Fantasy and Feminism
An Intersectional Approach to Modern Children’s Fantasy Fiction
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May 2018
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Abstract
This thesis compares modern children’s fantasy literature with older texts, particularly Grimms’ fairy tales. The focus is on tropes from fairy tales and myths that devalue women and femininity. In looking at these tropes, this thesis examines how they are used in modern fiction; whether they are subverted to show a more empowering vision of femininity or simply replicated in a more modern guise. Whereas other approaches in this area have addressed the representation of gender in an isolated fashion, this study adopts an intersectional approach, examining the way that different axes of oppression work together to maintain the patriarchal hegemony of powerful, white, heterosexual men. As intersectional theory has pointed out, mainstream feminism has tended to focus only on the needs and rights of more privileged women, who are themselves complicit in the oppression of their more marginalised “sisters”. Intersectional feminism, in contrast, seeks to dismantle the entire system of interlinked oppressions, rather than allowing some women to benefit from it to the detriment of others. The intersectional issues around feminism that this thesis addresses include race, disability, class, and sexuality. There is also an emphasis on female solidarity, which is championed as an effective strategy to weaken the hold of patriarchy and subvert it in its aim to “divide and conquer”. It is this intersectional approach to children’s fantasy literature that is seen as the thesis’s main contribution to knowledge.

The primary texts under examination are mainly from the United Kingdom, but also include works from the United States, Australia, and Germany. All of them were originally published between 1980 and 2013. The thesis explores heroism, beauty, magic, and gender performance in these works, showing how such themes can be dealt with in ways that are either reactionary and detrimental or progressive and empowering.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors, David Rudd and Jill Marsden, who helped me turn a few vague ideas into a coherent thesis and were very patient with me. I would also like to thank Lindsay Walker for lending me her copies of the “Old Kingdom” series and constantly providing me with book recommendations. The blog “Writing With Color” has also been immensely helpful for finding resources and correct terminology. Thank you to Lísa Hlín Óskarsdóttir and Sæborg Ninja Guðmundsdóttir for reading some of my drafts that I was struggling with. Thank you also to Griffin Allen and Harry Kim for coming over to see me when I really needed help.

My most heartfelt thanks go to Lee Hirst, who has patiently supported me these past few years, both financially and emotionally, and never seemed to get tired of the question “Does this line make sense?” You are the best thing in my life!
I wanted to write a thesis about feminism, because being a feminist has been important to me ever since I realised how much my life has been impacted by sexism. My feminist education began at the time when social media was starting to become all-pervasive, so I learned about feminism mostly from the internet. It was not until I was undertaking research for this thesis that I read some of the classic theoretical feminist texts. While I learned a lot from them, I also often felt excluded from some aspects of feminism put forth in them. For example, many feminists claim that working outside the home is empowering for women, whereas housework and child-rearing are oppressive (Friedan, 1963, p. 15). As a working-class person who is also disabled, I see work outside the home as difficult and frequently unpleasant labour that is necessary for survival within a capitalist system, rather than as being voluntary and empowering. Some feminists also argue that it is demeaning for women to be treated as though they are disabled (May and Ferri, 2005, p. 120). The implication is that people who are actually disabled – such as myself – deserve to be condescended to and demeaned. This attitude is particularly troubling for disabled women. Additionally, assertions that reproductive rights only affect women exclude transgender people like myself, as I have a womb but do not identify as a woman, despite being treated like one by society.

It is evident from these examples that some mainstream feminists only focus on the challenges of the most privileged women. While they claim to speak on behalf of all womankind, they actually exclude most of the women in the world. This exclusionary version of feminism has often been opposed by black feminists, such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks, who recognise that white women are complicit in the oppression of women of colour. They recognise many different types of power imbalances, and the way they intersect. As hooks writes:

The idea of “common oppression” was a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women’s varied and complex social reality. Women are divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and a
host of other prejudices. Sustained women bonding can occur only when these divisions are confronted and the necessary steps are taken to eliminate them. (1984, p. 44)

The feminist forums I frequent on the internet are, therefore, usually based on principles of intersectionality. This means that they provide a space for women (as well as other genders) of all races, sexualities, and social classes to discuss how different types of discrimination and oppression work together to mark their experiences as members of minority groups. Intersectional feminism is the only type of feminism that seems to include me and most of my friends, so it is this version of feminism that will be the focus of this thesis.

I also wanted to write about fairy tales, because I have always enjoyed them, even after realising how sexist and racist many of them are. As a child, I was not only familiar with the Disney films and other cartoons, but also with the uncensored first editions of the Grimms' versions of many of the stories. The tales often raised questions for me that I found no satisfactory answers to. For instance, when I asked my parents why Rumpelstiltskin wanted the Queen’s baby, their reply, that he wanted to eat it, did not seem logical to me. But this illogicality was also part of the tales’ appeal to me. I saw the stories as open frameworks whose details I could fill in, using my imagination.

Though I probably did not realise it at that age, the open weave of these tales is what has always given them their strength and appeal, especially in the oral tradition, before they were collected and written down by people like Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm. Thus, each new version of a tale reflects the social standards of the time and place at which the retelling takes place. According to folklorist Vladimir Propp, a “work of folklore exists in constant flux” (1999, p. 381). As he elaborates,

anyone listening to folklore is a potential future performer, who, in turn, consciously or unconsciously, will introduce changes into the work. These changes are not made accidentally but in accordance with certain laws. Everything that is out-of-date and incongruous with new attitudes, tastes, and ideology will be discarded. (pp. 380-381)

As an example of how storytellers adapt fairy tales to fit their listeners’ sensibilities, modern retellings of the Grimms’ tales often gloss over the sex and violence that can be found in the first edition, as later editions were more
specifically aimed at children.

However, although some details in the stories have changed over time in response to a changing society, others have remained the same, continuing to represent the society in which they originated. An example of this can be seen in “Cinderella”. One of the earliest versions of this tale is a ninth-century Chinese story about a girl named Ye Xian (Warner, 1994a, p. 202; Tatar, 1999, pp. 107-108; Anderson, 2000, p. 27). Like Cinderella, Ye Xian is identified by the prince through her lost slipper, which fits no other woman in the kingdom. In ancient China small feet were considered attractive in a woman (Hong, 1997, pp. 45-46), so having the smallest feet in the land marked Ye Xian as the “fairest of them all”. Even though modern Western society places less importance on the size of women’s feet, Cinderella’s tiny slipper is retained in contemporary European versions of the tale. The Grimms’ version even has the stepsisters mutilate their own feet in an attempt to fit this orthodoxy of beauty.

Similarly, while Rumpelstiltskin’s obsession with the Queen’s baby made little sense to me as I was growing up in the 1990s, to medieval and early modern listeners of the tale, who were familiar with the folklore surrounding child-snatching fairies, it probably would have seemed perfectly natural and in accordance with their worldview.

As Jack Zipes writes,

> such acts which occur in folk tales as cannibalism, human sacrifices, primogeniture and ultrageniture, the stealing and selling of a bride, the banishment of a young princess or prince, the transformation of people into animals and plants, the intervention of beasts and strange figures were all based on the social reality and beliefs of different primitive societies. Characters, too, such as water nymphs, elves, fairies, giants, dwarfs, ghosts were real in the minds of primitive and civilized peoples... and they had direct bearing on social behaviour, world views, and legal codification. (1979, p. 8, italics in the original)

Though the persistence of some of these more primitive beliefs might seem innocuous, others are less acceptable, as, we might argue, is the notion that a woman’s worth depends on the size of her feet, or indeed on any other physical feature. These more pernicious cultural values that persist in fairy tales, as though they were truths universally acknowledged, need challenging for their negative and oppressive messages. Speaking of classical mythology, John
Stephens and Robyn McCallum assert that it is “grounded in social assumptions which were masculinist, misogynist, socially elitist, imperialistic, and often militaristic and violent” (1998, p. 9). The same can be said about many European fairy tales, as they mainly come from patriarchal societies, and so tend to show women as either weak and passive (Snow White and Sleeping Beauty) or evil (Snow White’s stepmother and the wicked fairy who curses Sleeping Beauty). Even the tales that originated in more egalitarian societies have had patriarchal elements added to them in order to appeal to the sensibilities of medieval and early modern Europeans, such that there has been “a tendency... for powerful folktale heroines either to be deprived of their power or for their power to be transformed into evil witchcraft” (Stephens and McCallum, 1998, p. 202). Zipes states that, additionally, “the active, young princess was changed into an active hero; the essence of the symbols, based on matriarchal rites, was depleted and made benign; and the pattern of action that concerned maturation and integration was gradually recast to stress domination and wealth” (2006, p. 7).

As an example of a tale that evolved to make the heroine more helpless, Zipes discusses “Little Red Riding Hood”. In an earlier French version of the story, called “The Story of Grandmother”, the girl uses cunning to save herself from the wolf. However, Charles Perrault turned it into a dark morality tale, which ends with the deaths of both Red Riding Hood and her grandmother. The Grimms added the character of the male hunter, who comes to rescue the two females and punish the wolf (1993, pp. 228-230). The Grimms also undermine female independence elsewhere; thus, in “Rumpelstiltskin”, as Ruth B. Bottigheimer (1987) observes, they reveal a “tendency to isolate the female protagonist within the plot”. The version of the story recorded by the Grimms in 1810 has the heroine send her “faithful maidservant” to discover Rumpelstiltskin’s name. The Grimms, however, removed this character, so that “the hapless queen suffers alone, companionless, and learns the dwarf’s name only fortuitously through her husband” (p. 108).

In modern retellings, female characters are often presented in a less passive way. Whereas the title characters in the classic Disney films Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (Hand, 1937) and Sleeping Beauty (Geronimi, 1959) have as little impact on the story as the heroines in the Grimms’ tales they are modelled on, newer Disney films, such as The Princess and the Frog
(Clements and Musker, 2009), *Tangled* (Greno and Howard, 2010), and *Frozen* (Buck and Lee, 2013), show far more active princesses. However, while the passivity of female characters in myths and fairy tales is frequently subverted in modern media, other patriarchal elements remain largely uncontested: there is still a focus on physical beauty, antagonism and competition between women, and a favouring of values deemed masculine over those deemed feminine (or, as Susan Faludi puts it, “defining male behaviour as the norm, female behaviour as deviant” [1992, p. 359]). Even when modern adaptations feature empowered female characters, this empowerment frequently applies only to women who are privileged in other ways. For example, the heroines in *Tangled* and *Frozen* are young, white, conventionally attractive with European features, extremely thin, and of noble birth, whereas Rapunzel’s nemesis in *Tangled* is older, of a lower class, and looks like a Jewish or Romani woman. Tiana in *The Princess and the Frog* is a black, working-class woman, but spends most of the film in animal form. Moreover, most of these heroines achieve their happy endings through heterosexual marriage. They are also all able-bodied, although Elsa’s story arc in *Frozen* can be interpreted metaphorically as being about the alienation a person with physical or mental disabilities might feel. These films might arguably have feminist elements, but they are rarely intersectional, which means that their overall messages are often contradictory, suggesting that gains can be made only at the expense of particular interest groups.

As Stephens and McCallum express it, “there is a high probability that replication of an old content and mode of representation may result in the further replication of, for example, old masculinist and antifeminist metanarratives” (1998, p. 22), though they also see the positive, progressive potential of putting old stories into a new guise:

At the same time, retold stories have the potential to disclose how old stories suppress the invisible, the untold, and the unspoken. Such a potential will be realized through changing the modes of representation as well as, and more than, changing the content: by careful attention to point of view; by focalization strategies, since agency cannot be manifested by characters who do not focalize; and by textual self-reflexiveness or other strategies which remind readers not only of how they read the text but of how they read the world. (p. 22)
In the same vein, Marina Warner writes:

> Myths convey values and expectations which are always evolving, in the process of being formed, but – and this is fortunate – never set so hard they cannot be changed again, and newly told stories can be more helpful than repeating old ones. (1994b, p. 14)

Modern fantasy novels use many of the same tropes as classic fairy tales, even when they are not explicitly retelling the same stories. Thus, many fantasy worlds feature a vaguely medieval European setting, as in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955), with creatures, magic, and character archetypes from fairy tales. While some authors use this kind of setting to question assumptions about race, gender, or sexuality, others simply replicate old prejudices. This can be disappointing for readers who look to fantasy literature to envision possibilities of an alternative world without the oppressions and injustices of the existing one.

To take an example more contemporary than Tolkien’s work, J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007) is particularly pertinent, as it was an important part of my adolescence, not only because of the enjoyment I experienced from reading the books, but also because of the sense of community I felt when discussing the magical world of Harry with other people, either my age or older. This type of community is still a significant aspect of fan culture for many young people. Ideally, this kind of community of readers should offer a safe and welcoming space for children of all races, genders, religions, disabilities, and sexualities, but, sadly, this is not always the case. Providing children with media that celebrates diversity and empowers femininity in all its different guises is not a guarantee that they will embrace these same values in real life, although it is certainly a good start.

But as I am writing this, many places in the world are experiencing a period of backlash against advances made in human rights in recent years. Therefore, it is particularly important to examine representations of female characters in the media, analysing what they actually have to say about the place of girls and women in society, especially those who are marginalised in other ways. This is what I will attempt to do in this thesis, focusing on children’s fantasy novels – a genre that is close to my heart – from an intersectional feminist perspective. I will generally be comparing the modern children’s texts with the fairy tales that
preceded them, examining the way authors put old tropes into new guises, and seeing whether this is done in a way that subverts the sexism (and racism, ableism, classism, etc.) of the old stories or simply replicates it. But I will also endeavour to judge the new stories on their own merits, to see what kind of values they espouse. I will be looking in particular at whether texts which offer positive images of femininity appear less progressive when analysed through an intersectional feminist lens.

The Primary Texts
The authors I am examining are Tony DiTerlizzi and Holly Black, Jasper Fforde, Charlie Fletcher, Cornelia Funke, Neil Gaiman, Shannon Hale, Michelle Harrison, Diana Wynne Jones, Garth Nix, Lauren Oliver, and Tamora Pierce. I have chosen these authors because their works deal with a wide range of topics, and so when considered together, can be seen as fairly representative of the genre. Many of them deal specifically with issues I wish to address, and are therefore most apposite for my study. All of these authors are also popular; indeed, a number of them have won literature prizes, and some have had their works adapted into films. I deliberately chose popular texts, as I feel that the current state of fantasy literature requires that its dominant forms and practitioners be attended to. These texts seem to emanate mostly from the UK and USA, with some popular examples from Germany and Australia. Although the “Harry Potter” books are the most popular and influential children’s fantasy texts of recent times, I felt that these texts had already received considerable attention from other critics, which is why I have not included them amongst my primary texts. The same applies to Stephenie Meyer’s “Twilight” books (2005-2008).

However, I realise that, in focusing on popular texts, it is the authors who are white and privileged that are automatically put in the spotlight. Authors of colour find it harder to gain mainstream success, particularly in a genre like fantasy that is frequently seen as being particularly dominated by white writers. What is even more depressing is that those writers of colour who do gain success sometimes avoid writing about characters of colour, such as, for example, Soman Chainani in The School for Good and Evil (2013), which features mostly white characters and is heavily inspired by European fairy tale tropes. While it would be a pleasure to be able to consult a more diverse body
of literature, especially to look at material of a more radical, subversive nature, I felt it was more appropriate for this thesis to study texts that have had a significant cultural impact, rather than ones from smaller publishers or the internet, even if these sources may have more diverse and radical content.

