nevertheless take precedence by the end of *Song*, demonstrating the strength of the genre's pull.

Although Alanna quibbles with her plot as she enters the myth-space of her quest, she continues to participate in its motion. When she first hears that the Dominion Jewel is “kept for those with the will to strive...for the saving of a troubled land,” she scoffs, calling the legend “fairy stories” (4.28). This is Alanna's usual reaction to stock pieces of her narrative. She rejects the mystical forces that allow her to open a long-sealed trapdoor, attributing the incident to rainfall clearing dirt from the gears (1.51). She initially refuses to connect her journey toward the Roof of the World to the silvery runes on the sorceress's map, claiming that she traveled to Sarain because she “didn't have anything important to do” (4.9). Yet despite her dismissive attitude, Alanna still “enters into the stuff of fables” to retrieve the Dominion Jewel (4.231). She converses with the supernatural voice of a mountain and endures the ponderous warning of a seer: “He waits, old Chitral. He knows you have come for his prize. He will not surrender it if you are unworthy” (4.115). Though Alanna remarks that “Not every village ha[s] a cruel

overlord; few crossroads [a]re held by evil knights” (3.16), she still accepts that some creatures “serve the force we call Good, some that called Evil” (3.49). Her concession demonstrates the attractive, compelling force of these forms, which possess gravity powerful enough to draw Pierce's story back toward a conventional core despite these token resistances.

Alanna's only active resistance to conventional modes comes at the apex of her quest, as she fights an apish envoy of the mountain in an alpine pass (4.128). First, Alanna explains to the mountain Chitral that she needs the Dominion Jewel for personal glory and the glory of the kingdom. This is fairly on-script, but in the next breath Alanna turns against the cliché: “I don't know how the famous heroes of the past were able to take things from the entities that guarded them – not if they were as noble as they claimed. When you look at it right, it *is* stealing” (4.130; author's emphasis). She decides to let the peak keep its Jewel, rejecting the imperatives of her quest. Yet it is this gesture that prompts Chitral to give Alanna the Dominion Jewel in thanks for the entertainment of her visit; her resistance to the conventional plot ultimately facilitates it.

Prince Jonathan is also aware of the clichés of the genre. Upon Alanna's return to Tortall, he gives his friend a speech to read during her momentous presentation of the Dominion Jewel that expresses both the characters' and Pierce's knowledge of and exasperation with conventional language of the heroic fantasy tradition<sup>25</sup>: “...this awesome artifact for which I have gone in quest to the most distant corner of our world. Through peril I have borne it, for the glory of Tortall...” (4.258). Alanna thinks the speech is “some kind of joke” and of course it is; wholesale importation of generic language often produces comedy in Tortall. At the same time, it is an accurate description of her journey, which for the most part conformed to this hyperbolic mode.

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<sup>25</sup> Carrie Nishihira claims that revisions rely on constant comparison; quoting Anne Cranny-Francis, she notes that a successful revision must present both “the revised version of the traditional narrative and its discursive referent, the traditional narrative” (89). In this way, direct references to conventional plots and language in Pierce's books help to establish the tradition that is being modified.

Certain characters not only recognize generic clichés, but strategically invoke them. When the villainous Duke Roger convinces his cousin Jon to enter the forbidden Black City, he baits his hook with references to fantasy convention: “No mortal being returns from the place alive – especially if he’s young” (1.179). The Duke is in fact enticing his royal cousin into the traditional narrative structure that Margery Hourihan refers to as the Story; Roger doubts any mere mortal’s ability to make it out of the Story alive. Jon’s reaction to Roger’s dare echoes the Duke’s own melodramatic language and implies that the Prince has already been pulled into the fiction: he envisions riding to the Black City and “rid[ding] Tortall of a scourge” (1.213). Alanna translates this phrase as “almost certain death” (1.213). Yet it makes sense for Jon to wrap himself in the language of fable in order to face the Ysandir – in fable, the hero always wins.

## 2. *Foul villainy*

*Song*, like the conventional hero's story, draws battle lines between what Ursula K. Le Guin calls “(unquestioned) Good and (unexamined) Evil” (“Assumptions” 5). Pierce's earliest antagonist Duke Roger represents the innate, unalterable evil characteristic of the hero's archenemy. Roger fits Margaret Bruzelius's portrait of the demonic male, embodying the “fantasy of autarchy” that she describes (90); he is driven by the classic villainous concerns of unlimited power and world domination. While Roger belongs to the ruling Conté line, his foreign travels in Carthak and research into old magics associate the sorcerer with the exotic elsewhere that is usually controlled by a demonic male in nineteenth century adventure; Roger's final confrontation with Alanna takes place in ancient catacombs beneath the palace, in front of an abandoned temple (4.289). His ambition is outsized and destructive; he “has a reputation for slowing down, sometimes stopping the careers of young sorcerers who may turn out to be as good as he is” (1.164). Like Bruzelius's model, Roger pushes masculine ambition to the point of

femininity, using the female-associated magics of dolls, thread, water, and voodoo to attack the royal family, as well as engineering his own regenerative rebirth from apparent death.

The demonic male is erotic, characterized by "personal strength, charm, and seductiveness" (Bruzelius 90). Roger is extremely handsome, his "white, flashing smile... filled with charm and confidence," and his body "broad-shouldered and muscular, with strong-looking hands" (1.110). Alanna's first encounter with the Duke is eroticized; she stares at Roger "without shame" and begins "quivering all over" (1.112). Roger is magically as well as sexually attractive. The Duke's method for discovering Gifted pages is intrusive ("he would find it even if a boy tried to hide it" [1.113]); as he teaches, he twirls his "jeweled wizard's rod" between his fingers (1.114), in a gesture that is simultaneously suggestive and threatening. As Alanna approaches her final confrontation with Roger in *Lioness Rampant*, the Duke's threat becomes increasingly sexual. In a dream, he calls Alanna "dear one" and "sweet Lioness," informing her that he would like to lop off a body part as a "tie to [her] inner self" (4.290).

Although Alanna's layered gender renders the Duke's sexual menace complex, Roger ultimately typifies a simple, opaque evil that is conventionally opposed by his noble, heroic nemesis. Though Alanna deems Roger "only a man" after experiencing blizzards, earthquakes, and civil war (4.206), she remains fixated on the sorcerer; within the context of the heroic adventure story, the evil that Roger represents is itself a force of nature on par with these savage natural events. After killing the Duke a first time, Alanna yearns for her "one great enemy" to return, finding life "a little empty" after his vanquishment (3.224). This emptiness is understandable, since the hero's virtue and righteousness is predicated on his opposition to evil and wrongness. While presumably embodying inimical ideological qualities, the hero and his enemy are in fact profoundly interdependent, mutually constitutive.

Evil may be as powerful as blizzards and earthquakes, but its agents remain marginal and are always defeated by the arrayed forces of Good. Despite her transgressive disguise and knighthood, Alanna is aligned with masculine authority throughout *Song*. During training, she faces the bully Ralon with the support of the sons of Tortall's most influential noblemen, including the realm's heir. In the desert, the headman Halef Seif and Voice of the Tribes Ali Mukhtab take her part against the anti-feminist shaman Akhnan ibn Nazzir. Alanna travels to the desert to avoid reactions to the revelation of her gender in the city, but this backlash never materializes; by the time she returns to Corus, the conservative king has died and Alanna's friends rule Tortall: her adoptive father Myles, her training master Duke Gareth, her school companions Raoul and Gary, and her former lover Jonathan. As Alanna prepares for her final confrontation with Duke Roger, these men (as well as the King of Thieves and the Shang Dragon Liam Ironarm) are her reinforcements. Masculine authority is firmly on the side of Good.

### 3. *Bright swords*

According to generic frameworks, violence may be legitimately employed by Good against Evil. While few authors propose a hero who enjoys slaughter, plenty of protagonists appreciate certain features of battle: the glory of a charge, the adrenaline, the satisfaction of defeating an enemy. While Alanna has "fierce pride in being the better fighter," she distinguishes this pride from the "ugly joy at killing" that some knights feel (3.78). Unlike her peers, Alanna is happier finishing a training exercise than vanquishing opponent (4.48). Before her first duel with Roger, Alanna puts the combat in perspective, recognizing that regardless of outcome she has "planted the seed of doubt...he'll never be trusted again" (2.201). Identifying real triumph in Roger's exposure rather than in victory, Alanna undermines the importance of this presumably decisive combat. When Alanna defeats Roger's insane squire Alex, a skilled swordsman obsessed with

formal competition, she is disturbed rather than triumphant. She asks the dead man sadly, "Is this what it means to be the best?" (4.288).

Despite her discomfort with killing, Alanna makes no major challenge to her violent world. In fact, she repeatedly exploits beliefs around the justice of single combat to solidify her own position. Alanna's successor explains the false association between victory and righteousness: if she loses or is killed, "then the gods don't want women to be knights. Isn't that how trial by combat works?" (7.221). This is the system that Alanna uses to her advantage in her duel with Roger and her fight with the Bazhir champion Hakim, which precipitates her acceptance into the Bloody Hawk. While Alanna does not conflate victory with divine approval, she endorses the legitimacy of knightly combat. When Liam asks Alanna if she is "the best in Tortall," she tells the Dragon that "there may be some commoners better than [she]" since she "only f[ights] knights," accepting Liam's standard if limiting its range (4.50). The traditional hero is comfortable with violence *because* he only fights knights, or monsters, or Evil. Alex is right, after all: in Alanna's world, violence is no more than "play[ing] 'best squire'" (4.285), even when the game ends in death.

By the end of *Lioness Rampant*, Alanna's enemies are dead: the Ysandir; Roger; Roger's minions Delia, Josiane, and Alex; the insane Bazhir shaman Akhnan ibn Nazzir; Ralon of Malven. Some have been vanquished in single combat; some have brought their deaths upon themselves. Their evil is irredeemable, their deaths deserved. In the hands of Good, violence and death become justice. Early in *First Adventure*, Ralon the bully subjects the new page Alan to a string of nasty incidents. In response, the authorities of the pages' wing - Jon, Gary, and Raoul - subject Ralon to the same violence that he inflicts. Raoul holds Ralon underwater to prevent his breathing (1.58), and beats him (1.66). One afternoon, the three boys lure their combat instructor

away so that Raoul can beat Ralon with boxing gloves (1.67)<sup>26</sup>. There is no question of reforming Ralon; Evil, according to convention, does not change its ways.

#### 4. *Noble chivalry*

Tortallan knights are governed by the Code of Chivalry, which is both an official set of precepts recited before the Ordeal of Knighthood and a metonym for broader unspoken codes of masculinity - edicts of honor and pride that regulate behavior from George's underworld Corus and the Bazhir desert to the palace training courts. Central to page culture is the "I fell down" excuse given to the training master (and friends, in Alanna's case) in lieu of admitting to fighting. This phrase is one of Pierce's very best concretizations of masculine performance, as the delinquent page approaches his commanding Duke or Lord and voices an explanation for his bruises known to be false by both parties. Sometimes the authority figure expresses incredulity; Coram mocks Alanna's claim that "the ground bloodied [her] nose, split [her] lip and punched [her] in the eye, all at once" (1.62). The page must maintain the lie, secure in his knowledge that the older man actually approves of the fighting; Duke Gareth is "pleased [Alanna] had beaten Ralon, not angry" (1.80). "I fell down" is a link between generations of men; Alanna comments that the excuse "has tradition behind it" (1.66). Alanna's lies induce Prince Jonathan to praise her pluck (1.65); her angry refusal to report the bully Ralon's hazing earns an admiring comment on her "guts" from the hostler Stefan (1.55). By obscuring violence in the palace, the page demonstrates his honor and courage, and elicits affirmation from other males.

The codes governing masculine behavior are clearly dysfunctional in the *Song of the Lioness* quartet. Even a young Alanna notices difficult contradictions, particularly in the rules of non-lethal combat: "Fighting a fellow noble in the palace was breaking the rules... Yet the rules

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<sup>26</sup>In *First Test*, Joren's cronies "form a wall" so that teachers cannot see him hitting Kel (5.63). This close repetition troubles the parallel incident in *Song*, putting the four ruling pages in the same position as *Protector's* bullies.

governing what a noble could take in the way of insults said that Alanna had to fight Ralon” (1.81). When Alanna obliquely discusses her situation with the training master Duke Gareth, the Duke indicates that one rule (no fighting) must be subordinated to the other (defending honor). But the conflicted expectations remain, along with communication restrictions that prevent the divulgence of potentially dangerous situations to authorities.

The only character that directly questions these structures is Sir Myles of Olau, who encourages Page Alan's discomfort with and estrangement from normal knightly behaviors. Myles is an unconventional knight, not aspiring to recognized forms of authority, comfortable displaying character traits that his society disapproves of in a male knight. He is "interested in cooking gear, not weapons" (1.150); his fief is no fortress but a peaceful agricultural property with spacious windows (1.154). He is writing a paper about the ruins on his land simply because the work "gives [him] satisfaction" (1.148), doubting that many will read it. He weeps during emotional moments (3.197). When George says it was "kind-hearted" of Myles to adopt Alanna, the knight replies that it was kind of her to let him (3.202), even challenging his own position as patron. Because of his general opposition to the restrictions of male institutions, Myles is a logical supporter for Alanna's mission to dismantle one.

During Alanna's first class with her future adoptive father, he points out "the toll [the knightly] way of life has taken on [its students]" (1.36). Myles is in some ways reminiscent of Sir John Falstaff, companion to the young Prince Hal in *Henry IV*. Both men are older, portly knights who have abandoned combat status in favor of prodigious drinking.<sup>27</sup> Both involve themselves with the lower classes - Myles with his contacts at the Dancing Dove inn, Falstaff with his friends in Mistress Quickly's Eastcheap tavern. Most importantly, both knights express

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<sup>27</sup> Even a drunken Myles is startlingly perceptive. "A knight is a social animal," he remarks during one party (2.50), implying both that half of knighthood is dancing and conversing with ladies, but also that knighthood itself is socially constructed.



profound disillusionment with the codes of honor and chivalry that structure their worlds. "Can honor set to a leg? no: nor an arm? no: or take away the grief of a wound? no. ...What is honour? a word. What is in that word honour? what is that honour? air" (*Henry IV V.1.127*). Unlike Falstaff, Myles is still an estimable man, with a functioning moral code; his disillusionment and reproach are rather aimed at the criteria of honor, how "noblemen must take everything and say nothing" (1.60). Myles sees a rotted Code imposing unrealistic expectations that hurt the young men it governs, cherishing the motions and trappings of honor above the real thing.

Alanna defends the Code of Chivalry against Myles's cynicism; the courage, stoicism, and pride encouraged by the Code have always come naturally to her. When Alanna calms a large bucking horse, Coram remarks that this act demonstrates "the kind of courage a knight need[s] in plenty" (1.16). Alanna habitually conceals her own troubles and overexertions (1.25). Page Alan would be "ashamed if he thought [his friends] were fighting his battles" (1.64). Given these traits, it makes sense to position Alanna as the official defender of Tortall's Code in a duel against a foreign knight: "She loved the laws of chivalry, and this Tusaine barbarian had just broken them" (2.32). In this combat, Alanna represents not only her kingdom but chivalry itself.

Pierce does not explore the irony of Alanna's championing the chivalric institution that has consistently excluded and objectified her sex. When she swears to enforce the King's rule during her Ordeal, to "prevent the breaking of the law at all times, and in all cases" (2.178), Alanna is aware of having already violated the restriction preventing women from becoming knights. She concentrates on the resulting hypocrisy of her oath, rather than the questionable authority of the law that renders her hypocrite. She vows to uphold the law and "not look away from wrongdoing"; the tension between these two promises is not developed until Pierce's later series.

## Coda: Hero or Woman

*Lioness Rampant*, the fourth volume of *Song of the Lioness*, is the site of Alanna's most subversive moments: her fledgling relationship with two other women, her rejection of heroic aggression on the Roof of the World, her hybrid court costume. At the same time, *Rampant* is the volume that shows Pierce's surrender to the gravitational pull of the hero's story most clearly. It is the Alanna arc in microcosm; the heroine takes a few tentative steps toward rebellion but is ultimately pulled back.

By the time Alanna returns from her travels, it is becoming "hard to keep [Tortall] knit together"; border fiefs begin to break away in the wake of the old king's death (4.218). Parts of the kingdom are threatening to break off; parts of other spaces are threatening to break in. As a result of Jon and Alanna's connections among the Bazhir, more tribesmen are coming to Corus from the Great Southern Desert (4.217). Social boundaries are disintegrating; the thief George violates the codes of his own semi-legitimate criminal kingdom, "betraying the Rogue" to save his friend Jon from an assassination attempt by a challenger, the former bully Ralon of Malven, who has himself crossed the boundary from the nobility into George's criminal world (4.174).

Although Alanna is a boundary-crosser herself, having illicitly entered the masculine chivalric sphere, during the climax of *Lioness Rampant* she labors to restore structure and affirm the king's sovereignty. She gives Jonathan the Dominion Jewel, which allows the new king to hold the land together against Duke Roger's magical assault. She brings him the Saren princess Thayet, ensuring the continuation of his line. She even lends the king the strength of her own magical Gift during the final coronation battle<sup>28</sup>. Bruzelius claims that "romances always work to celebrate a masculine line of descent, even if the hero is a woman" (24); the celebration of Jon's

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<sup>28</sup> Descriptions of this final battle - during which Jon is "like an ancient tree sending out its myriad roots" (4.282) - reinforce the legitimacy of kingship by emphasizing an "identity between king and land" in a variation on the Fisher King archetype (Pearson 14).

inheritance and sovereignty is clear by the end of *Rampant*. In his post-mortem letter, Liam reduces Alanna's knighthood to part of "something new that centers around Jonathan" (4.306). This focus on the new King is apt; Alanna makes her way into spaces that are dominated by masculine power but leaves those systems intact. At times, Alanna makes minor challenges to conventional values and assumptions; in *Lioness Rampant*, she becomes the King's Champion, promoting not only the King but the mechanisms of patriarchy that keep him in place.

By the end of the series, Alanna has essentially succeeded in becoming the male hero as the fantasy tradition defines him: she has demonstrated courage, perseverance, honor, loyalty, and pride, won duels, defeated monsters, and fought courageously in battle. She has been grudgingly chivalrous toward women; she is fiercely protective of her primary relationships with her male companions. She has also fulfilled the woman's imperative, yielding to the love of a succession of powerful men. Upon completing her quest, Alanna is given two rewards corresponding to her two identities. As the Hero, Alanna receives a position and honorific (King's Champion); as the Woman, she is married and tamed by George. The two identities remain intact; although Alanna's dual-embodiment of the Hero and Woman roles is unconventional, her performance ultimately reaffirms the gender roles of the heroic adventure story rather than defying them.

However, one aspect of this coda does not quite fit: the Shang Wildcat, Liam Ironarm's gruff female mentor, who roams suddenly into the frame to deliver Liam's last communication to Alanna, and just as suddenly roams back out. The Wildcat assesses Alanna's fighting ability in a cursory, expert manner, then weeps over Liam's death, comparing him to her own two sons (4.305). Although Tortall's vanished warrior maidens and the formidable women of the Shang

order are mentioned earlier in the books as precedent for Alanna's story,<sup>29</sup> this is the first time that Alanna encounters an older female fighter. In a few short paragraphs, this woman proves more believable than many of the other female types scattered throughout *Song*; it is as if the Wildcat has wandered over from *Protector of the Small*. She is curt, eloquent, maternal, and competent, and we don't even know her name.