The texts I am using have all been published in English (though a few have been translated from German) between 1980 and 2013, and are aimed at children between the ages of about eight and sixteen. Most of the texts originate from the United Kingdom or the United States, but the Garth Nix texts are from Australia and the Cornelia Funke texts from Germany. I do not subscribe to Alison Lurie’s view, which she states in both Don’t Tell the Grown-Ups (1990) and Boys and Girls Forever (2003), that British children’s books are more noteworthy and generally of a higher quality than those of other countries: the prevalence of British texts in my study is simply a result of their prevalence in the UK. The societies of the four countries my primary texts originate from are not identical, but similar enough in subscribing to a Western worldview; in other words, their ideological standpoint is more similar than different. This can be seen as either a drawback or an advantage. Using texts from more contrasting societies would have added another interesting dimension to the study, allowing me to compare the impact of values from various countries on their respective literatures. However, studying works from similar societies allows me to examine how different authors use very different approaches to interpret material from a similar cultural background. Furthermore, the fairy tales of Perrault and the Brothers Grimm are well known in all these countries, so it is very likely that the authors under consideration have read at least some of these tales and their writing has been shaped and influenced by them in some way.

Chapter Organisation
The first chapter in this thesis constitutes a Literature Review, in which I discuss what other academics have written about in the fields of fantasy literature and children’s literature, respectively. There are various definitions for these two terms, so I specify how I use them in my study, as well as defining my position within the larger critical discourse. There is also a section on the history of fairy tales and the feminist discourse surrounding them. Finally, I talk about the
history and meaning of the term “intersectionality” and how it relates to my thesis.

Chapter 2 is called “Heroes and Heroines”, and in it I examine various forms of heroism presented in my primary texts. I discuss stories in which heroism is defined in terms of violence and besting others, but I also look at texts that portray heroism as stemming from values considered more feminine, especially cooperation. Whether the focus is on violence or something else, I will examine the social implications of the particular brands of heroism in these texts, particularly as they pertain to class. I will also discuss how characters’ marginalised or privileged status can affect their characterisation as well as their heroism. I draw particular attention to texts that portray positive friendships between girls, as this is an aspect of feminism that I feel is often neglected in stories that are otherwise meant to show female empowerment. I will also discuss a few heroines that, I feel, do not reach their potential and whose empowerment seems very shallow. This situation usually occurs because their character arcs centre more on their romantic partners or on other male characters rather than on their own position as heroines.

Chapter 3, “Beauty”, discusses physical descriptions of characters. This discussion not only covers the question of whether good characters are described as being more physically attractive than villainous ones, but it also analyses what beauty is said to consist of. The beauty standards portrayed in my primary texts tend to be Eurocentric, so I discuss the intersections between gender, race, class, and disability when it comes to beauty, and how they affect the way readers are meant to feel about a character. I also talk about bad beauties, or *femme fatales*, which are more common in the novels I have studied than unattractive good characters. Finally, a significant section of this chapter is devoted to an examination of the way fat characters are demonised, as this is a very common and troubling element in modern stories, and is often a result not only of sexism, but of ableism and class privilege as well.

Chapter 4 is called “Magic and Empowerment”. Fantasy fiction provides unique opportunities for feminine empowerment by using magic as a metaphor. In this chapter I examine several texts in which female characters discover magic powers and use them to overcome adversity and grow in self-esteem. My focus is on how this empowerment manifests itself, and whether it is used to affirm oppressive systems or to defy them. As in Chapter 2, I draw attention to
the way friendship and community between women is portrayed, and how this aids the characters’ empowerment. I compare depictions of witchcraft with depictions of wizardry within the texts, as these different types of magic are often shown to be at odds with each other. Subsequently I look at two specific kinds of magic that are common in fantasy stories: magic connected with vision and magic connected with words. Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze is particularly pertinent in my discussion of the former. I will also examine the racial elements that are involved in some depictions of magic, as well as connections to mental illness and physical disability.

The fifth chapter is called “Outside the Gender Binary”, and provides an analysis of gender performance within my primary texts from the perspective of queer and transgender theory. While none of the texts feature characters that are explicitly described as being transgender, there are numerous instances in which the gender binary is transgressed and the boundaries between male and female are weakened. This frequently occurs as a result of cross-dressing or physical transformation, both of which are common motifs in children’s fantasy. I finish the chapter with a discussion of ghosts and other undead creatures whose gender identities are often portrayed as being far more tentative than those of living characters. This has interesting implications for the construction of gender as a whole. In many instances I provide a transgender perspective that is often lacking in readings by cisgender scholars. I also discuss how mainstream queer theory tends to focus mainly on the gender expressions of thin, white people, and thus fails to encompass the majority of the LGBT community.

Finally, in the Conclusion, I summarise my findings and discuss their implications for the fields of children’s literature and intersectional feminism. Despite considerable progress in terms of promoting positive images of women, some structural inequities remain invisible, particularly in relation to bodies that are seen to exist outside the cultural norm. This is why an intersectional approach to reading contemporary fantasy literature is so crucial.

While many of the topics I talk about in this thesis have been discussed by other feminist scholars, they frequently approach these areas from a more limited perspective, which only considers gender or, sometimes, gender alongside race. However, as I have indicated above, privileged women are often complicit in the oppression of women with less privilege, so it is not
enough to support a feminism that empowers only rich, white women, allowing them to be part of the cultural elite along with rich, white men. To truly empower all women, all power structures need to be questioned and dismantled, which is what I have tried to do in my analysis of these texts.
Chapter 1: Literature Review

Through fantasy, man does indeed enter the Perilous Realm, and may find there both the familiar made strange, and the strange made familiar. (Swinfen, 1984, p. 234)

Introduction

In this chapter I will attempt to define some of the terms I am using, as well as explain my choice of primary texts. As my study focuses on children’s fantasy literature, I will try to pin down what exactly the terms “fantasy” and “children’s literature” mean. This is difficult as both of these concepts have been subject to much debate and disagreement, so I shall situate my definitions within the larger context of critical discussion, considering various points of view. As I will analyse how classical tropes from fairy tales are reworked in contemporary texts, a short discussion on fairy tale discourse is also necessary to explain the position of this thesis, in addition to what I have already stated in the introduction.

Finally, I will discuss the definition and purposes of intersectional feminism since that is the framework I am using for my analysis of my primary texts.

Fantasy

Lucie Armitt writes in Theorising the Fantastic (1996):

Any reader who makes even the most tentative of inroads into the vast body of critical material on fantasy literature will discover that, at least historically, by far the majority of this work concerns itself solely with issues of classification and categorization and the manner in which the generic limits which define and confine texts can be continually tightened and made ever more absolute. (p. 3)

Classifying works of literature can be rather unhelpful, both for the author and the reader. I do not wish to be limiting or reductive in this thesis, nor set a standard that should be followed by all writers of fantasy. However, as I have limited myself to the mode of fantasy for my study, I do need to use a definition of the genre to explain why I have chosen these particular primary texts and not others.

When attempting to define fantasy, many theorists, including Kathryn Hume (1984) and Neil Cornwell (1990), cite Tzvetan Todorov’s study on the subject, The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre (1975). Todorov coined
the term “Pure Fantastic”, which describes stories that are ambiguous as to whether the strange events they depict are supernatural or can be explained rationally. This ambiguity must be sustained to the end for the work to be classified as an example of the Pure Fantastic. If the events are revealed to have a rational explanation, then the story is no longer fantastic, but belongs to the realm of realism. An example of this is Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), in which what is initially thought to be a ghost or a demon turns out to be an ordinary dog. Stories with unquestioned supernatural events belong, according to Todorov, either in the realm of the fantastic-uncanny or the fantastic-marvellous, depending on whether the story in question is frightening or comforting. Thus, the works of authors like J.R.R. Tolkien or C.S. Lewis would be classified as “fantastic-marvellous”, whereas the works of Bram Stoker or Neil Gaiman would be “fantastic-uncanny”. In his book Todorov cites *Le Diable amoureux* (1772) by Jaques Cazotte as an example of a work of the Pure Fantastic. Other authors discussing the concept have also named *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) by Henry James. A recent example from children’s fiction might be Louis Sachar’s *Holes* (1998), as the events in that story can either be seen as the result of a curse, or as simply coincidental. While the concept of the Pure Fantastic provides an interesting perspective, it is also rather limiting and excludes most of the works considered to be part of the classic canon of fantasy literature.

In her study, Hume considers the views of Brian Attebery and Erik Rabkin on the subject; for the former, fantasy is “signalled by the presence of a vividly-realized secondary creation which gives the readers the sense of its having a history beyond the fragments presented in the tale”, and according to the latter, “the changing of the ground rules must be recognized by the characters as such” (1984, p. 13) for the story to be truly fantastic. In many cases, these two definitions clash. The characters in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954-55) or in Tamora Pierce’s *Song of the Lioness* quartet (1983-88), for example, exist in secondary worlds (Middle-Earth and Tortall, respectively) in which magic is the norm. Therefore, when the characters witness magical events, they do not consider them fantastic as they do not recognise a “changing of the ground rules”. So the only stories that both Attebery and Rabkin would consider fantasy are the ones in which characters from the primary world come into contact with a secondary world, such as in Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-56) or J.K.

Many other theorists define fantasy only insofar as it relates to the real world or realist fiction. Thus T.E. Apter defines fantasy by “its deviation from the norm” (quoted in Cornwell, 1990, p. 217), but also by “the way in which it highlights the instability, inconsistency or underlying preposterousness of the normal” (ibid.). Deviating from the norm is quite a vague criterion, whereas the latter criterion may be true for satirists like Terry Pratchett, but is not necessarily true of fantasy as a whole. Colin Manlove calls fantasy literature “a fiction involving the supernatural or impossible” (1999, p.3), and Armitt argues that “fantasy sets up worlds that genuinely exist beyond the horizon, as opposed to those parts of our own world that are located beyond that line of sight but to which we might travel, given sufficient means” (2005, p. 8, italics in the original).

As T.E. Little writes:

All writers of creative fiction are subcreators of Secondary Worlds.\(^1\) The Secondary World of a non-fantastic writer will be as close to the Primary World as his talents and the needs of his art will allow… . A licence is granted to writers of “normal” creative fiction to change their Primary World for the purpose of their art. Fantasy begins when an author’s Secondary World goes beyond that license and becomes “other”… . Such a subcreation could be called a Tertiary World. (quoted in Cornwell, 1990, p. 16, italics in the original)

Sarah Godek points out some problems in defining fantasy solely by the way it forms a contrast with realism, saying that “it leaves no place for realistic texts that contain elements of fantasy”, but, more significantly, she feels that it reveals an attitude of ethnocentrism, as “it assumes that the meaning of the term ‘reality’ is stable across different cultures” (2005, p. 91). She writes:

\(^{1}\) The term “Secondary World” is normally used for worlds in fantasy literature that are separate from our own world, with its own geography, history, and culture. J.R.R. Tolkien, however, who initially coined the term in his essay “On Fairy-Stories” (1947), used it, similarly to Little, to describe an author’s creation. He says that the storyteller makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is “true”; it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. (p. 12)
Another common definition, which describes fantasy as literature that depicts the “impossible”, contains the same ethnocentric assumptions – in other words, it views its own culture as the norm by which all things are measured, ignoring the fact that what is impossible to a western, English-speaking culture may not be the same as what is impossible to other cultures. (p. 91)

The definition of fantasy I have used, which forms the basis of my choice of primary texts, is that the stories must involve magic or mythical creatures, so it is a definition aligned most clearly with Manlove’s and Armitt’s views. However, unlike Armitt (and Attebery), but in line with Cornell, I would contend that a secondary world with its own rules is not enough to constitute it as an example of fantasy. A Series of Unfortunate Events (1999-2006) by Lemony Snicket, for instance, is not clear about whether it takes place in the primary world. While there are many familiar elements, they are often twisted in ways that seem alien, suggesting that this might be a secondary world. However, despite the strangeness of the series, it does not feature any magic or mythical creatures, so I have not considered series of this nature for inclusion in my primary texts.

Manlove’s terms should also be qualified a little, as “a fiction involving the… impossible” could also apply to genres like romance or thrillers, with improbably handsome and skilled heroes. The supernatural is clearer, though the term could also be used for stories with religious overtones, which I would not count as fantasy literature as they represent a group’s world view rather than something imagined by an author.

Many of the primary texts I have chosen feature various sub-genres of fantasy, such as gothic fantasy, medieval fantasy, urban fantasy, and humorous fantasy, but it is not necessary to explore the differences between these sub-genres, especially since they frequently overlap, and, as I said before, I do not wish to simplify these works by attempting to fit them into narrow, generic boxes.

Some critics, Armitt included, treat science fiction as another sub-genre of fantasy, whereas others, like Ann Swinfen, differentiate between fantasy and science fiction, as the latter “treats essentially of what does not exist now, but might perhaps exist in the future” (1984, p. 5). Two of my primary texts, Archer’s Goon (1984)² and A Tale of Time City (1987), both by Diana Wynne Jones,
could be classified as science fiction, but they have magical elements as well, making them more like what others sometimes call “science fantasy”. Other than that, I have excluded science fiction from my study, as not only does it not generally fit my criteria, but it is also less strongly influenced by fairy tales than is most fantasy literature.

Another author commonly cited by fantasy theorists is Rosemary Jackson. She also defines fantasy in terms of its relationship to the real, stating that classic Victorian fantasy

introduces areas which can be conceptualized only by negative terms according to the categories of nineteenth-century realism: thus, the im-possible, the un-real, the nameless, formless, shapeless, un-known, in-visible. What could be termed a “bourgeois” category of the real is under attack. (1981, p. 26)

As this quotation implies, for Jackson the main function of fantasy is to question and subvert the social order of the real world. She says that fantasy should “express a longing for an absolute meaning” (p. 158) as it “aims at dissolution of an order experienced as oppressive and insufficient” (p. 180). In her book, Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion (1981), she not only includes authors normally associated with the fantastic, such as Bram Stoker and George MacDonald, but also authors like Charles Dickens and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, who use fantastic elements in otherwise realistic stories in order to challenge the status quo of the society they were living in. She does not approve, however, of medieval, secondary-world fantasies in the vein of Tolkien, accusing such literature of “supporting the ruling ideology” (p. 155) and being “nostalgic for a pre-Industrial, indeed a pre-Norman Conquest, feudal order” (pp. 155-156).

Both Manlove and Swinfen agree with Jackson’s observations on the subversive nature of fantasy. However, Manlove, unlike Jackson, clearly uses the term in an apolitical sense; as he says: “Modern fantasy is inherently subversive in its violation of what we call possibility” (p. 142). Swinfen, too, though she speaks of “the concern of many modern writers of fantasy to use the

who rule the town are magical – ‘wizards’ – or alien beings with extraordinary but scientifically explicable powers, although Howard/Venturus’s obsession with spacecraft rather suggests the latter” (2006, p. 242).
form in order to present moral, religious or philosophical ideas” (p. 147), defends the frequent portrayal in fantasy fiction of an idyllic, pre-industrial society by saying that this tendency

is not a withdrawal in the sense of a shirking of responsibility. Rather it is a revolt against precisely that indirect form of violence which has created a widespread need for release from a sense of imprisonment by regulations and data-banks… . (p. 229)

She also says that “the fundamental purpose of serious fantasy is to comment upon the real world and to explore moral, philosophical and other dilemmas posed by it” (p. 231).