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<sup>29</sup> This history is explored in the *Provost's Dog* series, set four hundred years in Tortall's past. These later books feature not only lady knights, but also early signs of the Cult of the Gentle Mother, the beginnings of separate sphere ideology in Tortall.

## II. INTER-CHAPTER: DAINE

Between *Song* and *Protector*, Pierce penned another Tortall series: *The Immortals* (1992-1996). Although this middle series is less imaginative than its predecessor and successor, Pierce uses *Immortals* to introduce several issues that play a significant role in *Protector*'s revisions of gender and heroism. *Immortals* is about a girl with a rare talent for 'wild magic,' a connection with non-human animals. Like *Lioness Rampant*, the series adheres to a conventional heroic arc, reaffirming order and discipline on personal, political, and cosmic levels. Daine Sarrasri spends most of the first book learning discipline, pulling the "tangle of vines" of her magic inside her skin (WM 159)<sup>30</sup>. As is often the case for male heroes, Daine's heightened powers are derived from divine paternity, a hunter-god father whom she finally meets in the last volume of the series. *The Realms of the Gods* restores both human political order (attacks on Tortall are repelled) and divine cosmic order (most immortals are transported back to their native Divine Realms; Father Universe and Mother Flame intercede to cage their daughter Chaos).

Despite these conventional elements, Pierce's second series forms an effective bridge between her first and her third, demonstrating the gravity exerted by conventional arcs and devices while introducing several shifts that become prominent in *Protector*. Unlike Alanna, Daine comes to Corus from a "poor mountain village" (WM 11) and was outcast even there, as the bastard child of a hedgewitch. In the city, Daine's identity remains rooted in her class. She refuses to use a sword, calling it a "weapon for nobles" (WM 59), and expresses the same hesitation when given a book (WM 141). Daine feels that "people like her ha[ve] no business bothering the great and wealthy" (WM 59), only relaxing when she feels the palm calluses of a new acquaintance (signaling a manual laborer) (WM 82). *The Immortals* is concerned with class,

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<sup>30</sup> As in Annis Pratt's green world archetype, Daine leaves a state of natural connection and wildness for enclosure; although Daine retains some of these connections, she sacrifices some of her freedom for control.

but also with class mobility, the permeability of social boundaries. Many of the callused hands that Daine grasps turn out to belong to nobles. Her first acquaintances are men and women who have risen in the world, sought new opportunity in Corus: one sergeant is a former slave, the Queen and the commander of the Queen's Riders fled Saraine, and Daine's assertive first acquaintance, the horsemistress Onua, was "beaten by her husband and left to die" (WM 92).

Daine's introduction to Corus through Onua marks a major shift from the *Song of the Lioness* series, in which encounters between women are subordinated to relationships with men. Daine meets a progression of authoritative females: Onua the horsemistress, Alanna the King's Champion, Buri the commander. Women evaluate Daine's ability: Onua assesses her potential employee's skill with horses (WM 2), and Alanna watches Daine shoot (WM 52). She meets the Queen before the King. Relationships have shifted to reflect the increased importance of women<sup>31</sup>: "co-ruler" Thayet leads one army while Jonathan leads another (RG 214-5). Couples are comrades, partners. There is even a tentative gesture toward a revaluation of conventional feminine pursuits. Varice Kingsford is a pretty blonde mage who manages cooking and entertainment for the Carthaki emperor Ozorne. She defends her chosen occupation: "I just like things pretty. Is that so bad...?" (EM 255). As a powerful mage, Varice faced pressure to seek fame and fortune at the University; her choice is a plea to revalue feminized occupations.

In some ways, Daine's lover Numair is an early model of the men that appear in *Protector*. He is gentler and less attached to projections of manliness than Alanna's lovers; he is self-effacing, and chats easily with Daine about hair ties and lotions (WM 67). Yet Numair is another paragon - "the greatest wizard in Tortall" (WS 14) - and another teacher, fourteen years older than his student Daine. He calls Daine not "kitten" but "my little magelet" (WM 136). Like

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<sup>31</sup> Daine's surname is "Sarrasri," which means "Sarrah's daughter" in the Gallan tongue. "Only bastards are named for their mothers" Daine complains (WM 113); yet this name, and Daine's refusal to take her father's name upon discovering his identity, signal a new valuing of maternity.

George and Jon, Numair sometimes assumes a paternal guise, interrogating one of Daine's acquaintances about his intentions (EM 152), blurring the distinction between father, teacher, and lover. As his relationship with Daine becomes increasingly sexual in the fourth volume (like Alanna, Daine develops a tendency to lose her clothes at pivotal plot moments [EM 279; RG 102; RG 170]), Numair regresses further toward the Jon/George model, "go[ing] protective" rather than respecting Daine's capability (RG 57). When he and Daine finally begin their romance (after Daine takes a tumble into a landscape bearing a strong resemblance to female genitalia [RG 172]), Numair worries about "taking advantage of [Daine's] innocence" (RG 173). Daine rejects Numair's patronizing concern, pushing the couple into a mutual consideration of their future together. Numair's proposal is another tentative step away from Alanna's relationships: when Numair suggests marriage in the final pages of *The Realms of the Gods*, Daine's answer is "Maybe someday" (RG 276). The couple is still unmarried in *Protector*, in cautious resistance to traditional closure.

Using her wild magic, Daine acts as intermediary between animals and humans, forging alliances. Daine challenges the human assumption that "Brute creation is in this world to serve man" (WS 66), proposing instead that "humans and animals are meant to be partners" (WM 266). This theme is fairly hackneyed, but Pierce uses Daine's wild magic to explore two more compelling issues: the meaning of protection, and the relation between animality and humanity. The first theme anticipates Kel's later struggle to redefine the hero's traditional savior role. When Daine attempts to shelter local animals from a Carthaki attack, Onua accuses her of condescension: "You've made your friends helpless," she tells the girl (WM 267). Daine comes to terms with other creatures' autonomy; protecting animals by dictating their behavior or by acting for them would be objectification, not partnership. Instead, Daine uses her magical

connection to explain human events to animal populations, allowing them to make informed decisions. This early exploration of autonomy foreshadows the consideration of understanding and obedience in the fourth volume of *Protector*.

Pierce's wild magic is fundamentally concerned with the limits of the human. The movement from human/animal dualism to human/animal continuum is unique to the *Immortals* series, but anticipates a similar shift from gender binary to gender continuum in *Protector*. Margery Hourihan identifies human/animal as one of the fundamental dichotomies of the traditional heroic narrative, along with civilization/wilderness, master/slave, etc. Conventional heroism often features dominance over the "beast within" the hero (115). For Daine, the beast within is not an innate primitivity but rather derived from her bond with animals, which sometimes "overwhelms [her] humanity" (WM 180). While the danger of shape shifters' permanent entrapment is a common motif in fantasy (Le Guin's Ged risks eternal falcon shape when he transforms to escape an evil wizard), Pierce's vision of this risk is something more complex. Daine joins a wolf pack when she is ostracized by her fellow humans; she finds solace in the company of the group. Again and again, she is compelled to join packs, herds, and pods, succumbing not to inner bestiality but to animal community. Daine blurs the division between animal and human by awakening human intelligence in the creatures that are "exposed" to her (WM 130). Human cognitive ability is no boon to the animals, but rather "like a disease" (WM 130). Yet Daine is also infected, taking on characteristics of the animals with whom she joins; while pregnant (in Pierce's later *Trickster* books), she must morph constantly to accommodate her shapeshifting embryo. Daine is a glimpse of the liminal hero, who combines alien elements in her person and thereby "becomes an agent of creative social change" (*Alternative* 71).

*The Immortals* signals a discomfort with tradition that is more profound than Alanna's



recognition of conventional elements; Daine's series actively shatters certain conventions. When Daine first sees the King's Champion ride up with fiery stallion and golden armor, she thinks "Oh, glory." As soon as Alanna dismounts, Daine realizes that the Champion is much smaller than she first seemed, and female, and foulmouthed; the knight complains that "the outfit looks nice, but it's not very comfortable" (WM 43). Alanna is not alone; Numair also wryly acknowledges how his own glamour is constructed. He renamed himself Numair Salmalín in a gesture to convention, complaining "What great sorcerer has a name like Arram Draper?" (WM 65). Onua extends Numair's concession further, telling Daine that he "can't do the magic unless [he has] all kinds of robes and props and a big audience to cheer [him]" (WM 66). For Daine, the result of peeling back these layers of performance is possibility. Observing that Alanna is "a legend, sure enough, but... so *human*," Daine concludes that "if *she's* a legend, and a hero, then *anyone* could be a hero" (WM 61; author's emphasis). This is an early instance of the approachable heroism that shapes the *Protector* books.

Through Daine, Pierce breaks down expectations surrounding the evil beasts and mythical creatures that populate the pages of heroic fantasy. She begins with wolves, perhaps the most representative monster of fairytale.<sup>32</sup> Daine lives with a wolf pack, and explains their ways to a disbelieving young girl, informing her that "Wolves never eat humans" (WS 117); she debates the innate viciousness of crocodiles with the heir of the Carthaki empire (EM 25). Daine calls these preconceptions about animals "just stories" (WS 128), but she also challenges expectations surrounding creatures that really are just stories, beginning with a gentlemanly basilisk. Ogres<sup>33</sup> and the vicious hurroks are the victims of human enslavement and exploitation (WS 41; WS

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<sup>32</sup> The only wolf in *Song* wolves is the monstrous Demon Grey, who improbably carries off infants from human dwellings (2.130).

<sup>33</sup> Alanna battles ogres in *Wild Magic*; in *Wolf Speaker*, ogres are human slaves and allies to Daine's company (WS 41). Characters are no longer defined by their race or species.

131). Daine's horse informs her that there is "no such thing as a being who's pure evil" (WS 114). Other characters distinguish between instinctive behavior and elective behavior. Stormwings are metallic birds with human heads who defile corpses; one Stormwing queen tells Daine "My gods made me," while humans choose violence freely (WM 290). The Stormwing Rikash explains that the gods fashioned Stormwings from the dream of a human pacifist, "so that humans couldn't lie about how glorious a soldier's death is" (RG 182). The Stormwings' explicit role in the mythoecosystem is to undermine the expectations and conventions of violence and battle.

After disrupting the evil of the usual set of animals and mythical creatures, *The Immortals* reconfigures monstrosity as a human trait. Warned about sightings of immortal spidrens and hurroks by Onua, Daine responds "If I see monsters, I see monsters. My family was killed and my home burned by human ones" (WM 7). When Daine joins the wolf pack after her farm is burned by bandits, villagers hunt her for a week, trying to trick her into the open, calling her a monster (WM 177). Yet by animal law, it is the hunters who are monstrous: it would make the wolves sick to hunt members of their own species like prey (WM 175). This inversion is repeated throughout the second volume; Daine concludes that a human mage is "the real monster" (WS 218) and the wolves, chasing a human villain, "have a different idea of who's the monster" than does their frightened quarry (WS 274). Daine and her companions relocate monstrosity from the natural, the animal, and the Other, to the elective, the human, and the Self.

### III. SECOND PROTOTYPE: KEL

While Alanna is Tortall's first female knight in centuries, Kel has nearer precedent; she enters training only two decades after Alanna did, while the older woman is still King's Champion. Pierce's third series accordingly confronts not only a general idea of the male heroic, but also the specific vision of female heroism that Pierce had already defined and explored. In *Protector of the Small*, the transformed kingdom suggested at the end of *Lioness Rampant* and shown in *The Immortals* is transformed still further. Alanna's gesture to gender performativity expands into a shift from gender binary – the belief that gender takes two distinct and opposite forms – into gender continuum. The reconfiguration of male/female relationships and the reinstatement of female/female relationships beget a broad reevaluation of masculinity and of femininity. *Protector* develops the focus on protection, disruption of glory and evil, and class concerns introduced in *The Immortals* series, destabilizing the conventional portrait of knighthood and chivalry. Although Pierce's second knight-heroine is grounded in the author's earlier work, she is a marked revision of Alanna; Kel's heroism demonstrates her resistance to the gravity that ultimately pulled her predecessor back into conventional modes.

#### A. Gender

##### 1. *Cracking the binary*

Although Alanna and Kel are similarly situated as lone females in a group of male pages, the two women address questions of gender very differently. During a forest excursion, Alanna ties her fear of spiders to "behaving like a girl" (2.2). She then challenges the stereotype, citing palace maids who "handle snakes and kill spiders without acting silly" (2.2). Kel goes further. After a fight with bandits, she struggles not to cry and tells herself, "Hysterics - that's all I need for them to think I've gone completely female" (6.121). Like Alanna, she acknowledges an

association between a behavior - in this case, hysterics rather than arachnophobia - with the female sex. Her next move is not to break the association as Alanna does, to cite women who are not hysterical; instead, she attacks the negative behavioral classification at its root: "And what's wrong with being hysterical, if no one is hurt by it and it makes you feel better?" At her best, Alanna is able to superficially interrogate the troubling effects of patriarchy and binary thinking. Kel confronts these problems much closer to their source, and accordingly comes much closer to identifying and dismantling their essential mechanisms.

Kel's gender performance disturbs binary categories. The most representative image of Kel during her years of page training appears in *First Test*: in a yellow shift and fawn colored dress, with cropped hair, sporting a black eye, Kel grimly contemplates hair ribbons before dismissing them as a liability in a fight (5.33). Alanna dresses functionally yet longs for the beauty of gowns and earbobs; for Kel, both breeches and gowns are functional. Rather than opting to assimilate after experiencing harassment, Kel decides to wear dresses to dinner each night to remind the boys of her sex (5.32). Like Alanna, Kel also enters the city "in disguise" as a woman - though only once. Before her sweetheart's Ordeal of Knighthood, Kel tries on "the girl she would have been had she not tried for her shield" (7.261). Alanna spends much of the second and third volumes of *Song* cultivating that girl - the girl who would have gone to the convent and become a lady. Alanna's gowned secondary self remains separate from Alanna the knight; Kel refuses this duality: "Maybe I'm the same whatever I wear," she decides (7.261).

Pierce structures Kel's physical description around inconsistencies; she is "broad-shouldered and solid-waisted" with "many fine scars on her hands" and "muscles that flex[ ] and bunch[ ] under her nightshirt," all of which are "odd in contrast to" her "dreamer's hazel eyes" and "long, curling lashes" (8.5). When Kel's male friends ask her to check their outfits before

end-of-year exams, they claim that the request is not gender-based but simply because she has "an eye for such things... When it's not black" (6.72). The scene over which Kel's black eye for fashion presides resembles a military inspection more than a beauty salon, with the boys saluting and referring to their friend as General (6.71). The simultaneous embodiment of supposedly conflicting binary traits is not always graceful; when Kel meets the basilisk Tkaa, she "start[s] to curtsy, remember[s] that a page bow[s]... trie[s] to do both" and nearly falls over (5.47).

The women of *Protector* trouble binary assumptions that consign females to gentle, passive roles. Alanna refers occasionally to the vanished female warrior class; Kel receives a complete history of Tortallan female fighters for her first Midwinter at the palace (5.154). Woman warriors are in fact in style again; lady knights are joined by members of the integrated Queen's Riders as well as the Queen's Ladies, Thayet's combat-ready version of the traditional lady-in-waiting (7.194). It is therefore unsurprising that Kel judges her fighting abilities not against her brothers or palace guardsman, but against the capabilities of Yamani noblewomen. When she very nearly topples the Shang instructor on her first day of training, Kel must publicly admit that she knows only what Yamani court ladies know, a confession that is unsettling to her male peers (5.55).

Strong women do not limit themselves to combat positions. Brisk Salma has replaced the male steward as overseer of the page's wing, her authority signaled by a "large ring laden with keys" at her waist (5.29). She is the first in a long lineup of powerful lower-class women, from the leader of a merchant caravan, to the formidable refugee Fanche, to the maid-turned-businesswoman Lalasa. Lalasa cries as Kel prepares to depart with the King's Own ("Lalasa was sentimental") before immediately taking charge of her former mistress (7.24). After self-defense lessons with Kel, Lalasa is also deadly; the rash page Owen tells his cousins that the maid "sews, and she knows all kinds of ways to hurt you" (6.126). The "dainty but weathered" Shang Wildcat

Eda Bell, formerly Liam Ironarm's mentor and now one of the pages' combat instructors, turns her feminine side into part of her threat. Admitting that she looks like a grandmother, she bares her teeth: "Some grandchildren need more raising than others, and I supply it" (5.53).

While the Wildcat remains more threatening than grandmotherly, traditionally female roles and skills are accorded new value in *Protector*. Kel compares her maid Lalasa's concentration while sewing to her own focus while tilting, equating the two spheres of practice (6.154). Daine's deft handling of an infant griffin awes Kel and her knightmaster Raoul, both of whom envy people with non-combat expertise (7.101). Raoul's interest in unmasculine talents extends to household chores. The big knight helps Kel fold her sheets and sew a rip in her bedspread unprompted, turning the shared mending into a race and winning, with stitches still "better than hers" (7.174). Kel's shield features the distaff border, an emblem of the lady knight derived from the female craft of spinning; although Alanna defends the importance of the feminine arts among the Bloody Hawk (3.86-8), she never claims this emblem of women's work for her own standard.

Conventional definitions of acceptable gender behavior are as oppressive to men as they are to women (Cranny-Francis 72). One component of Pierce's shift from binary to continuum is the introduction of male characters who do not conform to traditional ideas of masculinity. Discussing masculinities created by female fantasists in a 1984 piece for the *Science Fiction and Fantasy Review*, James Riemer describes a two-pronged approach to the revision of men. First, there is a reassessment of conventionally valued masculine traits: pride, power, virility. In male chauvinist villains, pride is an anti-rational force; virility turns to rape, as does power. Second, Riemer notices female writers creating a new set of men who are "sensitive... openly affectionate and expressive" (2). In short, these fantasists envision two masculinities: one which pushes traditional masculinity to the point of abuse, and one which defies gender restrictions, freely

indulging in both masculine- and feminine-designated behaviors.<sup>34</sup>

This divide is evident in *Protector*. On one side are male chauvinists like the bullies Joren and Vinson or Kel's conservative jousting opponents; they are opposed by exemplars of compassionate, gentle masculinity.<sup>35</sup> In *Song*, men are like George - "a law to himself" (3.59) - or Jon, with his "arrogant tone of voice" and the "flash of pride in his eyes" (3.112). In *Protector*, many are like the Bazhir lieutenant Qasim, who keeps grain in his pockets for sparrows (5.205) and "meekly b[ears] a scolding" from a village woman for not cleaning dishes well enough (7.62). They are sweet like Numair, who uses his Gift as an umbrella to keep refugees dry (8.152). They combine military fervor with studiousness and domesticity. The young page Owen "love[s] books," but also possesses a "wild courage that le[ads] him to plunge into battle outnumbered" (7.198). The quarrelsome Corporal Wolset dislikes Kel at first, but upon her arrival to command the border camp Haven has "nearly ruined the embroidering" trying to help his squad sew the young knight a flag in welcome (8.69). These men have not sacrificed strength, courage, or virility; rather, they have added to their range of interests and behaviors.