In her book, Hume deals with both fantasy and realism (or mimesis, as she terms it). She rejects the view that either of these forms is inherently subversive or conservative. In fact, she condemns a lot of secondary-world fantasy as providing “comforting illusions” which “offer blind, passive enjoyment, and demand no obligation toward the source of the pleasurable stimulation” (p. 81).

None of these critics deal with a more problematic element of depictions of medieval societies in fantasy fiction, seeing them simply in terms of escapism, therefore being devoid of deeper meaning. As fantasy worlds do not have to reflect real historical societies, an insistence on writing about worlds with the same social structure and value systems as medieval Europe can be seen as an excuse to depict sexist, racist, classist, and imperialist attitudes without a hint of subversion. For example, the “Bitterbynde” trilogy (2001-2003) by Cecilia Dart-Thornton features a romance between a seventeen-year-old girl and a much older man. In our own Western world, it was common in pre-industrial times for girls in their teens to marry adult men, but as the series takes place in a fictional fantasy world, there is no historical reason to depict a romantic relationship that seems, by modern standards, predatory. Furthermore, the medieval societies depicted in fantasy texts are almost invariably Northern-European ones, with elements of ethnocentrism. When non-white races are featured, they tend to be depicted in a stereotypical and exoticised manner. Common fantasy races include dark-skinned savages, inscrutable Orientals, and greedy desert-dwellers, all of which are racist stereotypes of real people.

John Stephens makes a similar point, though specifically referring to the use of the class system:
As a broad discourse, medievalism is perhaps to be approached warily. Its penchant for allegory and fable, often packaged in consolatory and sentimental language, has at times made it a powerful exponent of class-based ideologies, masquerading under such humanistic tenets as “the underlying, unchanging nature of mankind”. (1992, p. 112)

Secondary-world fantasies can still show progressive themes and attitudes, of course. Some authors deliberately create oppressive societies, so they can set their characters to work to change them for the better. Thus, Miri in Shannon Hale’s *Princess Academy* (2005) struggles against the class system, and Alanna in *Song of the Lioness* fights against patriarchy. Other authors infuse their medieval societies with more modern values, as Rachel Hartman does in *Seraphina* (2012), where homosexuality is socially acceptable to the point that even the patron saint of love in the state religion is homosexual.

Of course, the same thing can be said about fantasies (or any other genre, for that matter) set in the primary world: some challenge the status quo on questions of equality, others do not. As Stephens writes, “[t]he worst things fantasy and realism can be accused of are that the former can be merely ‘escapist’ and the latter bleakly pessimistic” (p. 289), both of which can be said to discourage people from changing the establishment, either because it is unnecessary or hopeless.

Most texts of this kind, however, only seek to subvert one element of oppression, such as sexism or racism or homophobia, but do not explore how these factors intersect to ostracise people who are oppressed in multiple ways. So even if the stories appear feminist on the surface, they often only validate the most privileged of women. For instance, Alanna’s endeavours are successful because she is wealthy, white, and able-bodied. In the third book of the series, she joins a tribe of dark-skinned nomads in the South and attempts to help their women become more liberated. Showing the rich, white woman enlightening the poor, uneducated women of colour seems paternalistic and racist. Miri’s story is more inclusive because, as discussed in the next chapter, it does take into account intersections between class and gender (and, to a lesser extent, disability). Intersectionality shows how all these deviations from the norm are interlinked, and how all suffer oppression at the hands of a ruling (usually white, usually male, usually wealthy) elite.
Having explained my definition of fantasy, I shall now move on to the term “children’s literature”, which is probably even more contested than the term “fantasy literature”.

**Children’s Literature**

The idea that children need a separate literature is a relatively new one, so many of the works now considered adult classics used to be read by children as well (see, for example, Piesse, 2004). According to Jack Zipes, “[t]here is nothing inherently or essentially ‘childish,’ ‘childlike,’ or ‘appropriate for children’ in a book. There is nothing definitive about a text or a book that automatically demands that it be classified as a children’s book” (2001, p. 65). He questions the logic of viewing children’s literature as a single genre, and also points out that children’s literature is the only literature in which the target demographic is not involved in its production, as all children’s books are written, edited, published, and marketed by adults who decide what is appropriate for children. In light of this, I would like to examine some common conceptions and misconceptions concerning children’s books, using my own research as a guide.

Perry Nodelman claims that the protagonists of children’s books are always “either children or childlike animals or adults” (2008, p. 77) and that the story is focalised through these child protagonists. This is not always the case, however. Many of the works I have studied feature protagonists around the same age as the intended readers, especially the ones aimed at younger children, but others feature characters in their late teens and early twenties, as, for example, in Garth Nix’s *Sabriel* (1995). Conversely, there are numerous books aimed at adults focalised through child protagonists (Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* [1837] or Stephen King’s *The Shining* [1977], for example), so the age of the main character is not necessarily an indicator of the intended audience. Furthermore, some books, such as Cornelia Funke’s “Inkheart” trilogy (2004-2008), are focalised through more than one character. While twelve-year-old Meggie is the main character of the “Inkheart” books and most of the story is

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3 He also indicates that children’s books do not normally have first-person narrators, which I find odd, as I have found that type of narration to be a feature as common in children’s books as any other kind of literature. Even a text as simple as Dr Seuss’s *The Cat in the Hat* (1957) is told in the first person.
focalised through her, some sections are told from the point of view of her parents or other adult characters.

Zipes indicates that children’s books are more prone to censorship than adult books (2001, p. 44). This implies that there are certain themes that are considered inappropriate for a young audience. Kimberley Reynolds identifies the unwritten rules of censorship within children’s literature as “no sex, no violence, and no ‘bad’ language” (2007, p. 4). However, she also indicates that these rules are not as rigid as they once were. Thus, many of the works I studied contain sexual themes, some of them being candid about the fact that the protagonists are sexually active. Similarly, not all children’s authors shy away from violence. However, while some of the depictions of violence can be rather graphic, I have not come across any detailed descriptions of sexual acts. The main factor here is probably the age of the intended readership. In books for younger children, conflicts are more often solved without violence, and if there are sexual themes, they are far more covert. I should add, though, that most of my primary texts originate in English-speaking countries, in which nudity and sexuality are considered much more taboo than in some other places. A popular children’s author from my native country of Iceland has written a book in which the eleven-year-old protagonist and her siblings encounter some sex workers in the red light district of Amsterdam and, later, a male stripper sent to their mother, and another one in which a pair of twelve-year-old boys pore over an anthropological magazine with pictures of African women with uncovered breasts. The children in these books also use the same swear words and slang that real Icelandic children use, whereas in English children’s fiction cursing is rare, and mostly confined to mild expletives like “bloody hell”.

Even books for younger children often contain other themes that some people might find inappropriate for children, such as death, war, or family conflict. Alison Lurie indicates that death disappeared from children’s books early in the twentieth century, but is reappearing now. However, she says that “even today the characters who die tend to be of another generation; the
protagonist and his or her friends survive" (1990, p. xiv). Additionally, according to Reynolds, children’s books often manage to slip through the cracks of censorship applied to adult literature, and are therefore able to have political themes that publishers of fiction for adults would not allow (p. 16).

A common question when considering whether a work is “child-friendly” is whether it is too scary for children. The problem with this question, of course, is that children are not a homogenous hive-mind, and different children are scared of different things. As Reynolds writes, “Over the years it has become apparent that precisely what frightens children in the books and other forms in which they encounter narrative is unpredictable” (pp. 138-139). Using Heinrich Hoffmann’s Struwwelpeter (1845) as an example, she states that some children are scared of these stories while “others enjoy their dark humour” (Reynolds, p. 139). In an endnote, she also mentions an informal survey on books that children are frightened by, in which several texts by Beatrix Potter are named (p. 191).

Clearly almost any text contains elements that could frighten someone, and not just the ones that are meant to be scary, like Neil Gaiman’s Coraline (2002) or Diana Wynne Jones's The Time of the Ghost (1981). In the BBC documentary, The Worlds of Fantasy (2008), Philip Pullman suggests that a fantasy setting distances children from the danger in the story, making it exciting rather than terrifying. Reynolds shares this view, saying that frequently the “key to how young readers deal with frightening material is how closely it mirrors real-life” (2007, p. 150). This is another generalisation, of course, and is probably not true for all children. I have found, though, that during my studies, I enjoyed reading about child protagonists experiencing all sorts of magical and fantastical dangers, but found myself becoming upset while reading a story in Garth Nix’s collection, Across the Wall (2006), about two young boys in a realistic war zone. For me, this implies that many of the statements made about children or children's literature can be made about adults and their literature as well.

Another common misconception about children’s literature is that it has to be educational and didactic. John Stephens writes that “children’s fiction belongs firmly within the domain of cultural practices which exist for the purpose of socializing their target audience” (1992, p.8), but he also acknowledges that not all of the ideology represented within children’s literature is deliberately didactic. As he points out: “A narrative without an ideology is unthinkable: ideology is formulated in and by language, meanings within language are
socially determined, and narratives are constructed out of language” (p. 8). Surely this means that literature for adults serves to socialize its audience as well, as it also presents it with authors’ ideologies. While there are explicitly didactic children’s books (such as picture books for toddlers that teach about numbers and colours, or problem books for teenagers that attempt to show how to handle difficult situations in life), books that are mainly escapist in nature (such as R.L. Stine’s *Goosebumps* books [1992-1997] and other series fiction) are just as common.

Both John Goldthwaite and Bruno Bettelheim are of the opinion that the main role of children’s stories is to teach moral lessons. In his book *The Natural History of Make-Believe* (1996), Goldthwaite tends to judge whether a work is worthwhile or not based on the criterion of its representation of Christian morality. One of the complaints he lays against Lewis’s *Narnia* books (1950-1956), for example, is that they involve creatures from Greek mythology, which, in his view, have no place in a Christian allegory, and are apt to confuse child readers. Similarly, Bettelheim does not approve of children’s literature that mixes realistic situations with fantasy, because he feels that it will “confuse the child as to what is real and what is not” (1991, p. 64). Neither of these critics seems to trust the intelligence of young readers, which is perhaps why they feel that children’s books need to be didactic, rather than escapist. Jones, on the other hand, who spent most of her career writing for children, “has confessed that in writing her first fantasy novel for adults, *A Sudden Wild Magic* (1992), she discovered in herself a number of preconceptions about the expectations and abilities of adult readers, not least the assumption that they would be less able than children to follow a complex plot” (Butler, 2006, p. 267).

As unsatisfying as this conclusion is, it seems that the only sweeping statement that can be made about children’s literature is, in John Rowe Townsend’s words, that a children’s book is “a book which appears on the children’s list of a publisher” (1979, p. 10), more or less regardless of the content. Or, as Peter Hunt writes, “children’s literature has two unarguable characteristics (however much they are ignored): the implied readers of the texts were/are ‘children’; the actual users of the texts were/are predominantly ‘children’” (2004, p. 10). Nodelman goes further, indicating that children’s literature has very little to do with children themselves:

The actual purchasers of children’s books are and always
have been, overwhelmingly, not children but parents, teachers, librarians: adults. That this is the case seems part of the same cultural phenomenon that leads adults to write and publish the books to begin with – the conviction that children need things done for them by adults. In terms of success in production, what children actually want to read or end up reading is of less significance than what adult teachers, librarians, and parents will be willing to purchase for them to read. (2008, pp. 4-5)

I feel this statement gives too little credit to children’s abilities to choose for themselves what they like, as if they passively read whatever book is put in front of them, without being given the chance to voice their opinions. As children rarely have enough money to buy their own books, it is true that their options are limited to what is available at home, at school, in libraries, or what parents or other adults are willing to buy for them. However, they are still perfectly capable of saying which books they like, thereby influencing what type of books adults will buy for them in the future, or they can choose books for themselves at the library with no input from parents or librarians. Many children take control of their own reading as soon as they are old enough to get a library card. Meanwhile there are other children who never willingly open a book, despite well-meaning presents from relatives.

In addition to his view that children’s books are not actually aimed at children, but at parents and educators, Nodelman also ascribes a sinister motive to the adults who write these books, accusing them of trying to segregate children from adults and trying to keep them in an ignorant state. He looks at several texts in which childlike innocence is celebrated, as opposed to a more “adult” outlook on life, concluding that this is a feature of children’s literature in general. This childlike innocence he connects with a lack of knowledge, thereby concluding that children’s books tell their readers that they should be ignorant or at least pretend to be so, in order to be considered cute and charming. While it is true that many children’s texts celebrate characteristics that society considers childlike and perhaps innocent, I do not agree with Nodelman’s conclusion. Of the texts I have studied, the ones that most strongly feature a conflict between child and adult values are the three texts by Eva Ibbotson. The children emerge victorious, not because they are ignorant, but because they are unselfish, open-minded, and kind to animals. The adults that are portrayed unsympathetically, on the other hand, are self-
centred, cruel, and obsessed with money and power. There are some selfish and unpleasant child characters in these books, too, some of whom, it is implied, are un-childlike, as they are more interested in money and luxuries rather than playing outside, while others are shown to be childish in the negative sense of the word: needy and whiny. Connecting childhood with kindness and imagination is as much of a social construction as the pure, ignorant child that Nodelman complains about, but telling children that they should be nice to other people and animals is surely a better and more palatable moral than telling them that they need to pretend to be innocent of certain subjects, in order to get adults to like them.

Nodelman’s arguments are influenced by Jaqueline Rose’s line of thinking in *The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children’s Fiction* (1984). She claims that “[t]here is no child behind the category ‘children’s fiction’, other than the one which the category itself sets in place, the one which it needs to believe is there for its own purposes” (p. 10). Thus she maintains that fiction for children made by adults is actually an impossibility, and that it speaks of a dysfunctional relationship between adults and children. Both Rose and Nodelman characterise this relationship as one between coloniser and colonised. Roberta Seelinger Trites makes a similar connection between children and socially oppressed groups when she writes that “[o]ne of the most important functions of children’s literature is to depict children who enact the agency that children in real life may not have. And since feminism is so often involved with examining who holds power within a given cultural context, the purposes of feminism and children’s literature are easily united” (1997, p. 29). Trites’s statement speaks of social power in general, and perhaps indicates that children can identify with society’s underdogs because they too normally hold very little power themselves. Rose’s and Nodelman’s assertion that children are treated like colonised nations, however, seems to me like an effort to appropriate other people’s struggles for recognition and equality. Nodelman concedes that, unlike people of colour, children actually do need special protection, but he does not feel that this undermines his argument. Additionally, unlike being a member of most other socially oppressed groups (whether it is people of colour, women, or queer and transgender people), childhood is a temporary state, so even if it is harmful for children to be solely defined in adult terms rather than being allowed to define themselves, the oppression is hardly comparable. In this vein Mary
Shine Thompson writes:

Transience and change are integral features of childhood, while membership of certain subaltern groups is predicated upon certain givens, such as gender or race, for example, which are relatively fixed. Childhood is a state that accounts for perhaps only one quarter or less of the average person’s lifespan; furthermore it is universal – everyone, whether empowered or oppressed, has been once a child. So while it may be asserted that ideological constructions of childhood have kept children subordinate, the specifics of children’s subalternity are unique and create unique dynamics. (2004, p. 16)

Additionally, at one point Rose characterises omniscient narration in children’s books that edges too close to the child characters’ thought processes as “molestation” (1984, p. 70, italics in the original). Again, this belittles the experience of actual survivors of sexual violence by comparing it to something rather more trivial.