Raoul of Goldenlake, commander of the King's Own and formidable combatant, is gentle and kind. He speaks to his squire Kel "as he might to a noble his own age" (6.156), and respects her capabilities. Testing Kel's weaponry, Captain Flyndan is "unprepared for the weight" of her Yamani glaive, while Raoul calmly accepts that a young female squire might possess a pole arm of considerable heft (7.35). He values her judgment and advice, often asking for her tactical input (7.339). After Kel leads a squadron of men to defeat the first of the necromancer Blayce's killing machines, her knightmaster focuses on the creature rather than praising his squire's actions,

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<sup>34</sup>Rierner also notes a pattern of conversion of the former into the latter (2).

<sup>35</sup>Pierce's most successful male of this type is Farmer, the mage and eventual love interest of *Mastiff* (2011). Farmer recycles the magic of other sorcerers; his strengths are balms, ointments, and hedgewitchery. In his final confrontation with two enemy mages, Farmer draws his power from a ribbon that he has intricately embroidered.

taking her leadership as a matter of course. Raoul is "used to [Kel] taking whatever comes without a blink" (7.217), an attitude verging on underprotective.

Raoul's relationship with his squire is further equalized by the big knight's comfort with his own limitations and diminishment. Watching Kel practice at the quintain before inviting her to become his squire, Raoul tells the girl that her chosen target is beyond his own skill (7.12), immediately putting their future association on equal footing. When Lord Wyldon knocks Kel from the saddle during a joust, Raoul salves his squire's pride by admitting that he has also been defeated by the training master (7.258). Discussing a rogue giant, Raoul explains that "Those big fellows are all alike. Smash 'em on the toe and they turn into kittens" (7.360) - an unmistakable reference to the gigantic commander himself, who has no investment in machismo. Raoul is large, strong, skillful, on good terms with authority and in a position of authority himself. Yet the big knight does not exploit these advantages, preferring to remain amiable and unassuming.

Of all Kel's male acquaintances, her friend Neal is least representative of traditional masculinity. Neal and Kel complement one another; the boy embodies many conventionally feminine traits, while Kel claims a number of masculine ones. Neal is "the one with the imagination" (8.372); his father asks Kel to keep an eye on his "sensitive" son because she is "sensible and levelheaded" (8.57). Neal is passionate and expressive; during one incident at Haven refugee camp, Kel takes her explosive friend outside the walls so that he can yell about the unjust treatment of convicts (8.105). In this scene as in others, Neal expresses what Kel cannot. When Kel discovers that the necromancer Blayce's forces have sacked the refugee camp she commands, she is quiet and controlled: "all her emotions [are] bound in a hard, tight knot in her heart" (8.236). Neal, as he often does, expresses a side of Kel that she will not or cannot show, weeping silently as he faces the dead (8.240).



## 2. Romantic partnership

*Protector* distinguishes between courtship as constructed by generic convention and romance as experienced by its characters. Kel's adolescent peers prefer the former: they "sigh[ ] with longing" at the sight of a beautiful Yamani ambassador and immediately devote themselves to learning Yamani love poetry (7.134). Cleon mocks the verbal embellishments of courtly love, calling Kel "my pearl" and "teardrop of my heart" (5.149). Neal is the worst offender in his serial "unrequited passions for unattainable ladies" (7.20). Neal's friends make benign fun of his infatuations, congregating outside his rooms to "caterwaul[ ] the sappiest love ballad they kn[o]w" (6.93).<sup>36</sup> The maid Lalasa quietly sums up the boy's attitude: "Perhaps Master Neal just likes being in love" (6.95). When Neal finally forms a meaningful attachment, he forsakes his usual "high tragedy" and drama for uncharacteristic taciturnity (8.24).

Adult couples are presented as partners in the *Protector* series. Lord Wyldon and his wife train dogs together (8.193). One pair from the Haven refugee camp are "husband and wife... both smiths" (8.307). Refugees Fanche and Saefas fall in love as they "rally the civilian archers" together (8.170). Raoul and Buri are the commanders of the realm's two major fighting forces, and share a disdain for parties and balls (7.179). Even couples from *Song* and *Immortals* have become more balanced: Numair and Daine argue about books during a party (7.200), and each worries about the other's safety during the war with Scanra (8.152; 8.179). Friendships are similarly rebalanced. Jon instructed Alanna in her pre-Ordeal bath as her knightmaster; Alanna and Jon instruct Alanna's squire Neal together (7.367), equals at last.

Jonathan and Thayet's son Roald enacts a loose revision of his parents' courtship. Like her mother-in-law, Princess Shinkokami is a foreigner in Tortall; like Thayet, the Yamani princess

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<sup>36</sup> This communal caterwauling is a far cry from Alanna's friends' reactions to one another's courtships, which heighten tensions between the boys and spark duels over women's tokens.

often wishes to escape or disguise her royal heritage (7.138). Kel directs matchmaking between her two friends, as Alanna did; unlike Thayet and Jon, Shinko and Roald are already betrothed – Kel "nudge[s] them along" in developing affection for one another (7.180). Kel's matchmaking hinges on shared interests rather than physical attraction. Roald assumes that Shinko will be bored by combat discussions; Shinko, warned that "men with unconventional mothers want conventional wives" (7.182), worries that the prince will think her interest unmaidenly. After Kel engineers a lively discussion of Yamani and Tortallan culture and battle tactics, the prince and princess leave together, "debating the advantages of crossbows over longbows" (7.183). Kel's facilitation frees the pair rather than corralling them.

The men of *Protector*, no longer invested in the maintenance of masculine superiority, are attracted to women's ability rather than their vulnerability. During the Grand Progress, Neal butts into a cooperative fan throwing game, and only escapes maiming by happening to catch the razor-sharp steel fan base-down. One of the players tells the astonished intruder to "beware the women of the warrior class, for all they touch is both decorative and deadly" before using the edge of the fan to cut cleanly through a nearby piece of wood (7.208). Neal is clearly not deterred by the castrating image of the "pretty fan slicing the pole like sausage," eventually marrying the slicer. He is not alone. Domitan of Masbolle, one of Kel's flirtations, wins a bet against his fellow King's Own members that Kel will stay on a bucking horse (7.42). "Gods, I love a tough woman," sighs the formidable refugee Fanche's male admirer Saefas (8.69); in *Protector of the Small*, men are attracted to women's strength.

Love sneaks up on Alanna, both in George's stolen kisses and the sexualized descriptions that enter scenes alongside Alanna's suitors. By contrast, Kel is highly aware of her own fluctuating attractions; her interest in Neal appears as a sudden giddiness, his hand feeling

"uncommonly warm" (6.66). There are no sly descriptions of Neal's sensual lips or hard waist; Kel notices when she begins to think of her friend as particularly graceful or handsome (6.77). She also notices when her feelings begin to fade: "Neal looked like any other male. There was no special luster about him" (7.128). Kel's awareness of her romantic inclinations furnishes a degree of control over these liaisons that her predecessor never had.

When Cleon transitions from ornamented courtship language into a sincere attraction to Kel, he is timid. Kel treats him "like a skittish horse" (6.162), recalling George and Liam's treatment of Alanna. Unlike Alanna's lovers, Cleon does not pressure Kel, neither trying to "kiss her or get her alone," nor making "excuses to linger after the others" (7.218). He seeks permission, asking her to "say if [he pushes] too hard" (7.225). In fact, Kel "wonder[s] why he joke[s] about making love to her but never trie[s] to do so" (7.254). The pair discusses their situation candidly. As a poor landowner, Cleon must marry a neighboring heiress "or [his] people will starve this winter" (8.52); the financial realities that dictate noble marriages preclude a shared future. The relationship ends by mutual decision, as it began.

Sex and marriage are not inevitable for Pierce's second lady knight. Although *Lady Knight* ends with marriages, none of them is Kel's. In fact, the book closes on Kel's wry thought: "Lovers. At least there was one headache she *didn't* have" (8.409; author's emphasis). Yet she is excited to see the flirtatious Sergeant Domitan again. For Alanna, the single life is spinsterhood, the barrenness of the old maid. These two terms diverge sharply from their male equivalent, bachelor, which connotes possibility rather than isolation and expired opportunity. At the end of *Lady Knight*, Kel is a bachelor - her future is lively, full of sexual and social potential.

### 3. *Connecting women*

Instead of presenting women in terms of their associations with men, *Protector*

foregrounds womens' relationships with one another. Just as classical heroes are judged on the basis of their paternity, Kel must live up to her daunting maternity. "What has [Kel's] mother to do with anything?" an exasperated Lord Wyldon asks the Shang instructor Hakuin Seastone (5.190). The training master echoes the assumptions of the traditional heroic story, in which mothers indeed have little to do with anything. By contrast, Kel's ambassador mother is the standard against which her daughter is measured. Ilane of Mindelan's actions in defense of the Yamani Islands' sacred swords resulted in an important treaty; when the Yamani delegation arrives, they greet Kel as "the daughter of a redoubtable mother," pulling her under Ilane's aegis and predicting that her deeds will outshine her mother's (7.139). When Kel begins to overtop Ilane's height (Kel's mother "towers over most people, including Kel's father"), "the thought that she might outgrow her mother [is] uncomfortable" (7.141).

This revision of the heroine's relation to other women is not limited to Kel's mother; shared female experience of all kinds takes center stage in *Protector*. I have discussed how the Shang Wildcat, roaming into the coda of *Lioness Rampant*, feels like a lost opportunity for Alanna. Eda Bell reappears in Pierce's third series as one of Kel's instructors. As a "warrior who spent her life fighting men," Bell is able to teach Kel useful training exercises for her arms (5.25). Pierce has Kel receive practical support from other women throughout the series. When Kel practices jousting during a desert visit, friendly Bazhir women salve her wounds (7.192). After a joust with Lord Wyldon, a group of Tortallan women care for Kel (7.247). Kel's role models are women, even for small things: while a young Alanna envies male footsoldiers their bulging biceps (2.77), it is "the laundry maids, a set of rough, no-nonsense women" who have "muscles that Kel envie[s]" (5.161). Kel's training depends on female support; it comes as no surprise when the king "step[s] aside" during her knighting, leaving Kel to receive her shield from the

hands of female friends rather than from male authority (7.385).

Where *Song* focuses on Alanna's relationships with men, *Protector* is preoccupied with female networks. Young Tortallan noblewomen join Yamani ladies for morning weapons practices, turning the activity into a platform for cultural exchange (7.365). In the bathhouse, a group of women accost a bruised, tilt-addled Kel, assuming that she has been abused. They offer help, telling her, "The Moon of Truth temple will take you in... They'll get the man who did it" (7.117). This mistaken intervention reveals the women's readiness to assist and advise a total stranger. Some of Kel's most striking encounters are with female strangers. She helps a grieving mother set her house in order after a village raid; the woman asks "nothing of Kel besides her name" (7.64). Other strangers do ask for things, like the three girls who visit after a joust, seeking advice about page training (7.309-11). After providing guidance and encouragement, Kel offers a simple "Goddess bless" to the girls (7.312). This benediction recalls the blessing that Kel received along with anonymous gifts during her own training: "Gods all bless, Lady Squire" (6.253). The two similar blessing suggest a chain of female support.

Banned from mentoring Kel directly, Alanna sends the young woman expensive, useful gifts over her eight years of training. She appropriates financial patronage, a role etymologically and conventionally reserved for male sponsors. Kel passes Alanna's patronage on, helping the maid Lalasa to purchase a dressmaking shop. When Kel uses funds she is holding for Lalasa to outfit an urchin boy in *Lady Knight*, knowing her former maid would approve (8.43), she renders Lalasa a financial sponsor as well. This is a rare portrayal of female/female financial interaction, Alanna sponsoring Kel who sponsors Lalasa who sponsors an orphan. These women are empowered by their ability to give.

Chains of women, networks of women, webs of women; these are formed not only by

patronage and friendship but often by simple shared consciousness. The head servant Salma and new page Kel look together at the "Girls Can't Fight!" scrawled on the wall of Kel's rooms. Dismissively, Salma cites not the Lioness but ordinary noblewomen as evidence of the boys' wrongheadedness: "What do they think their mothers do, when the lords are at war and a raiding party strikes?" (5.33). The woman and the girl are united in exasperation at male ignorance. Sometimes Kel invokes this exasperation deliberately. When the contentious refugee Idrius Valestone uses sexual slurs to challenge Kel's authority over a border fort in *Lady Knight*, Kel's soldiers stand up growling in championship of their leader. While Kel appreciates this support, she tells the men to sit down, and addresses the women of Idrius's own party: "Have you ever noticed that when we disagree with a male... or find ourselves in a position over males, the first comment they make is about our reputations or our monthlies?" (8.155). Kel chooses shared female consciousness over male championship to defeat Valestone's onslaught.

Not all women are supportive, feminist, or united in *Protector of the Small*; though many females find common ground, *Protector* acknowledges that women have identities beyond their gender. The refugee leader Fanche is at first no friendlier than Idrius, speculating that Kel became a knight because of sluttishness (8.109). When Kel expresses surprise at Fanche's attitude, the older woman mocks her: "Why? Because I'm another woman, and everyone knows women are sweet and helpful with each other? Because we're all sisters under the Goddess?" (8.112). Fanche is the first woman whom Kel must struggle to sway. Her distrust of the knight stems from class, not sex; she sees the inexperienced Kel's command as an indicator that the nobles in charge of the war do not value the lives of displaced peasants. Kel appeals to Fanche as a fellow female leader, familiar with the issues faced by a woman in charge. This approach moves beyond the assumed universal sisterhood that Fanche dismisses, hinting at how women

can begin to form intersectional connections across social divides.

In *Protector*, female sexuality is no longer feared and demonized, in part because of the budding significance of female relationships. Kel reacts to her first period with the same fear and anger as Alanna, "thinking something dreadful [is] happening" (6.97). However, fear and anger quickly gives way to understanding as she recalls her mother's explanation of the menstrual cycle. Not only does Kel have prior knowledge that Alanna lacked; she also lives with the maid Lalasa rather than the gruff manservant Coram. Lalasa provides both care - instructions and willow tea - and affirmation, calling the change "the Goddess's mark," something that many girls pray for (6.98). Pope and Pearson discuss the transformation that occurs when women "discover that their femaleness is not a wound" (14); this newfound wholeness is predicated on the guidance of mothers and friends.

Alanna acquires her initial sexual education from her male lovers, after receiving some basic information from George's mother; Kel's own mother explains sex to her daughter, emphasizing enjoyment (7.231). Ilane calls Kel's physical explorations freedom, dismissing strict virginity as an aristocratic affectation: "You don't see that nonsense in the middle and lower classes. A woman's body belongs to herself and the Goddess, and that's the end of it" (7.229). Contraception ensures this autonomy; Ilane tells her daughter that she "do[es] have a choice in these things" before buying her a pregnancy charm (6.124). Although *Song* also promotes a positive view of intercourse, female sexuality remains inextricably linked to marriage.

Through Delia, *Song* vilifies court ladies; in *Protector*, these women are as heterogenous as any social group. Though one girl calls Kel "ox" and "underbred female" for her vocation, another young lady, a stranger, steps to Kel's defense (6.82). It is perhaps this first interaction with her defender Uline that prompts Kel to approach Uline's flirtation with Neal differently than

Alanna approached a similar situation between Delia and Jonathan. While it is "hard not to resent the older girl" for charming Neal (6.92), Kel's jealousy is upstaged by the pre-established bond with Uline. Kel even encourages Neal, despite her envy that Uline is "the sort of girl boys fall in love with" (6.89) – clever, kind, pretty, and delicate.

Kel may be intelligent and comely, but she never achieves delicacy. Where Alanna's diminutive stature is reinforced by incessant contrasts to large boys, Kel is big, broad, and muscular; she reaches five foot ten inches and surpasses her father's height during her early teens. Her male friends do not consistently dwarf her; rather, she notices their diminishment over the years (6.72; 6.220) as she outgrows her tunics and tights.<sup>37</sup> The only man who outstrips Kel in size and power is her knightmaster Raoul, who treats her as a physical equal, cheerfully giving her a war hammer like his own for a holiday present (7.275). Kel uses her size to make an impression on men who hassle her, flexing her bicep to free herself of one man's grip (7.48) and picking another up off the ground when he questions her leadership during a crisis (7.353). When Kel encounters the necromancer Blayce's minion Stenmun, she is surprised to have to look up at the big warrior (8.380). This detail both suggests the figurative significance of Kel's size: unlike Alanna, she rarely looks up to men.

#### 4. *Reclaiming femininity*

"Do you think [modesty is] a requirement for lady knights or something?" a friend asks Kel in *Squire* (7.346). It may be; both Alanna and Kel are exceedingly humble. Both see overconfidence as a fundamental flaw in an opponent (7.239). Each sets higher standards for herself than for her peers; an exasperated Neal tells Kel that she is the only one "dolt enough" to expect perfection from herself (6.138). As discussed previously, for Alanna these rigorous

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<sup>37</sup>Maria Nikolajeva discusses Annis Pratt's claim that the male fictional arc is a model of growth, while the female fictional arc models shrinking and enclosure (45).



standards lead not just to increased performance but also to a fundamental devaluation of self and reliance on male approbation. In one blurb for *Squire*, the *School Library Journal* praises Pierce's creation of a new heroine who "accomplishes her goals with... her self-esteem intact"; Kel's humility does not resemble Alanna's injurious self-doubt.

Unlike Alanna, Kel rarely expresses uncertainty of her own worth or ability to succeed. Rather, she levels her disbelief at the patriarchal system's willingness to allow her successes, to recognize her merit. Hearing on two separate occasions that Wyldon has praised the pages, Kel wonders if his comments extend to her. When Raoul mentions that the training master has expressed confidence in the group during a spidren hunt, Kel thinks "Even me?" (5.215). After the fight, Kel distrusts whether Wyldon actually said that the *pages* did well: "Did he? Or did he say the boys did well?" (5.222). As knights begin to choose squires, Kel does not purposefully take herself out of the running as Alanna did; she anticipates that conservative disapproval will prevent her selection, rather than any flaw in her own ability (6.94).

Doubt is relocated from the heroine to her antagonists; rather than combatting Kel's own misgivings, her friends often defend her against external skepticism. It is not until men of the Own scoff at Kel's tracking methods during a first year spidren hunt that the pages Faleron and Merric step to her defense, telling the men that she is "smart about a lot of things" and worth listening to (5.210). It is Wyldon's dismissive "Now you realize combat isn't women's work" to Kel after a bandit fight that prompts the boys to chip in with "She's the one who saved our bacon" and "We might be dead but for Kel" (6.119). Alanna's tests are physical, not psychological; surrounded by supportive male friends and authorities, most of the doubt she faces is her own. In *Protector of the Small* these positions are reversed; Kel faces harassment and misogyny directed at her by adult conservatives and peer bullies.

This reversal is part of a broader relocation of the denigration of femininity from women to male chauvinists. In *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man*, Alanna's female student Kara says that "women are weaker than men, and unfitted to be warriors" (3.31); these same lines are almost exactly transplanted into Wyldon's mouth in the first scene of *First Test* (5.4). Although it can be argued that Kara's internalization of her own societal devaluation is a principal factor in the perpetuation of that devaluation, shifting this attitude to a male authority such as Wyldon is a reminder that women do not simply construct their own oppression.

Since Alanna has largely absorbed her society's denigration of the feminine, she is unable to challenge even the few verbal expressions of sexism that bother her. Though Alanna disputes her peers' use of 'girl' as a put-down in *In the Hand of the Goddess*, she only addresses the challenge to her horse (2.3). Kel boldly vocalizes her objections to the judgment implicit in gendered insults. She calls bullies "these *boys*," putting a "world of scorn" into the word in a reversal of the usual schoolboy snub (6.27). Confronting the merchant Idrius at Haven, Kel addresses his reversion to sexual slurs when referring to women: "Should I place blame on the misworkings of your manhood? Or do I refrain from so serious an insult – far more serious, of course, than your hint that I am a whore?" (8.156). Kel ostensibly refrains from impugning Idrius's virility while doing just that, using heavy irony to stress verbal double standards.