I should add that while I dislike Rose’s and Nodelman’s views on children’s literature, I do not necessarily disagree with their assertion that children are often oppressed and exploited. Even in Western society I have observed people justifying beating their children and depriving them of privacy and other rights when these would be considered unacceptable things to do to adults. I still feel that Nodelman misuses the word “colonisation” when he applies it to children. For one thing, he admits to appropriating Edward Said’s research on orientalism (1978). Said is a Palestinian-American who invented the term “orientalism” to describe a type of oppression which he had personally experienced. It therefore seems inappropriate for a white Canadian like Nodelman to redefine this term in a way that removes it from its original context. For another thing, like white feminists’ assertion in the 1970s that “woman is the nigger of the world”, calling rich, white children colonial subjects appropriates and ignores the experiences of children whose countries have literally been colonised by the parents of those rich, white children. Additionally, Rose and Nodelman can be said do the same thing that they accuse children’s authors of doing – namely speaking on behalf of children and defining them by adult standards, instead of listening to the children’s own thoughts and voices. The fact that these theories are written in a way that is inaccessible to the actual subjects of the study makes them seem particularly paternalistic.
Accompanying these negative opinions on children’s literature is the view that books for young people are inherently conservative, favouring oppressive social orders, even “a wish to keep things from changing and a dislike of it when it happens. Viewed from this angle, change is always for the worse, an idea that directly contradicts the idea that childhood is a time of change and that growth toward adult knowledge is a good thing” (Nodelman, 2008, p. 79). Reynolds holds the opposite view:

Because writing for the young has a future orientation, there is often a freshness and urgency to the storylines of children’s fictions that correspond to the fact that their target readers are generally encountering ideas and experiences for the first time. Many children’s books offer quirky or critical or alternative visions of the world designed to provoke that ultimate response of childhood, “Why?” “Why are things as they are?” “Why can’t they be different?” (2007, p. 3)

This brings us back to the same debate as in the fantasy section of this chapter, as to whether a certain type of literature is more prone to conservatism or subversion. My answer here is the same as earlier; namely that there are both conservative and progressive texts within any genre, either for child or adult audiences. As Lurie writes, “run-of-the-mill children’s literature tends to support the status quo” (1990, p. x), but it can also be subversive, because, as she continues:

its values are not always those of the conventional adult world. Of course, in a sense much great literature is subversive, since its very existence implies that what matters is art, imagination, and truth. In what we call the real world, on the other hand, what usually counts is money, power, and public success. (p. xi)

Having discussed both “fantasy” and “children’s literature” as problematic terms, let me now turn to the question of “fairy tales”. Though not contentious as a term, approaches to this area of literature are remarkably diverse.

**Fairy Tales**

As I discussed in the introduction, fairy tales provide numerous tropes and plots that have inspired writers of fiction for years. This is reflected in all genres, but is particularly significant in fantasy fiction, as it is full of giants, dwarfs, witches,
wizards, kings, queens, and similar fairy tale archetypes.

One of the main critical approaches to fairy tales is the psychoanalytical, most famously championed by Bruno Bettelheim. In his view, the Grimms’ tales dispense universal and timeless advice to overcome the struggles of childhood in an unconscious manner. As Bettelheim is a Freudian, these struggles mostly involve sexuality, such as the child experiences in dealing with Oedipal feelings. As Bettelheim writes:

This is exactly the message that fairy tales get across to the child in manifold form: that a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, is an intrinsic part of human existence – but that if one does not shy away but steadfastly meets the unexpected and often unjust hardships, one masters all obstacles and at the end emerges victorious. (1991, p. 8)

However, his views have been criticised. For example, Bettelheim does not take the cultural context into account. He believes that the Grimms’ versions of the fairy tales survived because they represent the most universal values and are thus the best at teaching moral lessons to children, even going so far as to criticise storytellers who leave out small details in their retellings, since “the elimination of… seemingly insignificant elements… makes fairy tales lose their deeper meaning, and thus make them uninteresting to the child” (p. 32). This ignores the fact that the Grimms did not simply present the fairy tales in the way that they heard them, but edited them so that they were more suitable to the values of their day. In fact, as Ruth B. Bottigheimer (1987) and Maria Tatar (1987) outline, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published several editions of their collection of tales, each one with new changes which they hoped would make the stories more appealing to the public and thus more marketable. Also, several critics point out that the fairy tales were not originally intended for children, contrary to what Bettelheim claims. Robert Darnton points to the violent content of the French folktales told by Perrault and others, “from rape and sodomy to incest and cannibalism… portray[ing] a world of raw and naked brutality” (1984, p. 284). Moreover, as Jack Zipes writes:

In most European countries it was not until the end of the eighteenth and early part of the nineteenth century that fairy tales were published for children, and even then
begrudgingly, because their “vulgar” origins in the lower classes were suspect. Of course, the fairy tales for children were sanitized and expurgated versions of the fairy tales for adults, or they were new moralistic tales that were aimed at the domestication of the imagination… . (1995, p. 336)

Another common criticism of Bettelheim’s work is that, while he claims that the tales have equal value to male and female children, his views are steeped in gender essentialism, supporting the sexism found in the tales themselves. As Bottigheimer puts it, “Grimms’ Tales may indeed offer insights into the psyches of children reared unquestioningly along the gender-specific lines that the volume formulates, but certainly not into the psyches of children in cultures with differing views of what characterizes appropriate male and female behaviour” (p. 94, italics in the original). John Stephens and Robyn McCallum add that in the Grimms’ tales,

female lives are represented as revolving around, competing for, and winning male attention, and hence the emphasis falls on beauty, passivity, and dependence on outside forces. …such a position drastically changes the terms of [Bettelheim’s] underlying premise – that folktale texts function to help children find meaning in life by teaching that they can transcend the narrow confines of self-centered existence and make a significant contribution to sociality. Meaning, subjectivity, and sociality are represented through and as endemically gendered structures. (1998, pp. 204-205)

Similarly to Bettelheim, Sheldon Cashdan claims that the main function of fairy tales is to teach moral lessons to children. Rather than focusing on Freudian life stages, Cashdan aligns various tales with the seven deadly sins, saying, for example, that “Hansel and Gretel” teaches children about the negative consequences of gluttony, and “Cinderella” about envy. He also defends sexist tendencies in fairy tales, saying:

Modern critics claim that negative portrayal of the stepmother is part of a misogynistic streak in fairy tales. There is a grain of truth to the notion that fairy tales often depict women as cruel and malicious, but there is danger in attributing too much significance to this notion since it implies that fairy tales are faithful representations of reality; they are not… . We consequently must not take the figure of the witch too literally. She is less an actual person
than a representation of psychological forces operating in the child’s psyche. (1999, p. 18)

He claims that the reason for the prevalence of female villains in fairy tales is simply that the tales focus more on women, and that they “are essentially maternal dramas in which witches, godmothers, and other female figures function as the fantasy derivatives of early childhood splitting… . In contrast, male figures are relatively minor figures in most fairy tales” (p. 28). This is simply not true, as there are in fact many fairy tales about the exploits of male characters (such as “The Brave Little Tailor”, “The Little Thumbling” and “The Magic Table, the Gold Donkey, and the Club in the Sack”),\(^6\) who usually contribute to their happy ending in a far more active fashion than the female heroines do, although Tatar does point out that “it is also not rare for [male] fairy-tale heroes to suffer silently and to endure hardships in a hopelessly passive fashion” (1987, p. 88). Tatar also speaks on the subject of fairy tale villainesses, saying that they “challenge the notion of fairy tales as therapeutic reading for children” (1999, p. 182). She continues: “However satisfying the tales may seem from a child’s point of view, however much they may map developmental paths endorsed by orthodox Freudsians, they still perpetuate strangely inappropriate notions about what it means to live happily ever after” (p. 182).

Nonetheless, even within feminist circles, there are differing views on whether fairy tales are sexist or not. Some feminists, including writer Margaret Atwood, have pointed out that there are actually fairy tales, even in the Grimms’ collection, featuring active, intelligent heroines who do not need to be rescued by men (see Wilson, 1993, pp. 11-12). Comparing fairy tales with didactic children’s literature of the early twentieth century, Alison Lurie states that the fairy tales are “way ahead… with respect to women’s liberation” (1990, p. 18). She continues by commenting that in children’s books recommended by educators the characters’ roles are strictly gendered, whereas fairy tales portrayed a society in which women were as competent and active as men, at every age and in every class. Gretel, not Hansel, defeated the witch; and for every

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\(^6\) Admittedly, these tales are more popular in Germany, where I grew up reading them, than in the English-speaking world. There are, however, English folk tale characters who appear in popular culture almost as commonly as Snow White and Cinderella (Jack from “Jack and the Beanstalk”, for example).
clever youngest son there was a youngest daughter equally resourceful. The contrast continued in maturity, when women were often more powerful than men. Real help for the hero or heroine came most often from a fairy godmother or wise woman, and real trouble from a witch or wicked stepmother. (p. 18)

While it is true that there are fairy tales with active and resourceful female protagonists (such as “Maid Marlene” and “Clever Gretchen”), it is noteworthy that these stories are far less well-known than stories like “Little Red Riding Hood” and “Snow White”, in which the heroine needs to be rescued by a man. Of course, as I outlined in the introduction, passivity of female characters and presenting female power as evil are not the only sexist tropes in fairy tales. Neither Cashdan nor Lurie, who insist on the female-empowering elements of the tales, address the other concerns that I mentioned (preoccupation with physical looks, a prevalence of female rivalry, and so on), which is why I find their interpretations rather shallow. Bottigheimer’s study on the ideology of fairy tales, on the other hand, is very well researched. Rather than simply assessing which gender is presented as more active or powerful in various tales, she analyses tales with similar premises and compares how the text judges the characters. Thus she finds out that the Grimms seem to condemn female characters for the same behaviour that they praise in male characters. She writes:

Within the 210 tales of the Grimms’ collection, a witch-burning notion of eradicating (generally female) evil coexists with an indulgent tolerance of (generally male) malefaction. Plots routinely circumscribe girls’ and women’s sphere of activity by laying prohibitions on them, and the language of the text exhibits an effort to avoid laying prohibitions on boys and men. Obedience is necessary for females but not for males. (1987, p. 94)

She also notes that in many tales in which a heroine needs to rescue someone, she has to do so through self-abnegation. For example, the girl in “The Seven Swans” needs to remain silent for seven years to free her brothers from a spell. As Jennifer Waelti-Walters says, girls in fairy tales “are repressed: they must not speak or laugh; they must sit in a tree and sew or undergo some initiation into martyrdom” (1982, p. 5). Maria Tatar adds that, for fairy tale heroines, “[s]ocial promotion depends primarily on proof of domestic skills”:
Time and again in the Grimms’ collective, we encounter heroines who are reduced to tending swine, washing dishes, or scrubbing floors, but who are ultimately liberated from their lowly condition by clothing themselves in frocks that arouse the admiration of a prince and that drive rival princesses into jealous rages. Through a combination of labor and good looks, the heroine gets her man. (1987, p. 118)

As I noted in the introduction, Zipes has written about the patriarchal values of fairy tales, but, according to him, these are mainly the result of rewritings undertaken by male scholars, and the oral folk versions were far more subversive: “No matter what has become of the fairy tale, its main impulse was at first revolutionary and progressive, not escapist, as has too often been suggested” (1979, pp. 42-43). Lurie agrees: “The handful of folktales that most readers today know are not typical of the genre. They are the result of... the skewed selection and silent revision of subversive texts” (p. 20). Speaking of the revolutionary potential of fairy tales, Zipes writes:

Folk and fairy tales have always spread word through their fantastic images about the feasibility of utopian alternatives, and this is exactly why the dominant social classes have been vexed by them, or have tried to dismiss them as “Mother Goose” tales, amusing but not to be taken seriously. (1979, p. 3)

However, he also concedes:

The fairy tales we have come to revere as classical are not ageless, universal, and beautiful in and of themselves, and they are not the best therapy in the world for children. They are historical prescriptions, internalized, potent, explosive, and we acknowledge the power they hold over our lives by mystifying them. (2006, p. 11)

chapter on the patriarchal implications in the story of Snow White. Trites writes that

when feminist writers include intertextual references to folktales or mythology, they often rewrite these tales to suit their own ideological purposes. The form these ideological revisions usually take is to depict how much more aware of her agency the protagonist is than are the characters in the tale the author is revising. (p. 40)

Of course, not all of these revisions occur within the fantasy genre, and all but Trites's book examine works aimed at adults, which means that they do not quite have the same focus as my study.

So, finally in this chapter, let me explain my focus in more detail, by considering what an intersectional approach involves.

**Intersectionality**

When discussing the history of feminism, the achievements of women of colour and working-class women are often overlooked. Today many feminists try to rectify this, by including all women in their concerns, rather than just the ones with the most privilege. Kerry Mallan writes:

> Whereas Second Wave Feminism was accused of being for white, middle-class women, Third Wave Feminism attended to the politics of difference and has been inclusive of women regardless of race, culture, and class. The emphasis on deconstruction and difference that post-modernism and post-structuralism posit helped to reinforce criticisms of Second Wave Feminism by women of colour, Third World feminists, and lesbian feminists for its failure to address different sites of oppression and different sites of struggle. (2009, pp. 12-13)

Black feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term “intersectionality” to describe the way racial and gender discrimination work together to make black women’s experiences markedly different from those of white women or black men, who only experience one type of discrimination. She writes:

> Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated. Thus, for feminist theory and antiracist
policy discourse to embrace the experiences and concerns of Black women, the entire framework that has been used as a basis for translating "women’s experience" or "the Black experience" into concrete policy demands must be rethought and recast. (1989, p. 140)

She also talks about the failure of mainstream feminism to represent the lives and experiences of women of colour:

Feminists... ignore how their own race functions to mitigate some aspects of sexism and, moreover, how it often privileges them over and contributes to the domination of other women. Consequently, feminist theory remains white, and its potential to broaden and deepen its analysis by addressing non-privileged women remains unrealized. (p. 154; italics in the original)

Similarly, Audre Lorde writes: “Black feminism is not white feminism in blackface. Black women have particular and legitimate issues which affect our lives as Black women, and addressing those issues does not make us any less Black” (1984, p. 60). One example of a feminist issue that affects women of colour differently from white women is the battle for reproductive rights. As Susan Bordo (1993) discusses, white women have mostly fought for the right to not have children if they so choose, through access to contraceptives and abortion, whereas women of colour, particularly black and Latina women have often been sterilised against their will and without their knowledge, and so have fought for the right to have children (pp. 75-76). While these issues are different, they both represent the way patriarchy seeks to control women’s bodies, as well as the way white supremacy seeks to bolster the birth rates of white children while decreasing the number of black children.

Subsequently the term “intersectionality” has been expanded to take into account other axes of oppression as well. As Kristine Molina writes: “Presently intersectionality is used to describe the intersection of more than race and gender, but also that of class, sexuality, ability, language, and so forth” (quoted in Fernández-Calienes and Bachay, 2007, p.1). Patriarchy affects different women in different ways, and intersectionality seeks to address all of these. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes, for example, about how disabled women are viewed differently from able-bodied women within an ableist, patriarchal structure:
Women with disabilities, even more intensely than women in general, have been cast in the collective cultural imagination as inferior, lacking, excessive, incapable, unfit, and useless. In contrast to normatively feminine women, women with disabilities are often stereotypically considered undesirable, asexual, and unsuitable as parents. (2005, p. 1567)

Intersectionality also means that everyone’s stories and experiences are worth listening to, not only those of the people with the most privilege and visibility in society. In *Moving Women Forward* (2007), Raúl Fernández-Calienes and Judith Barr Bachay present a collection of articles by women of various races who tell their stories and show their findings, including accounts of war, immigration, and disability, and how feminism impacts on all of these areas of life.