*Protector of the Small* extends Alanna's discovery of performative and constructed gender, introducing characters who not only enact multiple gender roles but combine and synthesize supposedly conflicting traits. Gender is no longer a binary but a spectrum. Heterosexual relationships emphasize partnership and mutual decision rather than male superiority and marriage imperatives. Women form independent networks: they are each other's heroes, partners, and friends. Kel does not privilege masculine behaviors and modes over feminine ones, unlike

her predecessor. Learning of his sister's Bazhir adoption, Thom writes "you're a 'man of the tribe,' which is what you've always wanted, I suppose" (3.97). This remark is an astute summary of Alanna's attitude toward exclusively male institutions; she seeks not to demolish them, but to enter them. Kel's attitude is a radical departure; she confidently rejects conservative disparagement of the feminine. When Lord Wyldon praises Kel by expressing his wish that she had been born a boy, Kel reflects "But I *like* being a girl" (2.205; author's emphasis).

## B. Heroism

### 1. *Becoming the Other*

Otherness is intrinsic to Kel's heroism, as is exemplified by a dreaming flashback in the very first chapter of *First Test*. It is the memory of an attack by Scanran raiders on the Yamani imperial palace, during which Kel's mother Ilane defends sacred Yamani relics from attackers using a Yamani glaive, while her five-year-old daughter hides behind her robes. The incident results in a successful treaty between Tortall and the Islands, and Kel's family's acceptance into the emperor's inner circle (5.190). For all its political importance, Ilane's fight is most significant for its impact on her young daughter. "I'll be a hero one day, just like Mama," ten-year-old Kel resolves (5.25); for Pierce's second female knight, the word "hero" is first and foremost associated not with a male paragon like Liam Ironarm or Raoul of Goldenlake - or even a female model of the traditional hero, the Lioness - but with her mother. What kind of heroism does Ilane of Mindelan represent? One that is deeply concerned with the Other: Ilane fights in a foreign land, using foreign weapons to defend foreign objects, putting herself at risk for people and for values not her own. It is easy to catch a glimpse of a future Kel in Ilane's protective stance - Kel, who takes up male weapons in a strikingly maternal defense of society's most vulnerable.

While the conventional hero ventures forth from the center of society, Kel perceives herself as an outsider. She does not identify with either the dominant echelon or the dominant culture. This estrangement seems crucial to Kel's awareness of "the Small" - a category encompassing abused animals, women, children, victims of domestic violence, impoverished peasants, convicts, and refugees. Established male authority affirms and legitimizes Alanna; her successor is "essentially an outsider, who does not benefit from their rules or their system of values, and who therefore does not feel the status quo to be 'natural or inevitable'" (Hourihan 229). Although Kel is privileged, she feels distanced from dominant groups; this distance enables Kel

to see and to challenge contradictions, hypocrisies, and abuses of Tortall's ruling interests. Her sensitivity results in an allegiance to Tortall's outskirts rather than to its center. Kel identifies with the kingdom's most vulnerable, those not afforded the community's protection and those actively harmed by its oppressive mechanisms. She recognizes that abuse is usually aimed at victims who, because of their place in society, cannot fight back. Her anger is not only with individual oppressors, but also with a whole "world where servants [don't] matter" (6.198).

Like most knights, Alanna has old blood and old money; since her nobility is consistent with the expectations of her chosen career, social class and financial concerns are nearly invisible in the *Song of the Lioness* series. Alanna may not have access to inexhaustible wealth, but her blue blood confers status; sponsorship and eventual adoption by Myles solves whatever financial difficulties she might have had, his patronage enabling her to have "funds, to stay at inns, to give bribes" (3.118). Kel's social standing is more tenuous. Coming from a recently ennobled family of diplomats, Kel is situated somewhere between the noble and merchant classes, and though solvent is less wealthy than many of her fellow pages. She never has to worry about the next meal or a warm coat for the winter, but she is acutely aware of the financial strain that her training places on her family. Kel cannot simply buy her horse from the stables (6.199); she is pleased when her knightmaster Raoul provides the expensive squire's gear that her parents could never afford (7.108).

As a new, minor member of the nobility, Kel faces animosity from both sides of the class divide. One high-born King's Own commander treats her "as if she were a beetle" because of her family's recent ennoblement (7.108). Kel's behavior and preferences separate her still further from her aristocratic peers: "Unlike most nobles," she dislikes falconry and other popular pastimes (7.86). Yet commoners are suspicious of Kel as well. Many of the conservative Captain

Flyndan's misgivings about Raoul's new squire stem from his preconceptions about nobles, who "won't take orders from a commoner, and... balk when there's no potential for glory" (7.77). Peasants such as the refugee leader Fanche and the orphaned boy Tobe must look past Kel's nobility before they can respect her.

The King's Own was once a posting for "younger sons of nobles, wealthy merchants sons, and Bazhir" to "meet ladies with dowries" (7.16). Unable to afford the costs of knighthood, these second-string men sought alternate routes to affluence. While Raoul has transformed the Own into an effective fighting force, he continues to encourage economic awareness within the ranks. Instead of concentrating on the men's personal finances, this awareness is directed outward. When the Own quarter in villages, they hunt for their food and add to the village's stores in payment for bed and board, to decrease the burden on their hosts. They pay women for laundry and mending (7.106), contesting the common assumption that female caretaking labor is natural and therefore free. For training master Lord Wyldon, awareness of poverty is a dimension of chivalry; he informs students that knights "provide for themselves on the road" (5.191) when a page suggests overnighting in a nearby village, Wyldon reminds the group that most communities have no surplus.

Attitudes toward the peasantry vary among Kel's noble friends. Lord Wyldon eventually considers both Kel and Neal for command of the refugee fort Haven because of their broad-mindedness, but selects Kel because her friend is "much too fair" and seldom tactful (8.71). While most of Kel's fellows are not as egalitarian as Neal, many have at least internalized Wyldon's insistence on aiding Tortall's poor. On the road to the border conflict, most knights give their rations to refugees; only Quinden, one of Kel's school adversaries, accuses commoners of theft and "looking as pathetic as they can so we'll feed them" (8.58). Although generally only

antagonists express viewpoints this drastic, a few of Kel's friends hold similar opinions: Esmond comments that "servants [a]ren't important enough to be worth the time Kel spen[ds] thinking about hers" (6.124). Many of Kel's fellow nobles are fair and even kind to commoners, but Kel's unusual sensitivity to and preoccupation with issues of class sets her apart.

As a diplomat's daughter, Kel grew up as a foreigner teased by children in the Yamani court (5.66); back in Tortall, Kel is once again a stranger. When training begins, Kel and her parents have been home for only three months - their staff does not know what to make of the "strange, Yamani-like nobles" (5.10). When Lord Wyldon makes derogatory comments about Yamani during the first weeks of training (5.65), Kel's impatience with his Tortallan hubris suggests that she continues to identify with the Islanders rather than adopting the viewpoints of her native kingdom. In fact, Kel easily falls back into seeing Tortall from an Islander perspective; she agrees when her Yamani friend Yuki disputes Tortallan logic (7.134) and understands that the Emperor would not send a first rank princess in betrothal to Tortall, a "nation of foreigners" (7.135).

Yamani culture is a crucial source of Kel's calm, her stoicism, her honor and her liberal views. Both Yamani and Scanran warriors believe that "surrender [is] a loss of honor that [can] never be recovered" and prefer to die fighting (8.127); several exotic realms seem governed by more austere versions of the Tortallan Code of Chivalry. The Yamani Isles combine this adherence to strict hierarchies and codes of honor with some social attitudes that are more liberal than Tortall's. In the Isles it is accepted that "some men prefer other men. Some women prefer other women"; Neal informs Kel that allegations of homosexual behavior are "still an insult on

this side of the Emerald Ocean" (6.53)<sup>38</sup>. At the Emperor's court, ladies learn self-defense as a matter of course. Yamani martial culture takes physical power imbalances into account, teaching ladies and children the use of pole arms that make it "possible for a smaller warrior to take a big one"; Tortallan weapons cater to large and powerful bodies only (5.65). In many cases, Yamani values are more compatible with Kel's personal beliefs than those of her native land.

In *Song*, foreign cultures often function as foils to reinforce the relative superiority of Tortallan customs and laws. During one exchange, the Saren princess Thayet deplores the misogyny of her native land; Alanna follows each negative comment with a reminder of Tortall's advantages. The princess is bitter because "no female can hold the Saren throne"; Alanna assures her that Tortall "isn't that bad" (3.135). Thayet tells the knight that "in Sarain, women have no rights - just those our husbands or fathers grant us" (3.104), and Alanna calls the situation "barbaric". Alanna was allowed to keep her shield in Tortall, but opinion in Sarain was that the female knight should be stoned (3.135). Yet these contrasts are not as stark as Alanna implies. Tortall also practices male primogeniture. In disguising herself to become a knight, Alanna was escaping a husband- or father-dictated life. Alanna may have kept her shield after the revelation of her sex, but her avoidance of the furor was facilitated in large part by temporary truancy; there are certainly conservatives in *Protector of the Small* who believe Alanna and Kel could use a good stoning. Thayet says that Tortall sounds "like Paradise" (3.135); in these exchanges, hellish descriptions of Sarain render Tortall heaven by contrast, and obscure the existence of domestic prejudice and injustice.

Since Kel is estranged from dominant Tortallan interests, she has no investment in

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<sup>38</sup> Pierce's treatment of homosexuality undergoes a slow evolution over the course of her work. In early Tortall books, characters are overwhelmingly heterosexual, though the heroines of *Protector* and *Tricksters* are aware of societal intolerance and elision of same-sex relationships. *Provost's Dog* briefly features the sexual relationship of two biological men, one of ambiguous gender identity. Pierce's *Circle of Magic* books go further, introducing several lesbian protagonists.



buttressing Tortallan superiority. Although characters in *Protector of the Small* also use foreign cultures as a foil to promote Tortallan values, Pierce makes the comparison of projected misogynistic attitudes in foreign cultures to similar attitudes in Tortall much closer, the irony more explicit. The Bazhir page Zahir ibn Alhaz's chauvinism appears more blatant than that of his Tortallan peers; he tells Kel to "take [her] place behind the veil, where [she] belong[s]" (5.161). Regardless of whether Zahir's statement is representative of gender attitudes among the tribes, the voicing of this overt sexism by a cultural/racial Other allows Tortall to once again appear tolerant. When Zahir says that "Girls have no business in the affairs of men," Lord Wyldon tells him "We are not among the Bazhir tribes" (5.36), implying that Tortall is the more enlightened culture. Of course, Zahir's statement is practically identical to what Wyldon himself was baldly telling the King and the Lioness a mere thirty pages previously; the closeness of these two scenes does not allow Wyldon's hypocritical rebuke of the Bazhir boy to pass unexamined.

Visiting a small village after a raider attack, Kel becomes the object of further misogynistic treatment. The centaur leader Graystreak approaches the young squire like "a filly for his inspection" (7.55), assessing her strength with an eye to interspecies breeding capabilities, offering horses in trade for her (7.56). An irked Raoul replies that "human females are not for sale," seeming to set up a contrast between the rights that human women have and centaur females lack. Yet Kel's mother Ilane employs disturbingly similar language, characterizing noble parents as "horse breeders who try to keep their mares from being mounted by the wrong stallion" (7.229). Ilane recounts her own father's presentation of her to a potential suitor; he described her anatomy in terms of breeding capability just as Graystreak does. These parallel conversations imply that contrary to Raoul's assertion, in certain contexts human females are in fact treated as saleable commodities.

Kel is not the only character challenging Tortallan attitudes toward the exotic and the Other in *Protector*. Twenty years after Alanna's training, the capital city has noticeably diversified. Kel has more international teachers than native Tortallans, with instructors from Carthak, the Copper Isles, the Yamani Isles, and the Divine Realms. Expatriate teachers along with other non-native Tortallan notables (a K'mir commander of the Queen's Riders, a Saren queen, a Gallan Wildmage) indicate that immigrants in Tortall are not only being incorporated into the fabric of society but altering it, establishing formative relationships with the realm's future knights and claiming political influence. Cultural assimilation is a two-way street, with Prince Roald's Yamani betrothed urging Kel to greet her in the Eastern manner (7.1370) as Tortallan pages learn Yamani etiquette to impress the visiting delegation (5.81). The King's Own has made inroads recruiting the "once-scorned Bazhir"; Lord Raoul brought Third Company to live among the tribes for two seasons (7.41). Although the most visible result of these overtures is more Bazhir in the Tortallan armed forces, there are clues that this is cultural exchange rather than mere incorporation<sup>39</sup>: the men of the Own wear burnouses and ride desert-bred horses (7.40).

Tortall can no longer define itself against foreign nations; it has been deeply penetrated by immigrants, ambassadors, and other liminal characters<sup>40</sup>. Riding through Scanra in search of the refugees abducted by the necromancer, Kel comes to a realization: "She'd expected things to look different once they were in another country.... The land didn't change because humans divided it with an invisible line" (8.309). This conclusion, extended to genders, classes, and

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<sup>39</sup> This exchange began when King Jonathan became the Voice of the Tribes, the spiritual leader of the Bazhir. Although Jon's assumption of this role could be seen as further colonization of the tribes by Tortall, tribal leaders see the merge differently, hoping that this concession will lead to "a Bazhir king" rather than a Tortallan king of the Bazhir (3.46). The Voice cannot "consider defiance" of the people he communes with (3.149); he is a servant rather than a ruler, directly subject to the hearts and minds of his followers. By allowing him to become their spiritual leader, the Bazhir force the arrogant, autocratic Jon to commit magically to an ideal of democratic thought, to learn his eventual kingship from his role as Voice. When Jon reappears in *The Immortals* and *Protector*, he is a far more gentle and equitable king than could be predicted by the prideful and patronizing Jon of *Song*.

<sup>40</sup> Charlotte Spivack distinguishes between "merely delineating" the Other and integrating it with the Self (14).

ances, is a fair representation of Kel's challenge to not only the necessity of borders but to their essential validity. Kel has identified with the Other for too long, along too many axes - gender, class, nationality - to not understand how closely the Other resembles the self.

## 2. *Rupturing glory*

*Protector* chips away at the conventional image of the knight - a lone figure in shining armor charging to the rescue - in favor of practicalities. The shining armor is first to go, as Raoul changes men of the Own out of their "blues with the pretty silver mail and all" into gear more appropriate for an inconspicuous forest pursuit (7.56). The charging presents another problem; a knight's usual steed is good for open ground, not forested terrain - even over open ground, it lacks endurance (7.60; 7.16). The impracticality of the knight's "wonderful warhorse[ ], the terror of the infantry" extends even further; Raoul recounts a fight with Bazhir warriors during which the stallions, smelling the enemy's mares, broke formation (7.110). The knight commander has switched his forces to geldings and mares, refusing to value virility over pragmatism.

When people "say a knight's job is all glory," Raoul cannot help but "laugh, and laugh, and laugh" (7.93). The knight-commander routinely draws attention to the tension between perceptions surrounding his vocation and its lived reality. Raoul's second-in-command Flyndan warns Kel that "It's not glamour and glory. It's hard, mud-slogging work" (7.61). Sometimes, this description is literal. During one muddy week of earthquake relief, using muscles shaped by weapons practice to build shelters and warhorses to pull down collapsed buildings, a sarcastic Raoul remarks to his squire that "The glory of knighthood is lovely... The brilliance and fury of battle, the sound of trumpets in the air, the flowers, and the pretty girls - or pretty boys, in your case - climbing all over us" (7.297). Villains fall prey to similar overblown expectations of outlawry; one raider is disappointed that upon joining the bandits "There was no feasting or

pretty girls or wine. Just take and run, and run" (7.71).

Although Kel is naturally predisposed to dismiss this kind of glamorization, she holds on to her illusions about war; though she is not so misled as her friend Owen, who is startled to learn that "things go wrong" in battle (6.140), Kel still refuses to see her bloody skirmishes with bandits, spidrens, and hill bandits as anything more than "housekeeping," holding out for the real experience (7.328). The men of the Own teach her that perceptions of war are just as constructed as expectations of knighthood, that actual war is mostly boring and often quite domestic: planting gardens, raising an orphaned squirrel, a chess tournament (7.331). Between these stretches of monotony, Kel learns the brutality of war as well; by the time she marches out with an army toward Scanra in *Lady Knight*, she is unsurprised to look back to see not cheering and banners, but the vulture-like Stormwings circling above the palace, awaiting the dead (8.21).

Pierce includes a new abundance of detail in her *Protector* series that distinguishes it from its predecessors. Alongside direct references to heroic conventions and expectations, these quotidian minutiae draw attention to the gap between preconceptions of knightly life and its substance. Pierce outlines Kel's ordinary routines: pattern dances at dawn to help with staff work, evening bully patrols, morning floor exercises (5.160). We see her oil her mount's tack, take endless runs at the quintain, eat her vegetables, struggle to rise in the morning (5.118). Kel's anonymous benefactor sends gifts that reflect these practicalities: she receives not only a sword, but saddlebags with tooth cleaning powder and a waterproof hat (6.175). Riding with the Own, Kel meets not generalized peasantry but "charcoal burners, freshwater fishermen, hunters, miners, and hermits who eke[ ] out life in this wild part of the kingdom" (7.98). When the court embarks on a meandering Royal Progress, it is not mere ceremony but pragmatism: an excuse for a census, a road survey, studies of local law and medicine (7.211). Le Guin complains that while

a fantasy kingdom “may resemble medieval Europe in being preindustrial...that doesn’t justify its having no economics and no social justice. Nor does it explain why nobody there ever feeds or waters their horses” (“Assumptions” 5). In *Protector*, the shining armor is polished, the noble steed is fed, and social justice is the heroine's primary concern.

Kel and her friends are aware of how preconceptions of heroism, knighthood, and war are constructed by literature and ballads. Neal struggles to express his desire for romance to his friend: "color, and - and fire... things magnificent and filled with - with grandeur. You know, drama. Importance. Transcendent passion" (5.86). Kel replies that she just wants to be a knight (5.87); yet within the conventions of the genre, Neal's elaborate vision *is* just being a knight. Owen becomes frustrated with Kel's unwillingness to accept the trappings of traditional knighthood: “You’re not looking at it the right way. Here we are on an adventure. It’s glory, and fame.... not counting troops or finding ways to bury the dead so they won’t rot into the drinking water” (8.300). For the young squire, adventure is in the eye of the beholder.

For Kel, there is no choice between reality and adventure; one is true, one is not. When Neal describes Numair's transformation of a Carthaki mage into an apple tree, his friend is disbelieving: “Only in stories did mages turn people into things, and she had noticed such stories always took place in the very distant past” (5.170). Of course, Numair did actually turn Tristan Staghorn into a tree. "It's like a story, or a bard's tale," Alanna comments to Daine in *Wild Magic*, after seeing immortal spidrens for the first time. Daine's response is shrewd: "So are lady knights" (WM 215). Tortallan characters recognize the ways in which their narratives blur the boundaries of legend and normal experience, irrespective of the intrusion of mythical creatures into the kingdom. These exchanges are a reminder that no matter how much convention is deglamorized or subverted, Pierce's books remain heroic fantasy.