Some people might argue that trying to include every axis of oppression makes feminism too complicated and too divisive to continue as a movement. Jarune Uwujaren and Jamie Utt address this:

> The trouble with this line of thinking is that a one-size-fits-all feminist movement that focuses only on the common ground between women is erasing rather than inclusive. Even if all women deal with sexism, not all women deal with racialized sexism, or transmisogyny, or cissexism. (2015b, unpaged, italics in the original)

Another aspect of intersectional feminism is to use inclusive language (for example, by talking about “pregnant people” instead of “pregnant women” in order to include transgender men and non-binary people who can get pregnant) and to avoid terms that are racist, ableist or otherwise offensive to groups of people (for example, using “crazy” or “blind” in a derogatory sense). However, as Pat Pinsent mentions, “some arbiters have felt that the process has gone too far, and have ridiculed any attempt to make the language inclusive, caricaturing it as ‘political correctness’” (1997, p. 2). Presumably the people Pinsent talks about feel that attempting to make language inclusive restricts them in what they are or not allowed to say. She counters this argument with a quotation from a publication called *Working Group Against Racism*: “Pc is a convenient bogeyman for those who fear the diversification of our community will dislodge them from their position as typical and therefore able to speak on behalf of everyone” (p. 2.).
As more marginalised communities make their voices heard, intersectional theory becomes more intricate. Even though intersectional feminism is a relatively new concept, it has already evolved significantly to involve more axes of marginalisation. For example, two of the landmark texts of intersectionality – Audre Lorde’s *Sister Outsider* (1984) and Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Woman Native Other* (1989) – talk about the experiences of non-white lesbians but do not bring up transgender people, even though the LGBT movement in the United States was founded by transgender women of colour (King, 2015). Patricia Hill Collins’s *Black Feminist Thought* (2000) – another key text – mentions black transgender women in its discussion on homophobia within African-American communities, but does not examine how transgender women’s oppression differs from that of cisgender lesbians or bisexual women. Similarly, disability is rarely discussed at length unless it is specifically the subject of the work (such as *Take Up Thy Bed and Walk* [2001] by Lois Keith), even though disabled people of colour make up a large percentage of victims of police brutality in the USA (Perry and Carter-Long, 2015), and women with disabilities are more likely to become victims of sexual and domestic abuse than women without disabilities (Pate, 2008). These are important factors in discussions on racism and sexism.

For topical articles on intersectionality, the internet tends to be more useful than academic publications. Due to the somewhat elitist nature of academia, it excludes underprivileged people who lack the means or opportunity for education. As Sian Ferguson points out, “[a]cademia will never be entirely accessible for everyone. After all, it’s all about judging people by intelligence – something which will always be ableist” (2017, unpaged). The internet, on the other hand, provides a platform for everyone. Websites like Everyday Feminism feature articles by a variety of people on issues of intersectional feminism in a manner that is accessible to most people, even without a formal education. Many of these articles have been useful in writing this thesis, as I discuss issues like fat-shaming, ableism, and transphobia. Often they include the writers’ personal experiences with oppression, and so have been especially enlightening and useful concerning areas in which I have no personal experience because of my own privilege.

**Conclusion**
I have determined that there are no simple definitions of either fantasy or children’s literature, but for the purpose of this thesis, I have decided to limit the range of fantasy to works dealing with magic or mythical creatures, and children’s literature to works that are found in the children’s section of the library or bookshop. Additionally, I have found that critics disagree on the value of fairy tales. Although the tales in the Grimms’ collection generally support a patriarchal world view, this does not mean that every interpretation of every element in every tale is sexist.

Intersectional feminism is an important element of my analysis of all these terms. Most critics only focus on one axis of oppression at a time as they examine fairy tales, fantasy, or children’s literature. Scholars who define fantasy literature often decide what realism consists of based on a Eurocentric framework. Nodelman even appropriates terms used for racism and xenophobia in his theories on ageism, without considering the intersections of race and age. Instead of focusing on one issue to the detriment of all others, in this thesis I will use an intersectional approach and concentrate on the voices of those who are most marginalised.

In sum, my study aims to provide a nuanced, intersectional analysis of children’s fantasy literature that takes different points of view into consideration.

Chapter 2: Heroes and Heroines

The hero is a man of action and it is in action that he expresses his nature – skill, courage, dominance and determination. He is neither contemplative nor creative. He marches onward, and when he encounters a dragon or
Introduction

The characterisation of the heroines tends to be the element that is most changed in updated retellings of fairy tales. Rather than simply depicting girls as damsels in distress or prizes to be won, modern storytellers often make the female characters as active and capable as the male heroes. As Roberta Seelinger Trites writes:

“while in prefeminist novels the protagonist tends to become Sleeping Beauty in a movement from active to passive, from vocal to silent, the feminist protagonist remains active and celebrates her agency and her voice. This, then, is feminism’s greatest impact on children’s literature: it has enabled the awakening of the female protagonist to the positive power she holds.” (1997, p. 8)

However, sometimes this change is merely a shallow one, making the female character talk tough and be proficient with weapons, but still needing to be rescued by male characters.

The differences between traditional and modern male heroes are less marked, although it varies depending on the source material. Heroes of Greek myths, for example, represent hegemonic masculinity in that these men are physically strong, sexually virile, unemotional, and use violence rather than diplomacy to solve problems. Fairy-tale heroes, however, frequently express some emotions, such as sadness and fear in the light of difficult obstacles. While there are fairy tale heroes who rely on physical strength, usually they use their wits – or, surprisingly frequently, experience a lucky break – to get ahead. For these reasons, they can be seen as less traditionally masculine than heroes of other kinds of stories. Maria Tatar warns us of the dangers of reading fairy tale heroes and heroines too stereotypically:

“That Russian folklore has a male Sleeping Beauty reminds us that we must show caution in drawing generalizations about female developmental patterns on the basis of that plot. And we are obliged to think twice about male hero patterns when we come across a collection of tales depicting heroines who carry out tasks normally put to male heroes alone or who denounce fathers too weak to protect them from evil-minded stepmothers.” (1987, p. 47)

She also writes: “Fairy-tale heroines have never stood as models of an
enterprising spirit, but it is also not rare for fairy-tale heroes to suffer silently and to endure hardships in a hopelessly passive fashion” (p. 88). Thus, the characterisations of male and female fairy tale characters are often more similar than expected, though, of course, this can differ from collection to collection.

However, as discussed in the Literature Review, there are still characteristics that are portrayed as positive in fairy tale heroes, only for them to be demonised in heroines. Tatar gives curiosity as an example, which is an attribute that often helps plucky heroes to reap their rewards, but is punished in women. As Tatar writes:

Curiosity, along with stubbornness, occupies a privileged position in the pantheon of female sins. Since female curiosity is so often tainted with evil, while male curiosity is enshrined as a virtue, it is not surprising to find many more daughters of Eve than sons of Adam in fairy tales. (1992, p. 111)

Furthermore, in popular stories about male heroes, women tend to be portrayed with little character or agency of their own. As Margery Hourihan writes:

women in hero stories appear only in relation to the hero. They are part of the way his manhood is defined: some are his devoted assistants, dedicated to his cause, some are trophy brides, and some are dangerous opponents who seek to steal his potency... . They cannot share the role of the master for it is his destiny to be master – over all others. (1997, p. 3)

Problems like these can occur even in works that seek to subvert gender expectations. It is of little use to portray a female character who is skilled and feisty if her story arc and personality focus solely on advancing the story and personality of a male character.

Additionally, even effective heroines can uphold patriarchal views of society by valuing the same oppressive attributes, such as violence and selfishness, that are often seen in male heroes. As Hourihan writes: “The meaning to be constructed from the story of the smart, street-wise, gun-toting female detective, like the meaning to be derived from most retellings of the history of Joan of Arc, is not that women can be heroes too, but rather that, if they want any part of the important action, they must become as much like men as possible” (p. 95). In this way, these female (and usually white, straight, able-bodied) heroines do not
break the system of oppression, but simply uplift themselves by siding with the oppressors, not only against their own gender but also other minorities.

From an intersectional point of view, it is also important to remember that while women of some races are traditionally depicted as being weak damsels in distress, women of other races are, on the other hand, often seen as rough and unfeminine. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) outlines how black women were treated like “mules” (p. 11) during times of slavery in performing arduous physical labour, and Ava Vidal explains that “as a 5 ft 11 black woman I can assure you that being seen as physically weak was not a problem that I have had to contend with in my adult life. In fact, on the few occasions that I have asked a man for help with a heavy object they have [sic] laughed at me and said things like ‘Come on love! Don’t pretend that you can’t manage that. A big strapping lass like you!’” (2014, unpaged). Thus, while white women might find it empowering to see themselves as strong and tough, for black women it can be just as subversive and feminist to be soft and feminine. According to Audre Lorde, “[m]ost of the Black women I know think I cry too much, or that I’m too public about it. I’ve been told that crying makes me seem soft and therefore of little consequence. As if our softness has to be the price we pay out for power, rather than simply the one that’s paid most easily and most often” (1984, p. 165, italics in the original). Thus a depiction of a black girl as a fairy tale princess can be subversive and break stereotypes, as is the case with the title character in Jamila Gavin’s collection *Blackberry Blue and Other Fairy Tales* (2013). While Blackberry Blue is not entirely passive, she follows the traditional fairy tale plot fairly closely, beginning as the child of a poor woodcutter, being famed for her great beauty, and finally marrying the prince. Rather than having to be strong, unfeminine, and self-sufficient, as black women are so frequently portrayed in the media, Blackberry Blue is allowed to be kind and pretty, and to find love.

Hourihan speaks of how binarisms of good and evil, friend and foe, winner and loser, and the desire to outdo others in classic hero stories influence Western thinking:

> The need to struggle for “success” has come to seem equally axiomatic, and we have structured many of our social and political institutions as sites of this struggle. International relations are largely based on the assumption that “they” are potential or actual enemies and the process of demonization reinforces the perception; only the identity
This kind of aggressively binaristic thinking is detrimental to women as a whole, but more so to women who belong to other minority groups as well. Lorde writes:

In a society where the good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, there must always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior. Within this society, that group is made up of Black and Third World people, working class people, older people, and women. (1984, p. 114)

Some feminist authors strive to do something more than simply place a female character in a masculine heroic paradigm that is defined by violence and suppression of others. Rather, they hope to discover a new type of heroism that is based on values traditionally considered feminine, such as cooperation, communication, and sensitivity to emotions. Of course, these attributes are not limited to female characters, but can – and should – be applied to males as well. As Lorde says:

Men who are afraid to feel must keep women around to do their feeling for them while dismissing us for the same supposedly “inferior” capacity to feel deeply. But in this way also, men deny themselves their own essential humanity, becoming trapped in dependency and fear. (1984, p. 74)

She argues that men – particularly black men – who show compassion and embrace their emotions have the potential to break down power structures established by white patriarchy.

In this chapter I aim to look at different kinds of heroism in characters. I will not only focus on girls in this section, but on boys as well, because, as Annette Wannamaker states, “a continued focus on women and girls as the primary subjects of the study of gender in children’s literature could run the risk of further naturalizing masculinity and of perpetuating the assumption that girls are gendered whereas boys are just naturally boys” (2008, p. 122). Not only do I hope to find girls who break gender stereotypes by being brave and active, but I also hope to find boys who are allowed to be tender and caring. I will also
examine the way these heroes and heroines fit into an intersectional scheme, to see whether only white, able-bodied, middle-class characters are permitted to be heroes or whether heroism can be found in characters from more marginalised backgrounds. As discussed above, using the example of the strong, independent black woman, even when characters of colour play sympathetic and heroic roles, sometimes they are portrayed in stereotypical ways that are more detrimental than empowering, so I shall keep this in mind as well when discussing non-white heroes.

Most of all I hope to find stories that break the bonds of hegemonic masculinity as well as other power structures, and thus redefine what it means to be a hero.

**Boys and Girls and Violence**

As Kerry Mallan writes:

> War has provided an ideal mise-en-scène for the staging of masculinity. The warring male body signifies the masculine ideal of control, dominance, and mastery, and battle becomes the ultimate test of manhood, summarily sorting out the weak and the cowardly from the strong and the heroic. (2002, p. 18)

As outlined above, defeating evil in battle still tends to be one of the most important duties of modern heroes. Whereas in several of the texts Hourihan discusses, war and violence are portrayed as fun, more recent works at least pay lip service to the horrors of battle. Rather than being an enjoyable romp, fighting is seen as an unavoidable duty, possibly a sacrifice. Still, the characters engaging in battle rarely conceive of alternative ways of solving these conflicts. The main players on the sides of good and evil in stories like these are usually male, but sometimes there are female characters who get to participate in the main action as well. In Hourihan’s words, these characters are usually “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” (p. 68).

Charlie Fletcher’s “Stoneheart” trilogy (2006-2008) is a prime example of a series that equates heroism with fighting. Even when there is no action going on, the text is rife with martial metaphors, such as this one from the very first
On the class trip before this one they’d been to the War Museum and learned all about trench warfare. George had thought that’s what life felt like: just keeping your head below the parapet so you wouldn’t get hit. (Fletcher, 2006, p. 1)

Many of the characters are soldiers, and they are portrayed as being brave and noble. George himself is merely a twelve-year-old boy, but through the action in the story he learns to become a warrior. He starts the series of events through an act of violence in a fit of anger – he punches a wall and breaks a carving of a dragon. From then on he finds himself in the midst of a war between human-shaped statues, such as the soldier statues he befriends, and statues of creatures. There is very little nuance in the characterisations of the statues. All human statues are on the side of good, and all creature statues are automatically evil. The only statues who seem to have some choice in the matter are the ones that are part humanoid and part monstrous, such as a pair of sphinxes. These enemies’ lack of reason and conscience means that it is not possible to come to an understanding with them, and the only solution is to incapacitate and kill them.

George’s greatest asset in this conflict is his gift as a Maker. This means that his hands have the power to create things from stone or clay. However, this same power also allows him to destroy things others have created, and he uses his destructive capabilities on his enemies as often as he uses the creative powers to heal or make something new. The series shows George’s growth as a character, as he becomes more self-confident and learns to accept his father’s death and his mother’s unconventional lifestyle. This is shown in lines like the following: “George... had changed. Whatever he’d been going through was making him stand straighter and take charge. He wasn’t a sniveller like he’d seemed when [the Gunner] first saw him” (Fletcher, 2006, p. 413). But most of this growth seems to come from him learning to fight, rather than learning to be creative or emotional.

The narrative tries not to idolise the soldier characters, but to portray them as regular men. The Gunner says about the Maker who designed him and

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7 The parallel to Saint George and the Dragon is intentional, and is remarked upon a few times within the text.
At one point in the second book, *Iron Hand* (2007), George spends an hour within a realistic vision of a battlefield in World War I, where he witnesses warfare at its most gruelling. This account is neither glorified nor romanticised. However, while the war is brutal, the characters do not seem to consider it to be wrong. The soldiers are uniformly portrayed as noble and brave, seeing their profession as the most honourable available. Another statue asserts:

“I have never had cause to exert myself in a martial cause, and I may now admit that when I once said every man thinks meanly of himself for not having been a soldier, the everyman I was thinking of was myself.” (Fletcher, 2008, p. 182)

Nobody contradicts him, which validates the point of view that soldiers are more heroic and more important than other kinds of men. However, this definition of masculinity is dependent on continual warfare and falls apart when there is no enemy to fight, and thus it encourages aggression rather than compromise. Furthermore, it is likely to alienate young male readers who have no desire to engage in combat, possibly making them feel as though they are not “real boys”.

The focus on violence as heroism in the series is epitomised by an event that takes place near the end of the first book. The Walker, one of the main villains of the series, takes the Gunner’s bullets away after telling him: “The trouble with being a soldier is you think you can solve any problem by pointing a firearm at it” (2006, pp. 419-420). It seems odd that a villain should say this, rather than a hero, making it seem as though using lethal violence against your enemies is a heroic rather than a dastardly thing to do. The Gunner keeps only one bullet, which he hopes to use in rescuing Edie from a murderous minotaur, but his shot misses. The story now seems to be set up for a climax in which George shows his ingenuity by finding a different way to save Edie, without
using guns. However, George ends up using his Maker’s powers to make a bullet out of a piece of clay and shooting the minotaur with the Gunner’s revolver. While he uses his powers to create, ultimately they result in death and destruction.

Even though there are some female characters who participate in the fighting – most notably the Red Queen and her daughters – the heroism in the story appears strictly gendered. Both George and Edie learn throughout the series that having friends and relying on other people is not a weakness, but while George also becomes stronger by himself, Edie becomes weaker and more vulnerable. Although she is a tough street kid who hates showing weakness, she gets captured several times and needs rescuing. Near the climax of *Iron Hand* she even dies and is resurrected, after which “death will come further into life looking for her than it will with [George]” (2008, pp. 58-59). She is brought back by the spirits of the other girls whom the Walker has killed, though, so there is a sense of female power and solidarity here. However, when events take a turn for the worse in *Silver Tongue*, the statues wake George so he can help them, but they let Edie sleep, because they consider her too vulnerable at this point and in more need of protection.

There are other power dynamics at play between the two children aside from gender. George is middle-class, whereas Edie grew up in poverty and has spent the past few months living on the streets. While George’s mother is characterised as rather silly and a little careless, she is portrayed as being a loving parent, whereas Edie was abused by her stepfather before she ran away from home. The text does at times point out the way George’s privilege makes him oblivious of some of the realities of Edie’s existence. For example, in one scene he asks Edie: “Do you remember when you were a kid and it all seemed safe because your dad was there?” (2007, p. 19) As we have been privy to Edie’s memories of her childhood home, we know that she never felt safe with her father, and that George’s assumption that his own experiences of growing up with loving parents are universal is erroneous. Even in her backstory, the text puts Edie through a lot more trauma than George experiences. Making a female character in fictional work suffer more than any of the male characters can be seen as a form of misogyny, particularly when that female character is marginalised in other ways as well, as Edie is. The fact that the middle-class child has loving parents whereas the working-class child was abused can also
be seen as expressing class prejudice, implying that parental abuse mainly occurs among the lower classes.

Furthermore, while the female leaders are ostensibly equal to the male ones, George talks back to the Red Queen several times. In *Silver Tongue* he yells at her for losing Edie, even though the Officer is as much at fault as she is, and in *Iron Hand* he interrupts her mid-sentence, telling her: “You don’t suggest anything. If you want to help, you listen” (p. 387). While this is meant to show George’s character development and his new-found assertiveness, he never uses a similar tone with the Gunner or the Officer or any of the other male leaders, so it makes it seem as though they are more worthy of being listened to than the Queen is. There is also a moment when the Red Queen is talking to a large group of statues, and Richard the Lionheart is trying to get a word in. When he finally does, she snaps at him, at which point, “[t]he Lionheart rolled his eyes at George” (2008, p. 212). The fact that he looks at George while rolling his eyes elevates this from a mere display of annoyance to a shared moment of sexism between men, as if he were saying, “Aren’t women silly?” Together these scenes undermine female authority, making it seem less serious than male authority.

The only character of colour in the series is the Queen of America, a statue of an indigenous American woman, who appears briefly in *Silver Tongue*. She is both a healer and a warrior, has a kinship with animals, and speaks pidgin English. All of these traits represent a white person’s preconceptions about Native Americans, so even her positive skills seem stereotypical rather than empowering. She embodies the archetype of the “noble savage”, who is closer to nature than white people, and can thus communicate with animals and heal wounds. While this stereotype is meant to be positive, it easily appears patronising, and still portrays indigenous Americans as more primitive and less civilised than white Europeans, who have used these views on Native Americans as justifications for oppression and genocide. This is an example of the way intersectional feminism gives a more nuanced interpretation than if one were to judge a character such as the Queen of America by the same standards as a white female character would be measured. That said, as the Queen is literally an image of a Native American created by a white sculptor, it is possible that this characterisation is deliberate, although the text does not seem self-aware enough to allow for this kind of reading.
There are, however, scenes within the series which attempt to subvert stereotypes about masculinity. After George goes through his ordeal in World War I, he is visibly upset, and the Gunner and the Officer encourage him to cry, telling him, “[n]o one here’s gonna think any the worse of you”, and, “I blubbed like a baby all the way through my first bombardment” (2007, p. 383), showing that crying and being emotional are not unmanly. Significantly, though, George does not actually start crying, which undermines the message a little.

The narrative also presents some of the negative aspects of masculinity in the form of a guild of knights. Rather than adhering to a myth of chivalry, they are little more than bullies who glory in violence. They are described like this:

They didn’t look like a happy band of knights in armour who were devoted to courtly poetry and rescuing damsels in distress, or slaying picturesque dragons. They looked like a nasty hard-nosed bunch of mediaeval muggers. (Fletcher, 2007, p. 151)

The Red Queen says to one them: “Go back to your Guild, Knight. And play your sword games with each other. That is all you are good for” (2007, p. 211). Despite being a warrior herself, she has no respect for people who simply fight for the sake of fighting. It is also notable that she is saying this shortly after the Knights have killed a friend of hers. Even though she got her nickname by wreaking bloody revenge for the death of her daughter, in this instance she wastes no time seeking revenge, but rather goes straight to her friend, to return her to her plinth and so restore her to life. Although violence is shown to be the answer to many problems in this series, evidently it is sometimes less productive than other solutions, and should not be sought after for its own sake.

Again, however, the text slightly undermines its own message, this time by showing that while most of the knights are merciless thugs, their leader is as focused on honour as the archetypal knight of legend. For a “trial of strength” (2007, p. 148), George needs to prove his worthiness by defeating this knight in a duel, so once again the focus is on fighting. So, while the series provides some interesting female characters and a lot of action, it fails to provide a definition of heroism that is not based on strength and masculinity – even in female characters.
The Spiderwick Chronicles (2009) by Tony DiTerlizzi and Holly Black features three siblings with very different attitudes to violence. The narrative introduces the children in the following manner:

If someone had asked Jared Grace what jobs his brother and sister would have when they grew up, he would have had no trouble replying. He would have said that his brother, Simon, would be either a veterinarian or a lion tamer. He would have said that his sister, Mallory, would either be an Olympic fencer or in jail for stabbing someone with a sword. (2009, p. 3)

This description juxtaposes the tender and nurturing Simon with the competitive and aggressive Mallory, but the different future possibilities for each sibling are also juxtaposed. Both of Simon’s possible career paths involve animals, but the fact that Jared thinks his brother might become a lion tamer shows that he sees Simon as courageous as well as kind. Both of Mallory’s options involve swords, but – according to Jared, at least – she has the potential to either be prestigious or simply dangerous.

Jared himself does not know what he wants to do with his life as he is dealing with confusion and anger issues. Mallory tells him that their mother “thinks you’ve been acting weird ever since Dad left. Like getting into fights at school”, but Jared responds: “you always get into fights” (p. 53, italics in the original). However, Mallory’s aggressive streak never manifests itself as pointlessly destructive, the way Jared’s does, probably because through her fencing she has a healthy outlet for her aggression.

The main reason for Jared’s anger is the upheaval to his life caused by his parents’ divorce. He misses his father, even though it is clear that he was not a very attentive parent even before the divorce. Additionally, the siblings and their mother are left without a home until their aunt Lucinda lets them stay in her old, ramshackle house, which is described as looking “like a dozen shacks had been piled up on top of one another” (p. 4). It is not clear what the family’s economic circumstances were like before the divorce, but it is likely that they were far better off, considering that they could afford Mallory’s fencing gear and Simon’s pets, whereas now they cannot even afford a home. The text does not explore the implications of the children’s newfound poverty in detail, although

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8 The page numbers will be taken from a compilation called The Completely Fantastical Edition. The five books of the series were originally published between 2003 and 2005.
the fact that they find themselves living in an old house which they hate is important to the story.

The action starts when the children unwittingly destroy a boggart’s nest in their new home. The boggart proceeds to punish each of them with punishments suited to their personalities: it hurts Simon’s pet tadpoles, impedes Mallory’s freedom, and gets Jared into trouble with his mother. When Jared finds the boggart, he considers taking revenge on it: “He thought about Simon crying and about the poor, stupid tadpoles frozen in ice cubes. He didn’t want to help the boggart. He wanted to catch it and kick it and make it sorry it ever came out of the wall” (p. 75). But then he starts empathising with the creature:

“I thought that maybe the boggart was a little bit like us, because it’s stuck here too. I mean, maybe it doesn’t even want to be here. Maybe being here makes it mad.”

(Diterlizzi and Black, 2009, p. 82)

Here, Jared draws a parallel between the boggart’s destroyed nest and his own family’s altered circumstances which have left him displaced and angry. He decides to respond to the problem with understanding and compassion, rather than anger and aggression. Instead of hurting the boggart, he makes it a new nest, after which the creature becomes friendly.

Throughout the course of the series the three children encounter many other problems involving fey creatures, not all of which can be solved with compassion. In The Seeing Stone (2003) they are attacked by a gang of goblins, and Mallory fends them off with her sword. But even after Simon is captured by the goblins, his love for living creatures comes into play, as he refuses to let Jared save him until he has freed all the animals the goblins have trapped and caged. This includes a large griffin. Neither Jared nor Mallory is happy about freeing the griffin, as they think it looks dangerous, but Jared feels he “owed it to Simon to agree. After all, he had put Simon through a lot” (p. 172). Rather than harming the children, the griffin is grateful to them and becomes Simon’s loyal mount. It aids them on several occasions later on, so once again showing compassion proves to be helpful.

On another occasion it is Mallory who is kidnapped and needs rescuing. As this is not too different from the earlier instance in which Simon had to be saved, when Mallory proved herself highly competent, she is not simply a damsel in distress, but an equal member of the team – possibly even the leader
of the group, as she is the oldest and strongest. In an obvious parallel with Snow White, the dwarfs who have captured Mallory dress her up like a doll and place her in a glass coffin so that “[h]er beauty and youth will never fade” (p. 343). The dress and make-up are quite uncharacteristic for the tomboyish girl, which makes Simon say that she “doesn’t look like Mallory at all” (p. 343). When the dwarfs tell the brothers that “[o]ut of this case she would be doomed to age, death, and decay – the curse of all mortals”, Jared replies: “I think Mallory would rather be doomed” (p. 343). Interestingly enough, the dwarfs pose Mallory inside the coffin with a sword in her hands. As dwarfs are traditionally great lovers of metal, this is probably meant to enhance her beauty, rather than to make her look strong and fierce and less doll-like. Of course, once Mallory has been revived (not with a kiss, although Simon briefly wonders if that is what is required) she uses the sword to defend herself, rather than just as an accessory. In this she subverts the dwarfs’ expectations of her as a frail, passive image.

In the final book in the series the children’s mother is captured by the evil ogre Mulgarath. This occurrence is particularly significant, as, instead of having to save someone their own age, now they are called upon to rescue an adult who is normally their guardian. This can be empowering for child readers. Although the children have fought goblins and other creatures before, they have never killed anything until they are on their way to Mulgarath’s fortress. Mallory fights the goblins with the sword she took from the dwarfs. Despite her viciousness, she is shocked and aghast when she actually kills one. Afterwards, “[t]he bloodstained sword hung limply from her hand, and Jared was overwhelmed with the impulse to take it from her and clean it before she’d have a chance to notice” (p. 440), showing that Jared is almost as shaken by the death as Mallory is. He is even more shocked when Simon starts killing baby dragons to protect his griffin from the mother dragon:

When Simon turned back to them, tears were running down his face. As Jared watched him, Simon – who had never killed anything, who always carried spiders outside – stepped on the head of one of the baby dragons, crushing it into a smear under his shoe. It squealed. Dragon blood stained the ground and melted the edge of Simon’s heel.

“Look!” he screamed. “Look what I’m doing to your babies!” (DiTerlizzi and Black, 2009, pp. 445-446)
This is clearly an act of desperation, one that Simon does not enjoy at all. The dire circumstances turn even a gentle pacifist like Simon to violence, if only to protect those he cares about. Unlike George from the “Stoneheart” trilogy, finding this capacity for violence within them does not make Mallory and Simon feel more mature. Rather, it horrifies them and they hope never to have to resort to this kind of action again.

Interestingly enough, Jared, the only one of the children who used to get into fights, simply for the sake of fighting, is the only one who does not kill any creatures in this final confrontation. He is also the one with the clearest character arc, learning to accept his father’s absence in his life and managing to live more peaceably with his siblings. This does not happen through violence, but through realising and understanding that other people (his family, the boggart, Lucinda and her father) have feelings and problems too. Thus he becomes less self-centred and happier.

The children manage to save their mother, but they do not kill Mulgarath (he gets eaten by a hobgoblin after transforming into a bird). While they have to use violence on several occasions, most of the solutions to their problems come through other means. The violence they do engage in is for the most part not portrayed as heroic and glorious, but as grim and unpleasant. Still, Jared, Simon and Mallory are definitely heroes, as they not only save each other and their mother, but also actively help people and creatures around them with their actions.

Garth Nix’s “Old Kingdom” series puts young women in their late teens and early twenties into the role of hero, although there are some notable heroic males as well. There are different elements to the heroism, including fighting, creating, and magic. I will mostly focus on the first three books in the series: Sabriel (1995), Lirael: Daughter of the Clayr (2001), and Abhorsen (2004). In the first of these, eighteen-year-old Sabriel has to take over her father’s responsibilities as the “Abhorsen” after his death. The Abhorsen is the chief necromancer in the Old Kingdom, who regulates the boundaries between the living and the dead, and protects people from unlawful necromancers and undead creatures. The title is usually passed on from parent to child, regardless of gender. The first time Sabriel puts on her Abhorsen attire, she “turned to the
mirror, both pleased and troubled by what she saw. She looked competent, professional, a traveller who could look after herself. At the same time, she looked less like someone called Sabriel and more like the Abhorsen, capital letter and all” (1995, p. 123). Touchstone, a prince whom Sabriel rescues from an enchantment, similarly has difficulty in seeing her as a person with a human identity outside of her title: “A woman, looking down at him, a young woman, armed and armoured, her face... battered. No, not a woman. The Abhorsen, for she wore the blazon and the bells” (1995, p. 166, ellipsis in the original). Even though it is not unusual for the Abhorsen to be female, her role seems to take precedence over her gender, so she is no longer a woman in Touchstone’s eyes (or at least not initially, as later on they get married and have children). The same would probably not have been true for a male Abhorsen, since the general view is, as quoted above, that “girls are gendered whereas boys are just naturally boys” (Wannamaker, 2008, p. 122). This is reiterated when Sabriel finds a dead body and is startled to discover that it is a woman:

As she expected, the corpse was of a Charter Mage, dead but three or four days. But she hadn’t expected to find the dead person was a woman. Wide shoulders and muscular build had deceived her for a moment, but there was a middle-aged woman before her, eyes shut, throat cut, short brown hair caked with sea-salt and blood. (Nix, 1995, p. 193)

Just like the appointment of the Abhorsen, most skills and jobs in this series are ungendered. Both men and women can be Charter Mages (Sabriel even learns most of her magic skills at her girls’ school rather than from her Abhorsen father), the kingdom is inherited by the oldest son or daughter of the previous ruler, and female guards and soldiers are seemingly far more common in the Old Kingdom than in the more modern country of Ancelstierre. After Sabriel disenchants Touchstone, he decides to become her protector, even though she has a sword too, as part of her Abhorsen equipment, as well as being far more skilled in magic than he is (although he seems to be more adept in healing magic, which is considered a more feminine type of magic in many works of fiction). Rather than combining male and female strength, for the most part Sabriel and Touchstone simply bring their own personal skills to their partnership, regardless of gender. Usually it is Sabriel who rescues Touchstone when they are in danger (once by kissing him, using a common fairy tale trope),
although Touchstone rescues her once too, as well as proving useful because of his sailing skills, his knowledge about the Old Kingdom, and his ability to gather information from other people.