Kel's awareness of her own generic expectations allows her to suppress or indulge these fantasies depending on the circumstances, asserting some control over her own narrative. She is thrilled to ride at the head of Third Company, like "a hero from a ballad at the head of a mighty legion" before reminding herself of how she does not quite fit into the traditional scenario (7.45). Before speaking to the men at Haven for the first time, she imagines "delivering a blood-stirring speech full of fire and dreams that would have them all on their feet, cheering her, ready to take on the Scanran army" (8.95) before laughing at her own folly. It is a laugh at the reader's folly, as well; steeped in the heroic conventions of fantasy, it would be a rare reader who does not have some expectation of the scene Kel describes. She displays particular impatience with stories that glorify villainy and violence, unable to understand "romantic songs of highwaymen and pirates. Anyone who took poor people's life savings [is] not worth a song" (7.54). During the Royal Progress, Kel yields to the pull of tournament traditions: "The time-honored phrases of the challenge came from her lips with a strength that grew with each word. Do mages feel like this when they chant spells?" (7.220). Kel does not allow this enthrallment to control her: she eventually refuses to joust, disliking combat as spectacle. Yet her description of the initial force of this conventional language is apt. It is easy for an author like Pierce to succumb to the gravity of the conventional heroic mode, to invoke its time-honored phrases and feel like a mage chanting a spell indeed.

### 3. *Complicating villainy*

With *Protector of the Small*, Pierce introduces a diverse host of antagonists and destabilizes unqualified Evil. Nefarious acts are no longer the result of a wicked nature, but of societal mindsets and systemic conditions - of bigotry, of misogyny, of poverty. Hatred is deconstructed and explained; villainy is revised and punctured. Delia's malevolence toward

Alanna stemmed from her own naked ambition and a seemingly natural viciousness; her nephew Lerant's antagonism of Kel results not from inherited character but from inherited circumstance. Delia's treason impoverished her family and barred her young relative from respectable posts in the army, navy, and even palace guard. He became the victim of highborn bullies who mock his poverty and low standing, calling him "cur dog" (7.219). Lerant's malice is rational and traceable as his aunt's never was. Kel understands his jealousy, and even identifies with her rival: "she knew what it was like to be unwanted... hadn't Lord Raoul rescued her, all the same?" (7.49).

Sometimes villainy ensues not from familial circumstance but from broader social factors. This is illustrated in the shift from the bandit hillmen of *Woman Who Rides Like a Man*, who "live[ ] for killing and loot" (3.3), to the bandit hillmen of *Page*, "hollow-eyed ex-farmers" with torn clothing and naked, big-bellied children, who lost their land during the drought (6.122). Kel defends herself against the hillmen when her group of pages stumbles into a bandit camp, and hunts down village raiders with the King's Own. Yet she also knows that "there [are] no easy answers"; the bandits' victims are "as poor as they" (6.23). Kel's observations fracture villainy that is opaque and innate in *Song*, reminding readers that even in a fantasy world, evil can be constructed by famine, war, and poverty.

In the traditional heroic narrative, the most straightforward manifestation of Evil is the monster - primal, Other, the opposite of the rational human hero in every way. After Pierce's treatment of mortal and mythical creatures in the *Immortals* quartet, she can no longer link monstrosity and animality in this way. The monsters of Kel's series are all humanoid or human-made, from the half-human spidrens to Blayce's child-fueled killing devices, "made to give anyone who [sees them] nightmares" (8.17). They are hybrids and machines, constructed rather than natural.

Most of *Protector's* human antagonists share a set of interrelated behavioral patterns: misogynistic language, cruelty toward animals<sup>41</sup>, bigotry, and/or class prejudice. Verbal derogation of women is the strongest marker of an adversary; Joren's father calls Kel "bitch," "trollop," and "jumped-up merchant slut" (7.280), the refugee Idrius calls her "a shameless girl, a chit who's no better than she ought to be" (8.155). Two kidnappers maltreat Kel's dog Jump rather than simply subduing him during their abduction of the maid Lalasa (6.228)<sup>42</sup>; they are eventually captured by palace guards who notice dogs attacking the men on sight (6.242). Other antagonists espouse an intermingled classism, sexism, and racism. One conservative challenger asks Kel, "What have you people left untouched? You school the whelps of farmers, let women make war, intermarry with foreigners –" (7.281). Kel's crusade on behalf of "the Small" may seem broad, but it is justified by the clear interrelation of these patterns of othering and victimization. In *Protector*, adversaries are usually "the Big"; evil is closely aligned with privilege and the irresponsible use of power.

Tortall's contentious political landscape is evident from the opening sequence of *First Test*, when the pages' training master threatens to resign over Kel's entry into his program; recognizing that support from conservative nobles is contingent upon Lord Wyldon's continued presence at court, the King agrees to the new female page's probation (5.5). The broad support enjoyed by Alanna is dismissed as exceptional, anomalous; conservatives are the majority faction in this later series. The knights and mages of Alanna's generation (Jon, George, Raoul, Numair) have been labeled progressives and barred from judging the pages' end-of-year examinations (5.183), which are instead administered by the "oldest, blue-bloodedest, fussiest men in the realm" in an

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<sup>41</sup>Pierce occasionally disrupts this rule, depicting antagonists whose treatment of animals is kinder than their treatment of humans (*The Immortals*, *Provost's Dog*).

<sup>42</sup>Animal and women's rights groups cite statistics demonstrating that violence toward women and animal cruelty are closely related - 71% of battered women report abuse of pets by their batterer. "Facts About Animal Abuse and Domestic Violence." American Humane Association, 2006.



effort to "keep the traditionalists happy" (5.183). While this arrangement is a compromise to facilitate the efforts of a progressive king, it also cedes a major mechanism for judging and selecting the realm's future leaders to the kingdom's conservative caucus.

In *Protector*, conservatives claim moral superiority even when engaging in prejudiced or illegal activities, asserting that their actions are ethically justified. This assumed immunity is evident during the bully Joren's kidnapping trial and subsequent death in the Chamber of the Ordeal. Joren refuses to recognize the jurisdiction of the court and the realm, claiming that these authorities have been usurped by "certain interests in the kingdom [who] mean [Kel] to succeed" (7.158). He refuses to hear Wyldon's endorsement of Kel, assuming that the training master is "honor bound to say so" (7.157). Other conservatives are similarly unwilling to recognize the legitimate standing of their opponents. Joren's father "refuses to treat [his son's trial] as if it means anything" (7.151), and accuses Kel of affecting the Chamber of the Ordeal's supposed objectivity after Joren's death (7.280). Conservative antagonists appropriate language around objectivity, honor, and balance. In *Song*, the crazed Bazhir shaman Akhnan Ibn Nazzir accuses Alanna of destroying the "eternal Balance" (3.27) between male and female; "What honor has a nation when a female lives among men and pretends to their profession of arms?" asks Joren (7.157).

While Kel is not completely excluded during the beginning of her training, her early supporters are men and women who are in some sense already estranged from the establishment - the university dropout Neal, the migrant Shang warrior Eda Bell. Kel's eventual knightmaster Raoul, though commander of the King's Own, belongs to Alanna's aberrant generation. Unlike Alanna's friends, Kel's supporters are a minority faction. Kel experiences widespread resistance no matter how much support she accrues, from the "two grizzled warriors" who spend their

evening visiting Lord Wyldon "telling jokes about women who were never prompt" (5.152) to the pages who laugh at her for failing to hit the quintain (5.127) and sneak up on her in the latrine (5.193). The anonymity of this antagonism intensifies the sense of omnipresent adversity in the *Protector* books. Joren and his cronies may weight Kel's lance and trip her on the way to the stables, but it could be any of the pages who "squeak[s] in a falsetto voice" in mockery of her fear of heights (5.177); indeed, "all the pages" make jokes and bet on where she will freeze up while climbing (5.200). Anonymous enmity continues past *First Test*; there is no point at which Kel is shown to have completely subdued the hostility of her world. Acknowledging that Kel "had made friends among the pages" since her first year, the introduction to *Page* cautions that "there [are] still boys who...play mean tricks to make her leave" (6.8). Even as the newly instated commander of a border fort, Kel must address a squadron captain's bald allegation that her "ban on flogging [is] a sign of female weakness" (8.105). Locating the principle opponent of the *Protector of the Small* series in a pervasive sociopolitical viewpoint rather than a villain means that this antagonism can never be conclusively defeated.

If Kel is estranged, an outsider, her opponents are clearly insiders. She faces not only individual adversaries but the networks that sustain them - networks of support, obligation, and complicity which lend immunity to society's most privileged noblemen. These bonds stem from family connections, military history, and shared schooling. Meeting Neal, Kel is suspicious of his spontaneous offer of friendship, since the two "aren't related, and [their] fathers aren't friends" (5.40); she is aware that social relations are generally dictated by these pre-existing connections. Alanna notices the same pattern. During her meeting with Wyldon and the King at the beginning of the *Protector* series, she speculates that Jonathan is "inclined to give way to the man who[ ] saved his children" (5.4), deferring to Wyldon's demand for Kel's probation even at

the expense of justice. Young Alan witnessed this kind of exclusive bond her first day at the palace, when her own curt treatment by Duke Gareth contrasted with the Duke's friendly exchange with his old war buddy Coram (1.23). During Kel's training years, Jon cultivates this sort of rapport; visiting the pages' mess hall, the king establishes an understanding with the boys based on references to his own page years (5.84).

For members of the ruling set, it is difficult to be cast out. King Roald restores Duke Roger's estates and titles after his return from the dead in attempt to forgive and forget, despite proof of Roger's treasonous attempts on the lives of the royal family. Joren of Stone Mountain relies on this immunity during his trial for Lalasa's kidnapping, during which he confesses, thinking himself untouchable. When Joren gives the court "leave to sentence [him] under the law" (7.158), it is clear that he has no fear of a law constructed by men like him, a law that has always worked in his favor.

In many ways, Joren resembles the demonic Roger. Like Roger, he is attractive - an "unachievable dream of perfect manhood" (7.154). His physical appeal verges on feminine; he is "the prettiest boy [Kel has] ever seen" (5.61). He is powerful, not only privileged and wealthy but "one of the best pages in unarmed and weapons combat" (6.15), as demonstrated when he delivers a vicious beating to Kel in *First Test*. Joren's antagonism is a peculiar mixture of conservatism - he informs Kel knowingly that "All women care about marriage" (6.180) - and standard mindless cruelty, hitting and tripping younger boys for pleasure. In a history class, Joren attributes recent battles to Alanna's killing of a Copper Isles princess and Scanran raiding to their national character, while Myles explains the systemic factors that have influenced the conflict - crop failures, political instability, and the distribution of natural resources (5.75). Joren's explanation is subjective, narrative, oblivious to anything but dramatic events and

ingrained generalizations; it is as if, with one foot in the classic villain's role, he still sees the world from within a conventional framework while the rest of his classmates have moved on.

In conventional narratives, Good attempts to defeat Evil. Kel's usual approach to her adversaries is transformation rather than domination. In place of the usual series of single combats that the hero must win, Kel faces a series of people whose opinions and behaviors she must change. She instills trust and confidence in victims like Lalasa and Tobe, and struggles to broaden the minds of conservative skeptics like Lord Wyldon and Raoul's second-in-command Flyndan. Sometimes these are concerted efforts, as when Kel matches wits with the belligerent refugee Idrius Valestone or earns the respect of the argumentative corporal Wolset. Often, Pierce's second lady knight alters the opinion of those around her simply by proceeding normally; one conservative knight who tilts against Kel apologizes for his challenge to her integrity and wishes her well, admitting to having "heard things... [which] were untrue" (7.253). Kel's approach privileges "the vitality of relationships over mere victory" (Spivack 164).

Kel converts individual opponents; she also works to disrupt the cultural assumptions and systems that support them. Some of these are major disruptions - confrontations with bullying and domestic violence, challenges to chivalry - while some are smaller shifts. The hybridity of Kel's social role and her presence in male spheres prompts changes in terminology. This shift is exemplified in the halting attempts of Captain Flyndan of the King's Own, who struggles to reshape his speech around the presence of his commander's new female squire. He amends sexist assumptions, remarking to Kel that her glaive "looks awkward for a -" (7.35), swallowing the obvious "girl" and replacing it with "youngster." He adds female pronouns in order to lend gender equality to his pronouncements: "I've never seen a centaur miss what he shot at. Or she" (7.52). He even hastily reworks sexualized idioms, telling his companions that he "thought it was

impossible to get three Scanrans to -" glancing at Kel before finishing with "eat together" (7.325). Flyndan's hurried additions and subtractions demonstrate the influence that Kel's mere presence has on pre-existing verbal culture. These small transformations are an important component of Kel's disruption of Tortallan norms.

One difference between the social landscapes of *Song* and *Protector* is the presence of neutral parties in the latter series. Alanna is surrounded by allies and enemies, with nary a soul in between. Ralon of Malven is the bad apple; the rest of the pages encourage Page Alan and assure him of his superlative skill. In *Protector*, Kel's friends and Joren's cronies are joined by peers like Yancen of Irenroha, who is voted "a good sort, if not one of us" by the group (6.194). During a Midwinter confrontation with the bullies, Balduin of Disuart represents a group of neutral pages that temporarily aids Kel (6.86). The behavior of these pages provides a reasonable means of gauging Kel's success in the transformation of popular opinion and culture at the palace. Nonpartisanship is not limited to the pages. The etiquette master Oakbridge, though kind, "fusse[s] over the problems [Kel] present[s], being neither a proper young lady or a proper squire" (7.215); he expresses refreshing exasperation with the challenges Kel presents not to the natural, moral order of things, but to seating arrangements.

#### 4. *Rethinking the sword*

Violence undergoes the same deglamorization that glory and villainy are subjected to<sup>43</sup>. The irrepressible squire Owen habitually refers to fighting as "jolly," but in *Lady Knight* he visits the fallen Fort Giantkiller: "The dead were just strewn everywhere, like my sisters' dolls, all cut up" (8.199). Killing in *Protector* is untidy. After executing fallen men on the way into Scanra,

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<sup>43</sup>A number of critics of the masculine adventure story suggest that in order to be radical or subversive, an author must omit all instances of this sort of violence - a feat particularly difficult for authors writing about knights, whose lifestyle is a series of duels, battles, danger-laden quests, and tournaments. Deborah O'Keefe criticizes Pierce's books on this front: "Little girls deserve their own heroes - though Pierce might have described a girl hero without copying the violence of boys' adventures" (121).

Kel admits that she will "feel the glaive cutting flesh and bone for a very long time" (8.378).

Kel's discomfort with violence runs deeper than her predecessor's; what she encounters is far more brutal, less scripted, noxious. With the exception of a skirmish by the River Drell and a few tussles with assassins on the way to the Dominion Jewel, Alanna's fights are single combats with rules, spectators, and a victor. Kel sees killing machines and emaciated hill bandits, slaughtered villagers and refugees, piles of murdered children and animals, bruised pages and maids trapped in dark corners. Even when Kel commits acts of violence, these grim images inflect both her demeanor and her reactions.

Kel estranges herself from many Tortallans by refusing to treat violence as entertainment. She is furious at festive execution crowds, "[bringing] lunches or purchas[ing] food and drink from vendors, hoist[ing] children on their shoulders for a better look... Did they not care that lives were ending?" (7.99). She hates hangings: "No matter what the crime was, she s[ees] no malice in those hooded and bound silhouettes dangling against the sky" (7.61). Kel notices that like her, the commanders (Buri, Raoul, Flyndan) do not share the crowd's merriment. Buri sees the executions as evidence of a broken system, a punitive law that "says it's a lesser wrong than letting them go to kill again... [that] sows bitterness in the remaining family and friends" which the Own and the Riders will "reap down the road" (7.100). It is these commanders, those most often responsible for death, who are least complacent about it.

Leading a troop of soldiers, convicts, and refugees into Scanra, Kel must order others to kill despite her own misgivings. She herself "hate[s] to kill men on the ground" but, recognizing that survivors might prevent the liberation of the refugee captives (8.378), tries to help her people come to terms with the violence: "If you don't like hitting them when they're defenseless, remember that they help Blayce" (8.365). In Kel's mind, this directive remains murder; "What

d[oes] that make [me]?" she wonders (8.312). She prevents Neal from healing enemies dying on the ground, recognizing that his nature chafes at the command (8.313). Kel addresses her own feelings by proxy with Loesia, a refugee girl who has killed the guard who captured her. The child is distraught, telling Kel "He was nice when I was scared. How can I feel good about killing him?" (8.393). The battle done, Kel no longer needs to justify these actions as she did for the refugees on the road. She answers honestly: "There would be something wrong with you if you did" (8.394).

Kel distinguishes between necessary and unnecessary violence, and refuses to euphemize the horror of even unavoidable brutality. She finally refuses to joust, informing her challengers that she trained "not to play at killing someone for an audience's entertainment, but to help people" (7.322). This rejection of combat as spectacle is a recurrent thread, the attitude of a commander who sees enough real violence that it can never become entertainment. Kel responds bitterly to the Chamber of the Ordeal's tactful congratulations ("Very tidy.") for her defeat of the necromancer Blayce: "I 'fixed' it. I killed a swordless man and saw a lot of good people murdered" (8.389). An execution of this sort may be justice, but it is never comfortable.

The battle sequence at the end of *Lady Knight* is anomalous; for the most part, *Protector of the Small* concentrates on a more common violence, one that is even harder to justify or condone. Kel confronts bullying and domestic assault scenarios that involve harsh power disparities (emotional, financial, physical), a victim and an abuser rather than two balanced combatants. Offenders are the powerful, not the evil. Violence is unsightly in Pierce's third series, the brutality depicted not the kind usually associated with the hero's tale.

This is not to say that victims are not prominent in conventional heroic plots; riding to save damsels in distress is part of the hero's job description. However, the conventional rescue

scenario often reinforces power differentials between rescuer and rescued<sup>44</sup>. It perpetuates imbalance, not enabling the victim but rather shifting control from an abuser to a savior. Kel's revision of this dynamic depends on her strong identification with outsiders and the vulnerable; instead of simply saving victims, she works to permanently empower the Small and to modify the cultural mechanisms that permit and encourage their victimization.

The maid Lalasa is timid and self-effacing, wary around males. When Lalasa expresses surprise at Kel's tolerance for "noisy menfolk," the page retorts that her friends "don't mean any harm" (6.125). Lalasa's response reveals how threatening she perceives male sexual maturity to be. "Not this lot," she says darkly, "They're boys. I doubt they'll be so sweet when they're men" (6.127). Eventually, Lalasa slips and admits to Kel that "[her] bro- a man hurt [her]" as a child (6.190). The maid's trauma has transformed her brother into "a man," has rendered all men anonymous and sexually threatening.

Lalasa's vulnerability is heightened by popular perceptions of the sexual availability of domestic servants. When Kel discovers Lalasa being harassed in the corridor one day, her attacker claims to have an "understanding" with the maid; Lalasa, who assumes that her mistress will believe the man (6.64), is astounded when Kel takes her part without question. The maid is used to nobles like Vinson, who claims that maids "all do it - bed men to earn extra coin over their wages" (6.184) or Wyldon, who warns Kel that Lalasa may be lewd and is "not to involve herself physically with any page or squire" (6.22). These attitudes do not begin to address the power dynamics of even nominally consensual sexual relations between nobles and servants. Even Lalasa's gentle uncle Gower notices that "when city girls act shy, men hereabouts think they want to be chased," blaming not the rapacious male outlook but the "bold city girls" (6.9).