A scene in which Sabriel discusses with Touchstone about how she used to view the Old Kingdom as an adventure demonstrates the reversals of some of the gendered expectations in this story:

“I used to think like that at school... . Dreaming about the Old Kingdom. Proper Charter Magic. Dead to bind. Princes to be—"
“Rescued?”
“Married,” replied Sabriel absently. (Nix, 1995, p. 326)

Sabriel’s childhood daydreams combine masculine ideas of heroism with feminine ideas of romance, both of which she ends up fulfilling.

One attribute of Touchstone’s that might be gendered, though it is never stated as such, is that he is a berserker, which means that he is filled with superhuman strength when he becomes angry. The sequel describes it from the point of view of Sabriel’s and Touchstone’s son, Sam:

His father worked hard at staying calm, Sam knew, for there was the old berserker blood in him and Touchstone feared its rise. The only time Sam had ever seen that fury was when a false ambassador from one of the northern clans had tried to stab Sabriel with a serving fork at a formal dinner in the Palace. Touchstone, roaring like some sort of terrible beast, had picked up the six-foot barbarian and hurled him the length of the table, on to a roast swan. This had scared everyone much more than the assassination attempt, particularly when Touchstone then tried to pick up the double throne and throw that after the man. Fortunately, he’d failed and was eventually calmed by Sabriel stroking his brow as he blindly wrenched at the marble footing of the throne. (Nix, 2001, p. 195)

The berserker blood is here causing Touchstone to behave in a conventionally hyper-masculine manner, by being fiercely protective of his wife and using violence to defend her, while Sabriel is fulfilling the feminine role of socialising her husband out of his natural animal state. At least Touchstone and his family all realise that this ability is not particularly productive and so he tries to keep it under control, preferring to use other methods than violence.

At the end of *Sabriel* the characters need to bind a destructive undead
creature named Kerrigor back to his body. To do this, they need help from a large group of Charter Mages, including soldiers who know magic and some of the residents at Sabriel’s old school. The juxtaposition of the soldiers and the schoolgirls is commented on, but they are presented as equals:

“Magistrix, if you would place everyone – Lieutenant, please put your men among the girls... .”

Anywhere else, at any other time, there would have been ribald jokes and giggles about that. Here, with the Dead about the building, and the sarcophagus brooding in their midst, it was simply an instruction. (Nix, 1995, pp. 350-351)

After Kerrigor is bound to his body, Sabriel banishes him on her own, but the binding is a group effort and, in fact, only succeeds because a dying girl lends Sabriel her last spark of magic. This means that while Sabriel is presented as the heroine of the story, a lot of her accomplishments are achieved through cooperation and community.

At the time of the events in Sabriel the Old Kingdom has been without a king for two centuries. Touchstone is the last remaining member of the royal family, and so he is crowned as king, with Sabriel as his queen. Together they continue the royal line and bring back order to the Old Kingdom. This plot point presents a problematic element commonly found in fantasy fiction. As I discussed in the Literature Review, medievalist fantasy is prone to represent a rigid class system and to romanticise monarchies. The same is true here. The Old Kingdom was in chaos and disarray during the 200 years since the previous king, with undead creatures freely roaming the country and terrorising the living. When Touchstone takes what is seen as his rightful place on the throne, he returns the Kingdom to its previous peaceful and happy state, showing that the realm is better off with a king than when the people are left without rule. While Sabriel is not a member of the nobility, she is wealthy enough to attend a private boarding school, as are many of the characters in the sequels. While not all the heroes in the series are rich, the books tend to focus on the wealthier characters.

Another common problem with medievalist fantasy that I discussed in the Literature Review is its ethnocentrism. As in many other fantasy worlds, the inhabitants of the Old Kingdom appear to be exclusively white. It is not until a later sequel, Goldenhand (2016), that we are introduced to brown-skinned
characters. Their race lives to the north of the Old Kingdom, which is presumably why they do not appear in the series before. While they are still seen as the “other” to the white inhabitants of the Old Kingdom, the depiction of these northern tribes is respectful and does not use stereotypes about real races.

It is, however, interesting to note that a large part of Abhorsen is devoted to a plot point involving displaced refugees from Ancelstierre who hope to find a new home in the Old Kingdom. The heroes help the refugees, while the people who demonise them are portrayed as villainous, so being kind and helpful to people from other countries is presented as a positive thing.

The series also introduces the Clayr, a society of clairvoyants. Their skill is the only one in the series that is definitely gendered, as all the Clayr are women, living apart from men. Their children are fathered by travelling merchants and other casual lovers. Lirael, the protagonist of the second and third books, feels like a misfit in this group, because while she is good at fighting and better at using Charter Magic than most of the other Clayr, she seems to lack their gift of prophecy entirely. This parallels Sam’s storyline in the series, as his parents intend for him to become the next Abhorsen, although he is terrified of death and unable to use necromancy. At one point, one of the older Clayr (who also happens to be Lirael’s great-grandmother, although she was never close to her daughter or granddaughter) tells Lirael:

“Remember that while the Clayr can See the future, others make it. I feel that you will be a maker, not a seer. You must promise me that it will be so. Promise me that that you will not give in. Promise me that you will never give up hope. Make your future, Lirael!” (Nix, 2001, p. 103)

As it turns out, Lirael is Sabriel’s half-sister, and is fated to become the next Abhorsen, while Sam carries on the legacy of the ancient Wallmakers. Both characters become heroic as they fulfil their new roles, although they are not the roles they, or anyone else, expected them to take on. These roles do, however, reflect the two characters’ strengths and interests more accurately than the ones that were previously forced on them by their society. After the magical servants of the Abhorsen’s house bring the emblems of the Wallmakers to Sam, he says:
“They gave it to me, and I’ve been thinking that it’s as if my ancestors are saying it’s all right to make things. That’s what I’m meant to do. Make things, and help the Abhorsen and the King. So I’ll do that, and I’ll do my best, and if my best isn’t good enough, at least I will have done everything I could, everything that is in me. I don’t have to try to be someone else, someone I could never be.” (Nix, 2004, p. 69)

The powers of creation (as opposed to the powers of procreation) are traditionally associated with men, whereas death—Abhorsen’s realm—is often associated with women. As Carole G. Silver writes, “the face of death, like the face of evil, was often seen as female” (1999, p. 172). However, both Lirael and Sam also transcend some gender stereotypes, as the Abhorsen’s role also involves protecting people and fighting evil, whereas Sam is putting himself in a feminine “helpmeet” role, rather than one of leadership, second to women like his mother Sabriel (the current Abhorsen), his aunt Lirael (the Abhorsen-in-Waiting), and his sister Ellimere (the future Queen).

When Orannis the Destroyer is defeated at the climax of *Abhorsen*, similarly to the climax of *Sabriel*, it takes the efforts of several people with various different skills, all working together. Ultimately it takes an act of violence to bind the evil presence (Lirael has to slice it in two with a magical sword crafted by Sam, using blood from himself, his parents, his sister, Lirael, and two Clayr), but the emphasis on cooperation between different skillsets makes this series seem less one-dimensionally martial than Fletcher’s text. In the Old Kingdom nobody “thinks meanly of himself for not having been a soldier” (Fletcher, 2008, p. 182), because there are other ways to help protect the world, whether through magic, through crafting, through necromancy, through prophesying, or other means, more or less regardless of gender.

That being said, because most of the antagonists of the “Old Kingdom” series are mindless demons and forces of evil, it suffers from some of the same problems as the “Stoneheart” trilogy when it comes to dehumanising the enemy. Both series have human villains as well, but the ones in the “Old Kingdom” series are given more depth than the Walker from *Stone Heart*, and are occasionally even allowed a measure of redemption. This makes Nix’s text less

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9 It can be argued that this is not actually a violent act, as the Destroyer cannot be killed, only bound with magic. Even so, the binding is still being done with a weapon, so violence is implied.
one-dimensional than Fletcher’s.

Most of the heroes discussed in this section come from privileged backgrounds. The only character of colour is The Queen of America from *Silver Tongue*, who is presented in a very stereotypical manner that is more harmful than empowering. Edie comes from an impoverished family, but she proves to be a less effective hero than George, who is middle-class. The children from *The Spiderwick Chronicles* seem to go from a middle-class life to a working-class one, though the text does not explore the implications of this. Unlike Edie, however, who (it is implied) goes to live with George at the end of the novel, Jared, Grace, and Mallory do not return to New York to their middle-class life, but continue living in Aunt Lucinda’s old house with their working mother, so that overcoming their economic circumstances is not seen as a necessary ending to their story, and is thus less important than helping Lucinda and her father, defeating the evil Mulgarath, and learning to be more united and happier as a family. Mostly though, the texts provide very little diversity, even as they try to subvert gendered expectations.

Overall, while violence and offensive magic are still common in children’s fantasy literature, these are rarely seen as the only available solutions, and the focus is more often on helping and understanding others, rather than on competing with and besting them. How violence against enemies is portrayed depends largely on the age of the protagonists, but also on how humanised the antagonists are. There is less remorse over violent actions if the enemies are portrayed as being uniformly evil with no redeeming features, especially if they are literally not human, but rather monsters (as in the “Stoneheart” trilogy) or supernatural forces (as in the “Old Kingdom” books).

If the antagonist can be reasoned with, however, the story might call for other types of heroism, as discussed in the next section.

**Blessed Are the Peacemakers**

In some stories the heroism lies not in conquering enemies but in avoiding the conflict altogether. Jack Zipes writes that in fairy tales “[c]haos and conflict are followed by the restoration of order which affirms the goodness of the existing system” (1979, p. 127), but in these novels the status quo is contested and replaced by a better system, in which characters are more free to be themselves and which often provides more equality for oppressed people. All
this is done through communication and compromise rather than through bloodshed. Frequently – but not always – these characters are female, which seems to subscribe to the stereotype that women are less aggressive and more nurturing than men. As R. W. Connell states,

> it is mainly young men who are recruited into jobs that require the use of force: police, the military, private security, and blue-collar crime. And it is mainly young women who are recruited into jobs that repair the consequences of violence: nursing, psychology, and social work. (2002, p. 3)

Even though this portrayal of femininity may be more traditional than, for example, that of Sabriel with her sword, it is still potentially transgressive as it rejects hegemonic masculinity, both in individual characters and in society as a whole, and seeks to replace a social order based on physical strength with one based on compassion. Furthermore, this type of heroism necessitates using one’s voice, which is often a subversive act for a woman.\(^{10}\) In this vein, Marina Warner writes:

> The story itself becomes the weapon of the weaponless. The struggles of women, for example, are not resolved by combat, on the whole (one or two Amazon heroines excepted), as the contests of men may be in heroic epic; when they need to undo error or redeem wrongdoing or defend the innocent, they raise their voice, if only in a conspiratorial whisper – hence the suspicion of women’s talk that haunts the whole history of the old wives’ tale. (1994a, p. 412)

One book that depicts kindness as heroism while also subverting numerous fairy-tale traditions is Eva Ibbotson’s *The Ogre of Oglefort* (2010). The story introduces several “Unusual Creatures”, including a hag, a troll, and a banshee, as well as the hag’s familiar, who is an ordinary human boy named Ivo. While there are some creatures that have mostly positive connotations (such as fairies and enchantresses), hags and trolls are usually seen in a negative light. However, these characters are all friendly and they hold down jobs that benefit society. Additionally, they attend a Summer Meeting of Unusual Creatures at which they decide upon a good deed to do during the summer, using their

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\(^{10}\) For a further discussion about the power of women’s voices, especially in conjunction with magic, see Chapter 5, “Magic and Empowerment”. 59
special powers, simply for the pleasure of it. This year they are planning to help a family get rid of mice, but these plans are interrupted when the frail, yet powerful, Norns appear and order them instead to rescue a princess from an ogre. The troll Ulf says: “It’s because there’s a princess involved... . That’s why the Norns appeared. Princesses always bring them out” (p. 33). The Norns are not interested in the kinds of small acts of kindness that the other Unusual Creatures value, but rather their idea of doing good is based on heroic deeds involving swords and princesses. As they put it, “[w]hen a princess is in danger, something has to be done. This is a rule which binds all Unusual Creatures” (pp. 127-128), although the other Unusual Creatures seem to disagree, as most of them have no problem leaving and rejecting the quest. Perhaps it is because of the Norns’ great age that they feel themselves bound by tradition and fairy-tale clichés, and are thus also unable to envision this story going any other way than with a weak, passive princess and a slain beast.

Before the Hag and her friends set off to rescue the princess, the Norns give them three gifts, characteristic of the kind of helpful fairy tale figures that they aspire to be. These gifts are magic beans that allow the eater to understand animals, healing water, and a rusty sword. The Norns expect one of the grown men to take the sword, but they refuse: “The troll was strong and brave but he worked with wood, not rusty metal – and the wizard thought that the sword looked heavy and carrying it would make it difficult for him to think” (p. 39). Little Ivo ends up taking the sword. The former two gifts accentuate the type of heroism that the Unusual Creatures are comfortable engaging in, in which they communicate with others and attempt to help them. Both of these come in handy later on. The sword, on the other hand, turns out to be the least useful of the gifts by far, and Ivo feels silly rather than heroic carrying it “over his shoulder like a rake” (p. 56). As the characters never engage in the violence the Norns expect of them, the weapon is only a burden.