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<sup>44</sup> Anne Melano draws the same conclusion about this dynamic, though this section was written before I encountered her work (96).



Kel recalls that "squires tumble[ ] girls of the lower classes all the time; they [are] infamous for it" (7.254). While dominant attitudes attribute these congresses to female harlotry, the typical pattern is harassment and assault, one-sided instigation.

The maid's position is further weakened by societal disregard of domestic violence. Kel's male friends dismiss Lalasa's harassment; Cleon makes light of the danger that women face, advising the maid to "just carry a lead-weighted baton" (6.67). Lalasa seems to have internalized society's stance toward her mistreatment. She is vehemently concerned over Kel's training injuries ("Doesn't it hurt? You act like it's nothing" [6.32]) yet gives little weight to her own bruises (6.10). She accepts responsibility for the assaults, telling Kel that she will "be careful" and "no trouble" when she goes out (6.40). For the most part, timid Lalasa never does go out, preferring to stay in Kel's quarters where "nobody bothers [her] but the dog and the birds"; she has been abused badly enough that "friends to visit or errands to run" are no longer an option (6.65). Public space is threatening; fear pushes Lalasa further into the female sphere and feminine behavioral stereotypes.

Kel occasionally despairs of the maid's timidity, "hop[ing] she gets over it" (6.38), admitting that there is "something to Lalasa's meekness that set[s] her teeth on edge" (6.41). Kel is more at ease with the horse Peachblossom, whose mistreatment has resulted in meanness and defiance, than with the meek maid. Kel's treatment of Lalasa includes an element of impatience and judgment; Kel expects the maid to fight back in response to trauma, as she would. The page feels the compulsion of chivalric attitudes toward violence: a declared opposition toward some varieties (kidnapped damsels, villages in distress) coexisting with a tolerance toward or even perpetuation of others, even within the palace walls.

While Kel is aware of the individual power dynamics governing assault, she initially

dismisses Lalasa's warnings about servant women's broad societal vulnerability. Observing Lalasa's first assaulter in the palace, Kel notes that he "look[s] like the sort who enjoy[s] other people's fear" (6.64); she accuses her fellow page Vinson of picking on the maid because he knows he can scare her (6.185). Kel is aware that rape and harassment concern power and violence, not sex. Yet Kel still encourages the maid to report the assaults; it is Lalasa's uncle Gower who explains "the way of the world" to the page, reminding her that "in the end it's Lalasa's word against that of an upper servant or noble" (6.10). Lalasa's gender-based vulnerability is amplified by its intersection with her class identity. Even as a twelve-year-old, Kel is able to confront one of Lalasa's assaulters because "she [is] a noble, and she kn[ows] her rights" (6.64); the maid claims no such bloodright. Lalasa's danger is compounded by the rigidity of the criminal justice system, with guards who "apply the penalties for runaway servants" regardless of circumstance (6.215). These revelations are crucial to Kel's early disillusionment with existing systems of authority.

The law is incapable of protecting Lalasa; so is Kel. Lalasa begs Kel not to report her assault by Vinson, since doing so would increase her vulnerability. "He speaks to his mother, who speaks to the chamberlain, who speaks to the steward, who puts my uncle out of work," the maid tells her mistress (6.186). Kel will no longer be a page in two years, but Lalasa will remain in the palace; protectors and patrons cannot be everywhere and always. Realizing this, Kel resolves both to enable the maid to act as her own protector, and to change her abusive environment for good.

As soon as she is able, Kel begins teaching the protesting Lalasa self-defense (6.66). The maid squeaks and cringes, treating the defense lessons "as a silly game" (6.68). For Lalasa, meekness and cringing *are* defense, a coping mechanism developed in the face of violence.

Though the lessons impart key physical skills, the shifts in Lalasa's attitudes that take place as a result of the sessions are of far more import. Drafting her page friends as patsies on which to demonstrate painful deterrents, Kel turns male abuser into male victim, diminishing masculine threat. One day, Lalasa catches her mistress by surprise and throws her into a door; cutting off tearful Lalasa's apologies, a grinning Kel informs her: "What I've been teaching you, among other things, is how to throw me into doors" (6.142). The emphasis is as much on the "me" as it is on the throwing - Kel cultivates Lalasa's willingness to upset habitual power differentials of mistress and maid, man and woman, abuser and victim.

When Kel's rival Joren kidnaps Lalasa and Kel's dog Jump to the top of the tallest structure in Tortall, Balor's Needle, Kel confronts a conventional problem: how to rescue a maid(en) in a tower. Although the kidnapping forces Kel to choose between attending her final examinations and rescuing her friend, the maid's rescue is clearly Kel's actual final examination, a psychological test pitting the page's protective instinct against her own debilitating fear of heights<sup>45</sup>. It is given that Pierce's heroine will go after Lalasa; the more important issue is whether Kel will find a way to alter the classic rescue scenario and revise the traditional power gap between savior and saved.

Kel's acrophobia acts as an initial equalizer between her and Lalasa; the conventional hero does not approach his maiden on hands and knees, terrified of looking over the edge of the tower (6.228). Kel finally stands up because of the maid's faith in her strength. When her knees buckle,

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<sup>45</sup>In this instance, Kel's fear of heights is emblemized by the most phallic structure in Corus, the tower whose "long shadow" falls across Kel every time she crosses the palace courtyard (6.225). In order to rescue Lalasa, Kel must climb and symbolically conquer, stand atop, the largest emblem of masculinity in Corus. Kel's fear could represent a subconscious anxiety about surmounting male authority in this manner. As newly selected commander of the Haven refugee camp, Kel is disconcerted to find that her friends Neal and Merric are technically "under" her command (8.75); being above male peers discomfits Kel. Reading the Needle as phallic adds a new dimension to its role in a number of suicides by pages who fail the exams (5.177); defeated by the hyper-masculine knight's training, they are crushed to death by a fall from a giant symbol of masculinity.

she "stiffen[s] them for Lalasa and Jump" (6.239); she is able to triumph over the tower's external staircase by coaching the terrified Lalasa down (6.233), conquering her own fear by teaching another to be bold. "You taught me to be near as brave as you are," Lalasa informs her. "After that, what could Kel do?" (6.239) - knowing that Lalasa sees her as a hero forces her to become one.

The rescue also depends on Lalasa's practical support. When a rusty stair falls through, Kel finds herself with corroded metal tearing through her leg, "supporting Lalasa's weight as well as Jump's and her own for a horrible moment" (6.236). Fortunately, Lalasa takes the dog and "grimly tear[s] strips of her petticoat" to staunch Kel's wound (6.237). There are no victims during Lalasa's rescue, no trophies. The maid is just as stoic as her liberator, speaking "not a word of complaint" though tears roll down her face from pain (6.230). Nor does Kel expect her maid to be a passive victim awaiting rescue, speculating that "maybe Lalasa w[ill] escape her kidnappers. She [is] clever" (6.233). Lalasa finally asserts herself on Balor's Needle, admitting that she "wanted to box [Kel's] ears, when [she was] forever after [the maid] to fight and learn this grip" (6.238). The outcome of the rescue is not a triumphant hero and indebted damsel, but full equality between the two women. "With Lalasa's help Kel had done it" (7.149) - both the maid's faith and her practical assistance are critical to this construction of the younger girl's heroism.

A few months after the tower ordeal, Kel observes that "something ha[s] changed her retiring Lalasa into [a] brisk young female... Businesswoman Lalasa" (7.24). She ascribes this metamorphosis to the former maid's nascent economic security as a dressmaker with commissions from the Queen. Financial independence is the final component of Lalasa's transformation from timid victim into bold, self-assured woman. Lalasa has always been more

comfortable asserting herself in traditionally female spheres, efficiently measuring Kel for clothing and ordering her about. Opening a dressmaking shop enables Lalasa to extend this comfortable space permanently, to craft her skill into a public identity.

Lalasa's individual recuperation may be close to complete by the beginning of the third *Protector* volume, but Kel continues to cope with the mechanisms that allowed and facilitated the maid's abuse. When Kel catches Vinson attacking Lalasa, she threatens him with the court of the Goddess, where "a man convicted of hurting women... face[s] harsh penalties" from the female temple warriors (6.188). Pierce shies away from this ideal solution in *Squire*, instead forcing her heroine to confront the biases of the traditional judicial system.

Joren escapes with a fine for paying men to kidnap Lalasa; his hirelings are sentenced to hard labor. The trial satisfies the maid, who wears a "triumphant smile" as she watches the sentencing of the hired men, her immediate abusers (7.269)<sup>46</sup>. Kel challenges the social procedures responsible for Joren's apparent immunity to legal punishment. She confronts the King about the unjust law (which decrees separate penalties for criminals of noble and common birth) and extracts a promise for change, albeit slow change. In return, she promises to refrain from taking matters into her own hands, waiving her right to duel Joren.

Oddly, it is the supposed mechanism of conservative knighthood and kingship, the Chamber of the Ordeal, which takes matters into its own hands a year later. In a stroke of magical vigilante justice, the Chamber visits Lalasa's attacker Vinson with a curse that makes him feel every bit of violence he ever inflicted against a woman. As the court watches, Vinson experiences a reversal of his brutal assault on two commoner girls; observers see "marks on his shoulders, as though someone had grabbed him so hard that he'd bled through the cloth" and

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<sup>46</sup>Anne Melano sees Lalasa's abstention from speaking during the trial as evidence of the limitations of the maid's empowerment, calling the scene a "rescuer not rescued" situation (93). This analysis focuses on individual implications of the trial rather than the societal transformation that it sparks.

"shadow bruises [which] play[ ] over his face and hands, signs of a beating, or beatings (7.268).

Though satisfying, the Chamber's eye-for-an-eye intervention is disappointing as a *deus ex machina*; it is a merely punitive rather than educative or transformative<sup>47</sup> non-solution to sexual assault. The oppressive systems remain in place. At the end of the day, it is Jonathan's promise of gradual reformation of the legal system that matters; compared to the transformation of Tortall's courts, the Chamber's involvement is merely an interesting side note. Yet this interference is also the first sign of the Chamber's break with the systems of chivalric authority that it supposedly represents, which were all too willing to condone these abuses.

### 5. *Lessons in chivalry*

Like Alanna, Kel initially earns acceptance by "outperform[ing] those males she... want[s] to emulate" (Flanagan 83), by embodying traditional chivalry better than her peers. Young Kel respects authority, refusing to call the conservative training master Wyldon "the Stump" as Neal does (5.43). She strives for emotional self-discipline; after her quarters are trashed, Kel takes deep breaths "until the storm of hurt and anger...[is] under control," then calmly cleans up (5.31). When Myles gives his usual speech on the Code, telling Kel that "a page must endure everything that comes" and lamenting his "misfortune to be dumped among so many warrior toics," Kel internally remarks that warrior stoics are "the best company in the world" (5.123).

Like many pages before her, Kel is routinely brought before the training master to explain the cuts, bruises, and broken arms resulting from fights with her peers. However, when she offers the traditional "I fell down," Wyldon is disbelieving, pressing her to admit the truth and name those with whom she fought (5.136); the training master seems unwilling to allow Kel to

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<sup>47</sup> In *Lady Knight*, Neal uses a version of the Chamber's curse on an abusive innkeeper, causing him to feel every blow he inflicts in the future, not the past (8.37). This magical intervention is more clearly preventative than the Chamber's.

participate in the male custom. After Kel misses final examinations to rescue Lalasa from Balor's Needle, Wyldon asks the girl to explain even though he already knows the circumstances. Kel refuses, enacting "I fell down" on a larger scale, informing the training master that "explanations are excuses" (6.245). Wyldon's replies that he "would [she] had been born a boy" (6.246) - a terse acknowledgment that despite her sex, Kel is a perfect exemplar of masculine stoicism and chivalric behavior.

While Kel's defense of traditional stoic behavior is similar to Alanna's, her internalized Code results from unusual sources. The first of these is Kel's Yamani childhood. In the Islands, "displays of deep emotion [are] regarded as shameful" (5.7). Along with her parents, Kel waits for permission before saying what she feels (5.8). The Yamanis prefer to "live with pain" (5.94), just as the warrior stoic Wyldon does. Kel has internalized this precept to the degree that it "shame[s] her to feel happy at the easing of pain" (5.138).

Kel envisions self-discipline in terms of water and stone, an image set carried over from her Yamani upbringing. While stone is commonly associated with masculine behavior, Kel rarely invokes stoniness against the problems of her masculine world. She values balance, noticing that Lord Wyldon has "too much stone" and needs more water in his personality (5.26). She may simply value water and all that it evokes - fluidity, flexibility, reflectiveness, relentlessness - over stone. Kel calms her anger by envisioning herself as a "summer lake" (6.43) and centers herself before the Ordeal of Knighthood by seeing her soul as a pond, with the Code of Chivalry as stones falling in (7.375). Her approach seems to be effective; she is flexible and fluid enough to survive the Chamber, while her conservative classmate Joren is "so rigid that he shatter[s] under the Ordeal" (7.282). Unlike stone, water cannot break. Yet Kel retains some rock for her outward persona, making her face like stone when insulted (6.76) or to hide

embarrassment (5.37). When the bandit Gil describes the time she "guttled ol' Breakbone Dell" during the pages' fight with hill raiders, he uses both water and stone in his description of Kel: she stood "cool as meltwater" with "eyes like stone" (8.94). Kel may employ water imagery internally while she keeps her outward appearance stony, but ultimately she understands the value of and makes use of both modes of being. In fact, water and stone do not remain entirely oppositional for Kel. She prays to keep her will "as hot as the heart of the volcano, and as hard and implacable as the glacier" (5.48), evoking stone in its molten state and water in its solid form, challenging the implied polarity of her preferred symbolism.

Kel's stoicism and bravery derive not only from her Yamani upbringing but also from her compassion. Early in the series, ten-year-old Kel dives courageously into battle with a cat-eating spidren because "help [is] on its way - for her, but not for those kittens" (5.16). When Kel demonstrates traditional bravery - charging into battles with spidrens and killing machines - she does so for non-traditional reasons, rather than valuing bravery for bravery's sake. Her stoic moments are similarly motivated. Kel allows a small girl to cling to her mauled leg after a fight with a centaur; as "white-hot bolts of agony" shoot through her, she pretends indifference not for the sake of the Code but so as to not scare the child (7.84). She treats her charge Tobe similarly, "trying not to show her fear for her boy" after raiders attack the refugee camp Haven (8.378). The few times that Kel slips and displays her anger or frustration, she regrets the way her words impact those around her. Neal rationalizes Alanna's choice to choose him and not Kel as squire, telling his friend "She had to know what people would think if she took you." Kel finally cracks and, in a rare moment of vulnerability, replies "That maybe I was right to look up to her all these years? That if anyone can teach me how to be a lady knight, it's her?" (7.22). A moment later, Kel is berating herself for the slip - not because her outburst violated the Code's stoicism



imperative, but because it hurt Neal.

Kel is not opposed to emotional expression, just to its public exhibition; she often defers her reactions. After resolving to hide her fear for the Haven refugees from Tobe, Kel adds that "later, she could give way to emotion" (8.379). She reports her flame Domitan's arrow wound to Raoul "without taking her eyes from her view," letting duty and necessity dictate her response; she mentally apologizes, telling Dom "I'll go all shaky over you when this is over" (7.350). The most explicit delineation of the divide between Kel's public face and her deferred emotions comes when Kel contemplates redoing her four years as page in punishment for missing the examinations: "I didn't like it; I didn't want it. I would have screamed and wept and hit things once I was alone, in private, as is decent. But I would have done it" (6.249). To Kel, public outburst is both impractical and indecent.

"I'm no warrior," Daine informs Kel, "I can speak just as I please" (8.163). Kel sometimes expresses dissatisfaction with her own stoicism and courtesy, wishing that, like Daine, she could speak her mind. She envies the irrepressible Neal, who dares to question authority, mocking herself for being unable to do anything but "bow and be polite like a good ambassador's daughter" (5.84). On occasion, she lashes out, telling Neal that she is "tired of hiding the way she fe[els]," tired of the expectation that she will "say 'yes' and 'so mote' to anything, smile and go along no matter what... Never argue, never complain" (5.105). When Kel chooses to drop her facade of calm, it is a decision to "not [be] a good Yamani anymore" (6.246). Yet this choice is never permanent; the mask always goes back on. Kel's verbal freedom exists primarily in her imagination. While she remains composed in the face of Wyldon's injustices, Kel keeps up a running silent commentary on the training master's inequality: "Why won't you treat me like you treat the boys? Why can't you be fair?" (5.28). Kel knows that if she were to express these

feelings it would only hurt her case; instead, she sways Wyldon by embodying his own values.

Even as Kel embodies traditional chivalry, there are signs of her disillusionment, of her awareness of a rift between the chivalry enacted by those around her and chivalry as she envisions it. When Merric protests that hazing is customary, meant to instill fortitude and obedience in the pages, Kel replies "not like this" (5.133). Joren's crony Garvey makes a nasty remark to Kel in *Squire*; a concerned Raoul asks her if he was "being unchivalrous." "No," Kel replies, "He was just being Garvey" (7.124). This is a central aspect of Kel's disenchantment with the institution of chivalry: nasty, abusive knights like Garvey are still accepted.<sup>48</sup> There is no requirement that knights adhere to "chivalrous ideals" (5.139) in order to receive the benefits of the system. For Kel, it is a system fundamentally askew, with the ideals of chivalry submerged beneath trappings and contrivances. Through her struggle to articulate an ideal of knighthood that differs from that of her society, Kel "attain[s] heroism through... commitment to a truth beyond that which is recognized by social convention" (Pearson 9). She rejects atrophied chivalry in favor of its living root.

Kel is able to differentiate between those manifestations of the chivalric tradition which she sees as divorced from its essence and those which remain true to more fundamental ideas of honor. Unlike Alanna, Kel learns to tilt during tournaments held as part of King Jonathan's Royal Progress. At first she accepts challenges from conservatives who see jousts as an opportunity to humiliate her, although she derides their substitution of combat victory for justice. Kel herself values engagement over victory, concluding that "even if she lost she'd have protested" the conservatives' abuses (7.235). At the same time, she demonstrates that victory within such a

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<sup>48</sup>The recognition of hypocrisy facilitates this disillusionment, although Kel never uses the word. Anne Melano writes that Kel's task is to "transform and restore" a society that is falling short of its own ideal (92). Pearson and Pope are less forgiving of the existing social order, remarking that the "female hero is in tune with...values that the society *advocates* but does not practice" (9; my emphasis).

wrongheaded system can be immensely satisfying. When a defeated knight refuses to yield to Kel, she informs him "All those traditions you like tell you what comes now" (7.238). Eventually, Kel tires of "risking her own bones to prove her skill" (7.209), informing the conservatives that she is "not getting on a horse anymore to whack [them] with a stick" (7.293). This language echoes Alanna's twin Thom's dismissive distillation of knight's training to "falling down and whacking at things," and indicates that Kel is not as unthinkingly defensive of the institution of knighthood as Alanna (who bristles at her brother's remark).

Kel rejects some aspects of chivalry; she adds others. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Kel insists on burial rites even for the enemy dead.<sup>49</sup> She is "the only one to pray for [Scanran raiders], sent by their king to die so far from home" (8.257). She is distraught when she cannot bury a troop of enemy fighters on her way into Scanra, even after seeing the violence and desecration that the captive refugees have undergone at Scanran hands. The practical Stormwings mock Kel for what they consider a futile gesture: "Who cares about the enemy? Probably just you" (8.239). When Kel finally leaves the dead at Blayce's castle to the vulture-like immortals, it is not bitterness or disillusionment, but a concession to pragmatism. She thinks that "someone ought to get some good" out of the destructive battle (8.395).

Although Kel considers many aspects of Tortallan knighthood flawed, she never rejects the institution entirely. Contemplating the Code during her pre-Ordeal vigil, Kel decides that chivalry is "not the dry, withered thing it sound[s] in people's mouths" but organic, a duty "to keep the realm growing, to keep it as fair as life could be kept" (7.378). This is a duty not to tradition but to progression, to a realm that is not a political entity but a human one (7.377). Kel is instructed in the same Code as her predecessor, but the focus is altered; while Alanna hears

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<sup>49</sup>Pierce expands this treatment of the dead in *Provost's Dog*. Her protagonist, the city guardswoman Beka Cooper, tracks murderers and discovers unburied corpses so the restless souls of victims may rest.

about her duty to uphold the law in all cases, to prevent wrongdoing, and to keep her word (2.178), the description of Kel's instruction only goes so far as the protection of the weak before Kel is lost in her own thoughts (7.375). Perhaps it is this shift to protection rather than enforcement that causes Kel to conclude that "those words were the reason she had come this far, the whole reason she wanted to be a knight. She wanted them to be as much a part of her as blood and bone."

Kel's first challenge to Tortall's decaying chivalry pits her against older pages taking advantage of the training master's promotion of toughness to victimize younger boys. While Alanna also confronted a bully, Ralon of Malven was an aberration, acting alone on a personal vendetta against Page Alan. His treatment of Alanna was condemned by his peers, particularly Jon, Raoul, and Gary - the authorities of the page's wing. Alanna defeated Ralon in single combat, like a typical monster or villain; her development of superior hand-to-hand skills did nothing to destabilize broader assumptions about the acceptability of this sort of violence.

In the *Protector* books, the behavior of Joren and his cronies is a symptom of a system willing to ignore and even encourage such abuse. The bullying is not provoked by Kel's presence; her usual method for discovering harassment is accidental eavesdropping (5.101), a sign that the practice was ingrained in the fabric of the pages' culture before Kel's arrival. Unlike Ralon, these bullies are generally superior in number, as well as in strength and skill. Authority condones their methods; prominent older pages like Prince Roald, Faleron, and Cleon are inclined to ignore the violence rather than intervene. Abuse that is normalized in this fashion is far more destructive than Ralon's deviant misconduct.

Although Kel faces harassment and vandalism - her room is trashed, her lance is weighted, and she is tripped on the way to the stables - this bullying is directed at other victims,

younger boys like Merric, Quinden, and Owen. Unlike Alanna, who is targeted, Kel must choose whether to intervene on the behalf of the boys. She considers turning a blind eye as the older boys do, acknowledging that the bullying reflects large-scale knightly violence: "Giving way to superior force was how their world worked" (5.102). She cannot report the incidents, since the "unwritten law" dictates that the boys fight their own battles (5.103); moreover, the conservative training master sees violence as character-building. Rationalizing proves insufficient: "What if a custom is wrong? demand[s] the part of her that believe[s] in the code of chivalry" (5.104). Kel's decision to defy Joren's group is the first sign that her chivalry differs from common-order chivalry, whose "unwritten law" would allow the beatings to pass unexamined and unopposed.

As with Lalasa, Kel takes both an individual and a systemic approach to bullying. Alanna trains to become a better fighter than Ralon before confronting him; with other pages' injury on the line, Kel cannot wait and prepare. As a first year page, she inserts herself between Joren and his prey; she always loses. Her resistance is more symbolic than practical. She keeps her activities from her friends as Alanna does, but for different reasons; while Alanna is too proud to admit her victimization to the concerned Jon, Raoul, and Gary, Kel hides her nightly bully patrols because of her peers' stated apathy.

Confronted by Neal one night, Kel finally challenges the boys who never spoke out against bullying, even when victims themselves. The older pages confirm her expectations, protesting that "it's always been this way" and that one "can't go setting tradition on its ear" (5.166). It is in response to these boys that Kel finally translates her earlier revelation - that custom may be wrong - into a public position. She reminds her friends that their practices as pages will transfer into their attitudes as knights, that earning a shield does not result in a formerly apathetic knight's sudden defense of the vulnerable (5.166). Neal calls this speech "the best lesson [he's] had on

chivalry" (5.167). This chivalry lesson is Kel's first inroad toward changing the abusive world order. Her major role is educative; while she defends pages physically, her ultimate goal is the alteration of palace culture. Eventually, Kel's friends become numerous enough that the incidents cease; the real victory is not the intimidation of Joren's crew but the number of formerly apathetic pages who become aware of and engaged with the problem.

The second phase of Kel's evolving stance on chivalry plays out in her relationship with the Chamber of the Ordeal, the room that decides whether candidates are worthy of knighthood. On its surface, the Chamber is one of the chief devices of masculine authority in Tortall. It is guarded by male priests; its doors are "carved with a sun, the symbol of Mithros, god of law and war" (7.4). Tortallan conservatives profess unwavering confidence in the Chamber, faith that "*its* power at least remains uncorrupted" by social change (7.220; author's emphasis). The Ordeal of knighthood is a simple test of knightly stoicism: while confronting his worst fears, the subject must remain silent - a high stakes enactment of "I fell down."

Yet despite its role in the inscription of authority, the Chamber exhibits many traits of the female generative space described by Margaret Bruzelius in *Romancing the Novel* (though its voice throughout remains carefully androgynous): it is underground, outside of time, and impossible to return to (Bruzelius 137). It is a manifestation of the balance between life and death, mortal and divine (8.19). It is consumptive as well as productive: Alanna's training master lost a finger during his Ordeal (1.22), while Alanna "gained a new life and a sharper way of looking at things" from it (2.189). Kel's brother Anders tells her that the Chamber is "like a cutter of gemstones. It looks for your flaws and hammers them, till you crack open" (7.5); it is concerned with the making of things as well as the breaking of things. The Chamber abhors rigidity; knowing when to bend is the key to surviving it (7.174). Unlike the Dominion Jewel, the

Chamber claims no interest in affirming the King's order and rule – it is “a law unto itself” (7.23). “Countries and borders are meaningless” to it (8.19). Yet the Chamber is itself a border, regulating the passage from squirehood to knighthood; it is a set of chivalric criteria made manifest.

Kel's early interactions with the Chamber corresponds to the first stage of her attitude toward chivalry; unlike her peers, she visits the Chamber's door, subjecting herself again and again to its terrifying visions, proving her courage. In one vision, Kel's lover Cleon is gravely injured and she is unable to save him (7.321). In another sequence, Kel is chronically disabled, helpless as she watches raiders slaughter and rape a village. Her disability is the result of a misfit healing, an attempt to fit her into a traditionally female role: “She never got a satisfactory answer as to how a novice healer who specialized in childbirth would be the only one available to a squire who'd taken lances in a shoulder and a hip” (7.260). The last vision shows Kel powerful men (the magistrate Turomot, Joren of Stone Mountain) issuing execution orders for those who Kel has protected (Lalasa, the dog Jump, village children). The men assess women's property value, making remarks like “Breeding age. Looks well when clean” or “It's risky, taking a woman who uses weapons” (7.187). This vision is one of political helplessness against privileged masculine systems of oppression, of Kel's inability to provide lasting, impermeable protection for the most vulnerable members of society. When the hallucinations end, Kel spits on the ground in front of the Chamber, in a final gesture of defiant bravado (7.321)

A shift occurs during Kel's formal Ordeal. At first, the Chamber sends her the usual set of fearful visions: heights, helplessness, violence, death. Disillusioned, Kel lashes out: “I thought you would be grand and terrible! I thought you would make us grow up, make us accept knighthood's duties and sacrifices... you're a nightmare device” (7.382). Kel breaks the

mandatory silence (albeit mentally) to question her examiner, to reproach its criteria for determining chivalry. It is in response to this accusation that the Chamber suddenly ends Kel's visions, unveils itself, and elects Kel to end the depravities of the necromancer Blayce (7.383). The Chamber has already demonstrated that the chivalry that it embodies diverges sharply from that of Tortall's chivalric institution; when Tortall refuses to punish the abusive, privileged Joren and Vinson, the Chamber chews them up and spits them out. It seems that the Chamber allies itself with Kel precisely because of her reproof, her unwillingness to accept even *its* authority without question. Kel's willingness to confront codified authority is fundamental to whatever deep chivalry the Chamber represents; she is the ideal restorer of a balance threatened by power's excesses.

After Kel is knighted, she returns to the Chamber for what she calls "social visits" (8.15), prying for more information about Blayce's whereabouts. While the Chamber presumably dictates the terms of its affiliation with the young knight, its exchanges with Kel suggest a more equitable relationship than that of Alanna with her patron Goddess. Although the Chamber tends toward the same ponderous language as the Goddess - invocations of destiny and fate (8.197; 8.389) - its pronouncements are undercut by Kel's needling, her ability to aggravate the entity to the point of exasperation<sup>50</sup>. This is part of a broader evolution of the relation between Pierce's heroines and their divine sponsors, from service to bargaining and partnership. Alanna is a tool of the Gods; Daine, though called a "vessel" of divine interests, tells the Graveyard Hag to "stop pushing [her] around" (EM 206) when the Crone tries to use Daine for her purposes.

Increasingly, gods chat with humans, manipulate them, and ask favors instead of giving orders.

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<sup>50</sup>Diana Wynne Jones suggests that heroes develop relationships with gods and the supernatural in order to lend their actions universal significance, and because the oversight of a god encourages the hero to maintain a certain standard of behavior (130). During Kel's Ordeal, this oversight is momentarily reversed, as Kel chides the Chamber about its own behavior and purpose.



In *Tricksters*, the god Kyprioth enters into bargains with both Pierce's heroine and a flock of crows. Authority is no longer absolute; when Daine visits the heavenly pantheon at the end of *In the Realms of the Gods*, her adopted dragonling scolds the divine patriarch Mithros (DR 264-7); another dragon remarks, "Gods annoy me" (DR 269). Given the narrative role of Pierce's divine actors - the Goddess, the Chamber, Daine's badger god and Graveyard Hag, and Kyprioth the Trickster all provide Pierce's heroines with their tasks - this increased resistance to divine control becomes resistance to the plot's dominance, a new insistence on self-narration.

Kel's suspicion of the Chamber corresponds to her distrust of mortal authority, a distrust tied to her encounters with corrupt and abusive power. Kel is wary of Jonathan from the outset as the king who upheld her year of probation; though she comes to understand some of the political deadlock that the king faces in his efforts to enact social change, she never fully embraces the ruler. When the necromancer Blayce suggests that even Jonathan would jump to make use of his killing machines, Kel guardedly defends her monarch against the indictment (8.387). She informs the dead mage that while he is probably wrong about Jonathan, it is "better that [the King] not have the chance to be tempted" (8.388) by Blayce's monstrous war devices, taking the decision into her own hands. Kel develops her own standards for the behavior of rulers: "Could she serve a king who wasn't just with her? Chivalry work[s] two ways: you g[i]ve good service to your overlord, and in return your overlord honor[s] your service and treat[s] you honestly" (5.84). In Kel's chivalry, loyalty and duty are reciprocal.

King Jonathan places Kel on probation because of the efforts of Wyldon of Cavall, the pages' training master and one of Corus's most prominent conservative nobles, "known for his dislike of female warriors" (5.1). Wyldon's objection to Kel is a potent combination of a few truths (girls "are not as strong in their arms and shoulders as men") with stereotypes ("Girls are

fragile, more emotional, easier to frighten") (5.4); he buttresses the legitimacy of the latter claims with the certainty of the former. When Kel enters training, Wyldon habitually begins meals by speaking out against "change [which] threatens all that is time-honored and true," asking that "the god's light show us a path back to the virtues of our fathers" (5.42). In *First Test*, Wyldon - a chauvinist military hero who allows young pages to be hazed and beaten by older ones in the name of courage and strength - embodies the defective chivalry that Kel eventually opposes

In her efforts to outperform her male peers, Kel exhibits traditional stoicism, obedience, doggedness, and martial skill. Although Wyldon remains opposed to Kel's presence, he cannot bring himself to dismiss her from training on spurious grounds. Though Kel stays on, Wyldon's prejudices remain: "What if you come to grief, or cause others to come to grief, because your thoughts are on your heart and not combat?" (5.225) is a kinder, patronizing restatement of the training master's earlier worry that "this girl would get any warriors who serve with her killed on some dark night" (5.4). Yet it is this remnant of Wyldon's formal honor - allowing Kel to remain according to his agreement - that eventually leads to the training master's wholesale transformation. After ending Kel's probationary period, the scrupulous Wyldon begins to treat the female page the same as the male pages, as is mandated. Seemingly, treating Kel fairly results in coming to view her fairly, as well. Kel receives her first sparing compliment from Wyldon near the end of her third year as a page (6.178); in her fourth year, Wyldon chooses Kel to command a group strategy exercise (6.204). "Even I can learn when to quit," he says (6.251). At the same time, there are signs that Wyldon's transformation is broader than his grudging acceptance of a female page. During Kel's training, her instructor prays exclusively to Mithros, male god of law and war (5.216), while Kel often prays to the Goddess (5.217). After the rescue on Balor's Needle, Kel notices that "for the first time since her arrival," Wyldon "include[s] the

Goddess in his nightly prayer" (6.247), asking that the gods "strip the hate from our eyes, and the grip of bitterness from our hearts" (6.248).

When Joren of Stone Mountain is killed in the Chamber of the Ordeal and his crony Vinson's sexual assaults are revealed, Wyldon resigns from the training master position. He wonders aloud to a visiting Kel if his aggressive methods created the abusive squires, making the strong stronger rather than assisting the weak, encouraging violence. "My training, my approach, is flawed," he admits (7.285). This shift is much more powerful than Wyldon's recognition of Kel's excellence; this is the chivalric institution admitting that it wandered, and repenting.

In *Lady Knight*, Wyldon has metamorphosed completely from one of Kel's primary adversaries into the young knight's commander and mentor. For all the rigidity that the former training master manifests, it is he who teaches Kel that both service and command require interpretation, flexibility. He explains the reasoning underlying his appointment of the young knight to command a border refugee camp, informing her that "sometimes it's better to have understanding than obedience" (8.71). During Kel's first months in command, this distinction crops up again and again, refining Kel's perception of authority. It is "one thing to be given command by your superiors and another to be given it by the men under you," she learns (8.106). Wyldon's injunctive has roots in the text of the original Code, which states that "a knight's first duty is to understand."

When the refugees of Kel's fort are abducted by the necromancer Blayce, she disobeys orders to enter Scanra in search of them. After recovering her people, Kel rides back to the Tortallan border to face Wyldon's punishment for her treason. Anticipating execution, Kel considers flight. Yet "flight would mean that she took no responsibility for what she had done. That was unacceptable. She had done what was necessary. She would take the consequences"

(8.396). In this case, it is through Kel's embodiment of fundamental chivalric values that she generates the most change and forces chivalric authorities to recognize the ways in which their systems are broken. In *Protector*, Pierce finally confronts the tension between "upholding the law at all times," as the Code mandates, and doing what is right. Had Kel run after her Scanra excursion or after missing examinations to find the maid Lalasa, Wyldon would never have been forced to look Kel in the eye and recognize a chivalry truer than his own.

However, it is a changed Wyldon who Kel faces at the end of *Lady Knight*; the former training master has already acknowledged the failings of his customary approach. He no longer advocates constructive aggression and unthinking obedience. He recalled the "voice of honor" after Kel's unjust probation (7.285); the honor that Wyldon recalls and comes to epitomize is remarkably well-aligned with the deep chivalry abandoned by the majority of the institution, embodied by the Chamber of the Ordeal and championed by Kel herself. Wyldon teaches Kel about understanding and obedience, but *Lady Knight's* final warning is for him: "One of the hardest lessons for any commander," Wyldon admits, "is that it is a very bad idea to issue an order one knows will not be obeyed" (8.399). The commander Wyldon refers to is not Kel. This admission is the image of a matured chivalric tradition, an institution brought into line by the girl it tried to exclude. Wyldon once taught Kel, and sat in judgement on her probation. Gradually, these positions are reversed. When Kel says that Wyldon is the kind of knight she wants to be, the training master calls her judgment "the greatest compliment [he] will ever receive" (7.285). Wyldon is training master and commander, but it is Kel who gives lessons in chivalry.

### Coda: Mother and Commander

The Chamber of the Ordeal is the physical embodiment of the Code's essence, of chivalry as it ought to be. It is therefore appropriate that Kel's Chamber-given moniker, "Protector of the Small," is derived from a line of the Code itself: "to protect those weaker than you... rich and poor, young and old, male and female may look to you for rescue, and you cannot deny them" (7.375). While this might be fairly standard heroic behavior, Kel remakes the traditional "Protector" as a complex nexus of teaching, maternity, command, rehabilitation, and advocacy. From the stray dog Jump and mistreated horse Peachblossom to a vicious baby griffin, from the abused maid Lalasa to groups of underfed orphans and convicts at the border camp Haven, Kel instructs the Small in self-defense and self-respect, feeds them and clothes them, puts herself between them and abusive authorities, and pulls groups of them together to do the same for themselves. Her protection is reciprocal rather than patronizing, rooted in her own identification with the mistreated: "I do it because I can. I've been treated badly, and I didn't like it" (8.36). The climax of *Lady Knight* is tailored to this newly defined Protector role, as Kel leads a group of refugees and convicts against a distorted maternity aimed at the smallest members of society.

As a ten-year-old girl with no towers to climb or maidens to retrieve, young Keladry saves stray and orphaned animals instead. She knows that the rescue of abused and abandoned beasts is no simple recovery act, but rather an extended process of physical and mental rehabilitation; creatures rescued by the page are cared for personally and usually become part of Kel's extensive animal retinue. The first of these is Peachblossom, an intractable gelding "ruined for knight's work" (5.68) by an abusive former master who covered the horse's mouth in scar tissue (7.10). Kel decides to take on this supposedly impossibly mean-spirited horse for her own knight's work, another supposed impossibility, thereby saving the big gelding from being culled for meat. A

convention of the heroic adventure is the valiant steed, so proud that he will let none but his noble master ride him (Hourihan 82); Peachblossom's refusal to let anyone but Kel mount is a revision of this relationship, derived not from the horse's acknowledgment of and submission to his mistress's nobility, but from a built trust that will be recognizable to anyone who has adopted an abused pet from a shelter. Peachblossom allows Kel to ride him in deference to the girl's compassion, not her mastery.

Indeed, Kel's compassion toward animals is one of her defining characteristics. She "wince[s] for the horses" shot during a battle with Scanran raiders, recognizing the creatures' innocence in their human masters' quarrel (8.120). She directs her hunting dog to attack only male deer in the spring, since does have young to care for at that time of year (7.330). Her compassion even dictates her actions within her own living space; in the morning, she never throws off her blankets for fear of hurting the sparrows and dog which share her bedroll (8.5). Kel's dog Jump, like Peachblossom, has been abused. He is scarred and emaciated, sporting an oft-broken tail (6.7); when she first encounters him, he is the prey of the cook, who is "chasing something much smaller than her" (6.6) - the literal Small. Kel protects and cares for Jump on principle, refusing at first to become attached, telling the dog "I don't even like you," that she is simply opposed to bullying of any kind (6.8). Yet like Peachblossom, like the maid Lalasa, like the griffin, like the downtrodden stableboy Tobe, Jump becomes attached to Kel despite her resolutions. Kel has a knack for finding that which "has been destroyed by the irresponsible exercise of power, cast out of common humanity [or animality], made Other" (*Revised* 23)<sup>51</sup>. Like Le Guin's Tenar, Kel recognizes that repairing this destruction, reversing this casting out, is not a single day's work but the task of a lifetime. Rehabilitation entails both confronting

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<sup>51</sup>I am often compelled to use Le Guin's formulations in discussions of Kel; there is no corresponding impulse with Alanna.

irresponsible power and nurturing its victim.

Animals serve as extensions and representatives of Kel herself. As much space is devoted to describing Jump as is spent describing his mistress (7.3); the two share a number of physical characteristics. The dog lifts his head with pride though he "will never be a beauty" (6.19); he is a "scarred, stocky... brawler" (6.200). He is "neither a silky, combed, small type favored by ladies nor a wolf- or boar-hound breed prized by lords" (8.12), a hybrid type reflecting Kel's own hybridity of gender expression. When Wyldon explains the prohibited dog's presence on the training courts to the King, he could be speaking of Kel: "I see no harm, if he doesn't distract [the pages]. He earned his way several times over during the [bandit fight that Kel and her friends participated in]" (6.135).

The horse Peachblossom is another extension of the girl - "no man's friend, but he suit[s] Kel nicely" (7.10). He is oversized, like his brawny mistress. Kel "admire[s] the big gelding's independence, the way he d[oesn't] seem to care whether people like[ ] him or not" (5.99), an attitude to which the page herself aspires. Kel makes the horse's role even more explicit in *Page*, "env[ying] the gelding's freedom to be mean" and pretending that "Peachblossom [is] her temper, her true temper under all the Yamani manners" (6.200). In a confrontation with misogynistic centaurs, Peachblossom's angry defiance substitutes for Kel's politely concealed rage. The surprised centaur leader protests that "geldings don't face down stallions," adding a sexual dimension to the horses' rebellion (7.58). One man observes that "history gets rewritten sometimes." This exchange has bearing on Kel's own situation; as a female squire she is challenging the supposedly natural, biological supremacy of the virile male, just as the geldings do.

Pierce draws clear parallels between abused animals and human victims, such as when Kel

addresses Jump and Lalasa assumes that Kel is speaking to her (6.37), clearly used to being treated like a dog. Kel's approach to strays often resembles human childrearing. She carries an adopted griffin within her coat like an infant (7.148), later repeating the motion with the human orphan Tobe.<sup>52</sup> When the griffin misbehaves, she spansks him "as she would a puppy or kitten, loudly rather than hard" while making him look at the results of his destruction in order to associate the behavior with the punishment (7.171). As a member of a large family, Kel has experience with young children that she willingly extends to her treatment of young animals.

Unlike her predecessor, Kel does not shy away from maternity, instead embracing it as a central feature of her role as Protector. She nurtures both female and male friends out of habit.<sup>53</sup> During Neal's Ordeal of Knighthood, Kel takes his lover Yuki to practice archery and glaivework, gives her a bath, massage, and change of clothes, "glad to have someone to look after" (7.371). In part, Kel cares for others in order to cope with her own anxiety. Daine and Kel bond over shared fear and exhaustion during the war with Scanra; the younger girl offers the Wildmage porridge, and the older woman remarks on Kel's "trying to take care of [her], too" (8.165). This caretaking often manifests as an impulse to feed; even as a young girl, Kel forces her older friend Neal to eat his vegetables (6.13). Meeting impoverished villagers and convicts, Kel's first thought is often how "these people need[ ] a proper meal" (8.369; 8.174).

Kel's male friends often jokingly refer to her as "Mother." Checking in with her patrol captain Merric, her friend tells her "I knew you'd give me a spanking if I went out without doing my chores" (8.205). This is less belittling than Halef Seif's referral to Alanna as a worried desert hen pursuing her chicks. Nor does it invoke the sacrificial "scapegoat role" that mothers often

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<sup>52</sup>Maria Nikolajeva notes that animals in children's literature can either act as a parental substitute for a young protagonist (as the smug cat Faithful often does for Alanna) or allow the protagonist to practice their own parenting skills (*Rhetoric* 126).

<sup>53</sup> When motherhood or mothering makes a rare appearance in heroic fantasy, this is almost exclusively a mother/son relationship; women mothering women is particularly rare.



assume in fiction, giving everything and receiving nothing (Pearson 41). It is not diminutive but aggrandizing, an acknowledgment of Kel's maternal power. That Merric deems Kel not only a mother but *his* mother serves to juvenilize the male speaker, rather than merely maternalizing Kel. Perhaps this is why Kel is so willing to indulge her friends' mockery. In a similar exchange, Kel's flame Dom remarks that "Mother gets upset when she thinks we lads have been careless" (8.339). Kel plays along, informing the sergeant: "If I'd been your mother, I'd've beaten you." As with Merric, this designation shifts the power differential in Kel's direction. When Tobe calls his mistress "milady Mother," acting "every inch an exasperated male," Kel again plays along rather than rebuking him (8.231). Privately, she is "flattered that Tobe might call her Mother, even in jest"; Kel clearly does not buy into Alanna's frustration with and devaluation of motherhood.

Whether fostering or rearing, both the rescuer of abused animals and the loving mother aims at the eventual independence of their ward. Kel takes this rehabilitative approach with victims like Tobe and Lalasa; she implements the same process on a larger scale with the convicts and refugees of her border camp Haven. She trains them in weapons so that they will "walk[ ] less like victims" (8.227). When a group of refugee farmers is attacked by raiders, Kel abstains from fighting so that her pupils will develop confidence in their own abilities; the consequence is that the raiders are defeated before the camp's soldiers even make it to the scene (8.228). The farmers are proud to have "fought for themselves and won" without her interference. Yet as the refugee's commander and teacher, Kel remains fundamental in the construction of this independence. A clerk informs her that the new fighters "take confidence in what they do from the confidence [that Kel] show[s] in them" (8.229).

Alanna is more model than teacher. While at some point she "taught combat arts to pages and squires" (3.72), these scenes are never depicted or referred to in detail. More common are

scenes in which Alanna teaches by example: in *Lioness Rampant*, boys watching her practice swordplay eventually "grab[ ] sticks and imitate[ ] her (4.47), in Corus, children she has never met "play at bein' Lioness" in the streets (3.230). Kel, on the other hand, is a born teacher. After her male friends observe her giving Lalasa self-defense lessons, they begin sending new pages to her for staff instruction (6.165). Kel derives teaching methods from her own practice strategies, telling the boys that they "do the thing [she] used to, where [she] was so in love with swinging a weapon that [she] didn't care about the exact way to do it" (6.167). Admissions like these make Kel's pupils more comfortable with their own mistakes. She "gentle[s]...along" her students, relying on her own history as student and learner to help others (8.104). As with nearly every component of Kel's role as Protector, her teaching is grounded in identification and reciprocity; she "would love to do for someone as Lord Raoul had done for her."

The difference between Kel's teaching and Alanna's modeling exemplifies a major shift between the two heroines. One of Alanna's Bazhir shaman students, Ishak, complains: "You have a cat that's supernatural, a token from the Goddess, a magic sword, the Gift – and you want to keep it all for yourself!" (3.82). The boy's accusation is partially true. Alanna is unique, exceptional. Kel might have the same kinds of accoutrements - a spyglass, a flock of super-intelligent sparrows, a headband of truth-seeing griffin feathers - but she treats these as tools and friends rather than personal talismans. She loans her magical headband to Raoul (7.349) and lets members of the King's Own use her spyglass (7.194). Occasionally, she forgets that she owns the former item (8.108). Kel diffuses elements of her heroism to those around her, not only sharing her talismans but her skills. Alanna's exceptionality does not lend itself to systemic change - particularly within a system that lauds the extraordinary<sup>54</sup>. Within heroic narratives, the

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<sup>54</sup>Brian Attebery claims that "Fantasy's reliance on traditional motifs makes it less adaptable to such wholesale transformation of society; it usually focuses on the development of the exceptional individual rather than the

exceptional is ordinary - Kel's ordinariness, conversely, is highly exceptional.

Raoul of Goldenlake distinguishes between Alanna the heroine and Kel the commander. In his eyes, Alanna is one of the rare heroes who "find[s] dark places and fight[s] in them alone" (7.120). While heroism of this sort is valued within heroic convention, Kel's knightmaster sees this approach as limited: heroes are "wonderful... but we live in the real world. There aren't many places without any hope or light." In Raoul's Tortall, heroes are less needful than commanders, who "size up people's strengths and weaknesses...know where someone will shine and where they will collapse" (7.121). Raoul describes a command predicated upon the "vitality of relationships" (Spivack 164) - a command that Kel already practices, even as a young page. Her strength is in assembly; during a spidren hunt Kel's first year, she musters her peers so that "the sight of not one page, but four in a steady line... ma[kes] the spidrens hesitate" (5.220). This scene is repeated in *Page* when Kel takes charge of a group of bandit-besieged pages (6.108), demonstrating her "cool head" and ability to place her friends where their skills are most needed. The frequency of Kel's group leadership makes her eventual formal command post a given.

Raoul's own command is concerned not with power but with relationships; Kel studies this approach to leadership under her knightmaster's direction. Several observers remark that Kel "get[s] more like [Raoul] every day" (7.360), using the older knight's battle bellow (8.121) and even looking like him when she raises her eyebrows (7.288). She learns to give orders as Raoul does, "as if there were no doubt she would be obeyed" (8.169). Yet the big knight's real leadership does not stem simply from his forceful presence. Pitching camp, Raoul and his squire "help[ ] with every job, getting as dirty as everyone else" (7.329); when Kel has her own camp to run she does the same, putting her own name on all the work lists (8.102). She eats in the mess

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reformation of culture" (*Strategies* 103). This shift from the exceptional to the diffuse and ordinary, from one woman's quest to the quiet war, enables Pierce to buck this restriction.

hall with her men instead of dining separately, switching tables nightly as the diplomatic Prince Roald did during her time as a page (8.103). Finding the dead of Haven after the fort has been sacked by Blayce's raiders, Kel "recognize[s] everyone she s[ees]" and tells a story or fact about each corpse (8.237), having taking the time to involve herself, even briefly, in the lives of each of her people.

Before the war with Scanra begins, Kel faces a decision to "await the Crown's orders or slip away" to hunt her quarry Blayce (8.7). The hero's choice is obvious; even Alanna placed the confrontation with her nemesis Roger over participation in the battle that consumes Jonathan's coronation<sup>55</sup>. Kel manages to resist, though she is repeatedly tempted to find Blayce alone (8.203). Instead, she commands the border refugee camp Haven, defending its walls and nurturing its inhabitants. When the refugees are captured, Kel defies Lord Wyldon's orders and rides into Scanra alone, in a conventional quest to the dark mage's hidden castle (8.270).

Back at the Tortallan Fort Mastiff, Pierce leaves Kel's point of view for the first time in the *Protector* series, locating the narrative consciousness with Wyldon, Raoul, Kel's knight friends, the squire Owen, and the boy Tobe in turn. This is an unusual series of conversations between men about Kel, recalling the numerous conversations between Alanna's male friends and protectors during her absences. In contrast to those in *Song*, these exchanges do not emphasize the distance between the male speakers and Pierce's heroine, their patronizing superiority. Instead, the conversations in *Lady Knight* foreground the closeness between Kel and the men left at the Fort: their debts to her, their knowledge of her character, their admiration of her. The boys recall that Kel has saved all of their lives at one time or another; they cannot allow her to enter Scanra alone (8.264). Raoul sends a squadron of King's Own across the border with instructions

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<sup>55</sup>Kel does not skip the fight at Blayce's keep, but goes after the mage only after the fighting downstairs is "nearly over" (8.379).

to take orders from Kel, demonstrating his faith in his former squire's judgment. The boy Tobe agrees with Kel's reasoning and identifies himself with his mistress: "neither the lady nor [he] would let [the people of Haven] be killed or enslaved" (8.266).

Kel's solo rescue is disrupted by the four separate groups of people who follow her into Scanra. She wakes up one morning to find the squadron leader Dom cooking her bacon and oatcakes (8.276); when Tobe and Own arrive, she resigns herself: "More friends? What is this, a cavalcade?" (8.279). Kel is pragmatic, acknowledging that the arrivals give her "a better chance to save" the refugees" (8.284). Along the way, Kel gathers escaped refugees and convicts from the group she pursues, as well as strays from abandoned farmsteads. The traditional quest is a lost cause: it is a rare hero who rides against his nemesis alongside an assortment of men, women, and animals. When Kel reaches Blayce's keep, she finds another group of people who push back against the conventional script. The peasants of the castle's village, though amenable to the invaders' goal, refuse to let Kel rescue the children that Blayce has captured immediately. The villagers inform Kel that they are not "killing [their] own so [she] can bravely charge in"; they agree to aid her in a rescue, not with acting out a heroic convention.

Blayce the Gallan is at first glance the opposite of Roger and Joren's demonic male. Kel calls him the Nothing Man for his "bewildered eyes" and "thin, selfish mouth" (7.383), for his fidgeting and ratty robes and chewed nails (8.385). He lacks the virility, the indefinable sexual threat<sup>56</sup> of the other two villains. He shrouds himself in mystery not because of outsized ambition, but out of paranoia; he "feels that if others know his spells, he can be dispensed with" (8.195). He is an eminently vulnerable archfoe. The strong constraints that the genre places on Blayce's character, as expressed through Kel's own expectations, are contrasted with his disappointing reality. Kel anticipates an enemy with an "air of hidden power" or "suggestion of

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<sup>56</sup>Rosemary Jackson calls this sexual threat in the demonic the "manifestation of unconscious desire" (Wolfe 24).

iron strength" (8.385); instead, she confronts the "most commonplace monster she might ever meet" (8.395). This is Blayce's unsettling message: Kel resolves to "see what a monster looks like" (8.385), and discovers that monstrosity bears an appalling resemblance to humanity. It is the "worst letdown of her life" (8.395). Though Kel "cleanly beheads" the Gallan, this final confrontation is far from clean (8.388). Blayce is "no more able to physically defend himself than Meech," a five-year-old refugee; he "lurche[s] toward Kel with open arms," pretending he was forced into his necromancy by the Scanran king (8.385). Blayce's mundanity and weakness make his killing not combat but slaughter<sup>57</sup>, throwing Kel's "soul [into] uproar."

Kel may be troubled by the death, but she never doubts that Blayce deserved his end. In fact, he "had deserved worse," and Kel is proud that she did not give it to him (8.388). Blayce was once a student in the City of the Gods; like Alanna's brother Thom, he left with a transgressive aspiration to push boundaries, to conceive new perverse life from death (8.134). In Bruzelius's demonic male, this is the usurpation of the maternal generative function, an attempt to create and control life and thereby control woman's role in the creation of progeny (90). Blayce's evil pushes this corruption of maternity even further; he abducts children whose murders fuel his sorcery. Blayce's death magic does not require young souls, but the necromancer prefers them (8.356). Like the witch of "Hansel and Gretel," Blayce diverts his victims with luxurious baths, rooms of toys, silken comforters, and "food the likes of which they've only dreamed" (8.355), nurturing the children before transforming their murdered spirits into fuel for his monstrous mechanical offspring.

For Kel, monstrosity often involves the perversion of normal maternity; the spidren hunt of her first year culminates in a mockery of motherhood, with "thirty young feeding on the body of

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<sup>57</sup>Anne Melano calls Blayce a "powerful, evil opponent" and claims that during Kel's final confrontation with the necromancer, "the triumphal violence mode finally overwhelms the narrative" (97).

[a missing] village woman" (5.221). Blayce the Gallan is the anti-maternal, the opposite number to Kel's maternal Protector. Moreover, his abduction of the Haven refugees strikes at the heart of Kel's Protection of the Small. Her command of the refugee camp is the strongest fusion of the multiple threads of Kel's identity; her leadership is permeated with rehabilitation, nurture, and instruction. She is the Protector of her people in every sense of her revised definition of the role. Likewise, the camp's population is the series' most concentrated manifestation of the Small: the poor, the displaced, the orphaned, and the young. Refugee camps are "storehouses of fuel" for Blayce (8.135); Haven's children are the perfect victims, vulnerable along each of these axes. Blayce's monstrosity depends on a society that overlooks the Small, a Scanran king who turns a blind eye to Blayce's use of even his own kingdom's young (8.356): the necromancer's first victims were the poor children of King Maggur Rathhausak's personal fief (8.364).

Blayce laid no plans against a heroine preoccupied with the protection of society's most vulnerable. Nor did he account for the tough group of victims from Haven. Riding across the border, Kel speculates that all she needs to worry about is "finding [the adult refugees] and getting weapons into their hands" (8.272). Even the children are tough, leaving behind scraps of a doll's hair (8.130), a crumb trail leading Kel to the gingerbread keep. When Blayce's henchmen ride ahead to the castle with the group's children, the young refugees "[f]ight like wildcats" against their captors (8.323). "Blayce has your children," a young seer tells Kel (8.353); the possessive adjective is a frank acknowledgment of the maternal role that Kel has taken toward the young refugees. Kel's children may be the smallest of the Small, but they are no helpless damsels waiting for the lone rescuer; like the adults of Haven, they have been rehabilitated, nurtured, and taught. Kel finally enters the necromancer's castle not as conquering hero but as Protector: rehabilitator, teacher, mother, and commander.

## EPILOGUE

Like Le Guin's *Tehanu*, *Protector* represents metamorphosis. Pierce's book features no burning wings or fiery flight; her re-visioning is gradual, though no less thorough. Every step she takes against her genre's gravity is laborious, stumbling, hard-won. Pierce does not turn women into dragons but heroes into humans; her characters are not freed, but subject to all the burdens, expectations, and joys of common humanity.

In *Squire*, Alanna reveals herself as Kel's anonymous benefactress, heralding her presence with a "very quiet knock" on the younger woman's door before solving the mystery (7.386). This is no heedless Squire Alan but a humble, careful, aging Alanna, warning Kel that "even with healers, your body still adds up the breaks and bruises" (7.387). As Alanna considers her own story and relation to her successor, it is possible to hear Pierce: "You went so far beyond what I hoped," she says to Kel (7.388). Alanna admits that she was not enough, that "everyone could and did say [she] was a freak, one of those once-a-century people." Alanna's heroism was extraordinary; Kel's is normal, accessible. Girls watch her tilt, swearing to take up jousting, Shang combat, archery, or riding "because [Kel] had shown them it was alright."

Kel shows young girls, refugees, and orphans what a heroine looks like; she also diffuses her heroism, encouraging others to be heroes as part of her redefinition of "Protector of the Small." Kel's shield has a distaff border, the ancient symbol of Tortall's vanished lady knights; Alanna never claimed one (7.386). Perhaps Pierce knew that Alanna would not be her final model, that she would later construct a heroine willing to break more decisively from the gravity of the heroic fantasy genre. Alanna does not resent Kel's success; rather, she is proud of the younger woman. And while Kel may go far beyond what Alanna did or was, it is Alanna who gives her her sword, who lays a "small, hard hand over Kel's" in support as she grips the weapon for the first time (7.389).



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