Once they arrive at the ogre’s castle, Ivo and the Unusual Creatures discover, to their surprise, that the princess was never in any danger. She sought out the ogre of her own accord to ask him to turn her into a bird, so that she could escape from the pressures of being a princess. The narrative describes her as a spirited tomboy and, perhaps more importantly, as a rather ordinary child, especially in comparison with her older, more lady-like sisters:
Sidony and Angela were pretty, obedient girls who liked doing all the things that royal people do, but Mirella did not. She was a misfit from the start. Mirella did not look like a princess. Her eyes were black and her hair was straight and her ears stuck out. Mirella would not ride in a closed carriage and wave to the people; she said driving made her sick. She would not have her portrait painted or go and play with children who were “suitable”. (Ibbotson, 2010, p. 45)

Unlike the “Old Kingdom” series, The Ogre of Oglefort is explicitly critical of monarchy and the class system. At one point the narrative says of Mirella: “It was a pity she was a princess – Ivo did not approve of people being royal – but it was not her fault; one cannot choose one’s parents” (p. 41). Aside from Mirella, the other nobles are portrayed as being snobbish and somewhat callous at best. At worst, they are selfish and downright malicious, particularly Mirella’s greedy suitor, Prince Umberto, who only wishes to marry her to gain money and influence. It is never stated how old either he or Mirella are, but Umberto is old enough to grow a “silly blond beard” (p. 48), whereas on several occasions characters note that Mirella is far too young to get married, so there appears to be a significant age difference between the two. Even though the proposed marriage is one of convenience rather than being based on sexual attraction, Umberto is portrayed in a rather predatory way. After Mirella is gone for good, he suggests getting engaged to Princess Sidony’s newly born baby girl, but is finally cast aside by her family.

The royal family’s arrogance and lack of support for Mirella is juxtaposed with the Unusual Creatures’ humble and charitable lives. They work at simple jobs that are of use to the community, and they enjoy taking care of others.

Ivo and his friends are confused when they realise that Mirella is not in any danger, and that it is, in fact, the ogre who feels as though he needs rescuing from her incessant pleading. But as they have been tasked with solving this situation, they stay at the ogre’s castle to help, albeit in different ways than they expected. Ivo tries to cheer up and befriend Mirella, while the others take care of the run-down castle and the ailing ogre. Interestingly, it is the otherwise fairly masculine Ulf who nurses the ogre. The characters are brought into action again when the castle is attacked by a human army and they are called on to defend it, but even then they rely on trickery rather than violence. Once again, the text subverts expectations by depicting the soldiers as the enemies, full of
foolish masculine pride, whereas the ogre and the other Unusual Creatures are the brave and heroic ones. When the army approaches, one of the characters – a timid woman with a fear of men – describes it thus:

“There are men with uniforms riding towards us. I could see them coming over the hill. Many men – a whole army... . Men like that are bad – very bad. They have flags with many colours – green and yellow and blue, and foolish hats. When men have such silly clothes they are dangerous.” (Ibbotson, 2010, p. 168)

Even though this was written at a time when female soldiers existed – despite their being less common than male soldiers – Nandi always refers to the army as “men” rather than “people”. Whether or not there are any women in the approaching army, its imperialistic agenda and glorification of war and violence are depicted as particularly masculine follies.

After the soldiers have been scared away, Ivo, Mirella, the Unusual Creatures, and the other inhabitants of the ogre’s castle settle down there and live together in peace and community. This is the happy ending to all their stories, which is achieved through kindness and cooperation rather than aggression and rivalry. Significantly, Mirella does not return to being a princess, but is much happier living a common and communal life, in which she works hard and is equal to her new friends.

A similar approach is found in Shannon Hale’s first two “Princess Academy” books (2005 and 2013). The books introduce a group of teenage girls from a village of stone quarriers who are given the opportunity to be trained and educated in high culture, and to meet the prince. As only one of the girls can marry the prince and become a princess, they are expected to see each other as rivals and to compete against each other. Instead, the girls discover a sense of unity and community as they come to know each other better. The protagonist, Miri, says at one point:

“I don’t like feeling in competition with everybody to be seen and liked by Prince Steffan.”

“We should make a pact,” said Esa. “We’ll be happy...
for whomever he chooses, no jealousy or meanness.”
All the girls agreed... . (Hale, 2005, p. 196)\textsuperscript{11}

At first the other girls speak badly of Britta, a newcomer to the village, because they think she is arrogant, but they become friends when they realise that she is simply shy and actually very kind and sweet. Similarly, Miri engages in a bit of rivalry with an older girl, Katar, to be at the top of the class but, like her previous dislike for Britta, this is resolved on a friendly note when Miri learns more about Katar and comes to better understand her motivations.

The girls’ unity and bravery are tested when the Princess Academy is attacked by bandits, and they only have each other to rely on to escape this situation. As Shirley Foster and Judy Simons write:

> Stories for children frequently stress their protagonists’ ability to survive in a world without adults. When such a narrative also focuses on girls who are removed from obvious patriarchal influence, the emphasis on possibilities of female autonomy becomes intensified. (1995, p. 86)

This happens in *Princess Academy* as the girls are cut off from their families for most of the story, but especially when the bandits attack and remove the other adults from the vicinity. The girls all work together to help each other escape through the window and to contact the village to let them know of the danger. Eventually Miri tricks the leader of the bandits into falling over a cliff edge, but he holds on to her and nearly drags her down with him until Miri’s father drops a mallet onto his head. Hale probably chose to end the scene in this way so she could spare her thirteen-year-old character the burden of having killed someone herself. Other than that, Miri is very much in charge of her own narrative by being clever, courageous, and full of empathy.

Miri’s other main act of heroism occurs when she discovers the true value of the stone that the villagers quarry and so she encourages them not to be swindled by the travelling merchants any longer. This changes the lives of all the villagers for the better, as they no longer have to work as hard to merely

\textsuperscript{11} While this appears to remain true in this book, the sequel reveals that one of the girls, Liana, is resentful of Britta, who is chosen as the princess, and secretly plots against her. Similarly, Lady Sisela, who is a leader in the resistance, is mainly motivated by her jealousy of Queen Sabet, saying about the king, “I wonder if he thinks about how different his life would be if he’d chosen me” (2013, p. 190). But even these two characters are not demonised for their pettiness and selfishness as much as they are pitied for not being able to feel the joy and beauty of female solidarity.
survive, and can now afford luxuries like decent blankets and honey. This new state of affairs is achieved not through battle, but simply through increased knowledge and the ability to negotiate. As Britta says to Miri later:

“What we did last year – what you did, Miri – that was revolution. Turning things around. You said just because things had always been one way didn’t mean they couldn’t change. You persuaded the village council to refuse the traders' terms and fight for fair value. That was pretty brave.” (Hale, 2013, p. 31, italics in the original)

The sequel, *Princess Academy: Palace of Stone*, goes even further, as Miri not only betters the lives of people in one village, but in an entire kingdom. Along with several other girls from the old Princess Academy, she goes to the capital city to visit Britta, who is about to marry Prince Steffan, and Katar, who has become a royal ambassador. While there, some of the girls discover a new vocation when previously the only opportunity they had was to become quarriers like their parents. So, for example, Esa realises that she wants to learn medicine, and Frid takes up steel-working. Furthermore, Miri finds out that many of the king’s subjects are poor and unhappy, and she wants to help them. Britta is unable to use her influence as the king’s future daughter-in-law, as he makes her feel completely voiceless. She tells Miri, “he won’t listen to me. Sometimes I feel as if when I speak no sound comes out at all” (p. 210).

Miri joins a group of resistance fighters as she is enamoured by their ideals, but soon discovers that their methods are ruthless and, for at least some of them, their motivations are not as pure as they pretend. The resistance tries to incite anger towards Britta amongst the common people to make them rise up against the entire royal family. Knowing that a violent revolution will mean the death of her friend as well as of many other innocent people, Miri seeks to find a peaceful resolution. When an angry mob comes for Britta, Miri manages, using only words and symbols, to calm it down by making the people understand that Britta is not their enemy. Later she and her friends draft a charter to secure the rights of the common people, and convince the king to sign it, to secure peace in the kingdom while also helping and uplifting the poor. Rather than simply reaffirming the status quo, with perhaps a higher social position for herself, Miri successfully changes the system to make it fairer for everyone. This ending makes *Princess Academy* and its sequel different from
the other texts discussed in this section, as it not only criticises the class system in the way *The Ogre of Oglefort* does, but has the characters change it. Even when the methods and personalities of some of the revolutionaries are questioned, the narrative never belittles the common people’s need for equality and change.

The “Princess Academy” books are also the only ones of my corpus of primary texts that feature a physically disabled character in a major role. *The Merlin Conspiracy* (2003) by Diana Wynne Jones has a nameless disabled woman who appears briefly to serve as a mentor to the main character. Resa in Cornelia Funke’s *Inkheart* (2004) is temporarily rendered mute, but she regains her voice in the sequel. Miri’s best friend, Esa, from *Princess Academy*, on the other hand, is portrayed as a normal girl who happens to have a malformed hand. Her disability makes her unable to work in the quarry with most of the other villagers, but she is never treated like a burden or an object of pity. Unlike the hurt woman from *The Merlin Conspiracy*, Esa gets to participate in the adventures with Miri and other characters and, unlike Resa’s muteness, her disability is neither magically incurred nor cured, but a natural thing. These factors make her a well-rounded disabled character, and her inclusion in the story shows that Miri’s revolution has a place for disabled people as well as able-bodied ones.

The story particularly emphasises the impact women can have on history. Chapter 22 of *Princess Academy: Palace of Stone* starts with a snippet of song that reads:

*The army slew a thousand and showed little pity*
*The king ordered fealty from the conquered city*
*The prince charmed its people with words wise and witty*
*And the queen sat on a couch, looking very pretty* (Hale, 2013, p. 283, italics in the original)

This describes events from the past, as they are perceived. In reality, the queens in the world of *Princess Academy* are brave and accomplish far more than simply lying on couches and being pretty. The school Miri attends is called the Queen’s Castle, as it was founded by a previous queen, Queen Gertrud, who wanted to use her limited power to help people by creating a school that everyone could attend, noble and commoner alike. Sabet, the current queen, presents the charter that Miri has penned to the king. At first she is not sure if
she is brave enough to do this, but a portrait of Queen Gertrud inspires her to speak up and support Miri’s cause. All of this is accomplished through a sense of community between women. As Trites says:

One of the strengths traditionally associated with femininity is the way many women have recognized the importance of community. Throughout history women have been depicted in their families and friendships as nurturers. ...feminist authors often use the common conception of women strengthening each other within relationships as a focal point. (1997, p. 80)

Friendship and solidarity between female characters is a significant theme in all of Hale’s works, particularly in The Book of a Thousand Days (2008). This text is a retelling of the Grimms’ tale “Maid Maleen”, about a princess who is locked in a tower for several years, along with her waiting maid. Unlike the fairy tale, the focus of the novel is on the servant, Dashti, rather than the princess, but like some of Hale’s other works it presents a friendship between a princess and a common girl (Britta and Miri in Princess Academy; Ani and Enna in The Books of Bayern [2003-2010], discussed in Chapter 5). Notably, The Book of a Thousand Days is the only one of my primary texts in which none of the characters are white. According to the author, the fictional country in which the story takes place is based on medieval Mongolia. One edition of the book features a photograph of a Mongolian-American model on the cover. On her blog, Hale explains that this edition proved less popular than similar editions of her other books which had pictures of white girls on the cover, which suggests that – consciously or not – race is still a significant factor in book sales. However, she also writes:

When I visited schools, school librarians who told me they had large Asian populations in their student body said they wanted the paperback [of Book of a Thousand Days] specifically. They knew representation matters. That those students who were of Asian descent would be happy to see someone who looked somewhat like them on a cover, leading a story of her own. (Hale, 2015, unpaged)

This reaction shows one of the reasons why diversity in media is so important.

The story is told through Dashti’s diary, beginning on the day when she and Lady Saren are locked in the tower because Saren refuses to marry the man her father has chosen for her. Dashti’s narrative is characterised by kindness
and optimism, even when she reflects on her harsh life as a peasant. At first she takes her position in life for granted and she considers it her duty to be submissive to Saren and other members of the nobility. When Lord Khasar – the man Saren was meant to marry – appears at the tower, he orders Dashti to stick her hand out of the food hatch so he can slap her. Dashti knows that he is a cruel, ruthless man, but, as she states, “I recognized the command of gentry, and I must do what he says” (Hale, 2008, p. 58). Throughout the story Dashti discovers her own inner strength. Spending time with Saren also makes her realise that the gentry simply consist of people as well. This knowledge enables her to stand up for herself and her own rights. When a lady she dislikes gives her an order, she writes:

Strangely, her words held no sway over me. Maybe it’s wrong, but I don’t think I have to do what she says just because I’m a mucker and she’s an honored lady. I smiled to myself then, thinking that if I were in a tower now and a black-gauntleted Khasar told me to put my hand back down so he could slap it, I’d tell him to go slap himself. (Hale, 2008, p. 274)

Dashti’s greatest strength is her ability to sing healing songs – a skill passed down to her from her mother, through a matrilineal line. While serving Saren, Dashti mostly uses this ability to ease the princess’s pain, but after they escape from the tower, she finds wider uses for her talent to help various people she befriends. It even brings her to the attention of Khan Tegus, the prince whom she marries at the end of the story. Her greatest achievement, however, is when she uses her magic to stop a war. As in Princess Academy: Palace of Stone, averting a war is considered a far better outcome than winning one.

During most of the narrative, Lady Saren is presented in stark contrast to Dashti. While Dashti is cheerful and hard-working, Saren is sullen and idle. Although Dashti respects Saren’s superiority, she does not understand her behaviour. Later she learns, though, that Saren has been traumatised by events in her past and is now terrified of all men, and this helps Dashti understand her better.

After the two young women escape from the tower and are employed as kitchen maids in Khan Tegus’s palace, Saren learns to work and becomes

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12 A more knowledgeable reader might recognise Saren’s behaviour – her lethargy, her anxiety, and her bouts of over-eating – as characteristic of someone with clinical depression.
determined to do things for herself, even when she does them badly. Her depression becomes less overwhelming after Dashti gives her a cat for companionship. But what really gives her confidence and helps her overcome her fears is her friendship with Dashti. Near the end of the story Saren speaks in Dashti’s defence to a court of chiefs, and for the first time she sounds like a confident princess rather than like a cowering child. Dashti remarks in her diary:

There was power in her voice, and the chiefs took notice. How could they not? I’ve seen my lady begin to change since the cat purred in her lap, since she found use for her hands in the kitchen, since Khasar died, but never until that moment had she looked like I thought gentry should. Like anyone should. More than a thousand days we’ve been together, more than a thousand songs I’ve sung for her, and only now, I think, do I see Saren truly begin to heal. (Hale, 2008, pp. 297-298)

In classic fairy tale fashion, Dashti marries the prince, but it is this celebration of the girls’ friendship and sisterhood that provides the true happy ending for both of them. Significantly, Saren does not have a love interest within the book. While she is no longer terrified of men, heterosexual marriage is not presented as a necessary next step for her to fully heal from her trauma. Nor is remaining single presented as a burden or a sacrifice, but as a valid choice.

It bears mentioning that while *The Book of a Thousand Days* critiques and scrutinises the class system by showing Dashti to be the equal of Lady Saren and the other royal characters, unlike the other two texts discussed in this section, the main characters neither flee nor overturn the system, but end up participating in it, as Dashti becomes a princess by marrying the prince. Even then, her power is presented as limited, as it is subject to a council who represent the traditions of the kingdom. Presumably she will use her authority to try to better the lives of commoners, but this ending is still less radical than Miri’s creation of a bill of rights, or even Mirella’s rejection of her status and her choice to live communally with Ivo and the Unusual Creatures.

Asian women are characterised as being “quiet and docile” and ready to “do what they are told with a smile” (Sun, 2014a, unpaged). Dashti and Saren break these stereotypes, not only by being active and refusing to follow orders, but also by showing emotions other than a cheerful willingness to serve. Mental illnesses are still commonly stigmatised, and this is particularly true within East-
Asian communities, which makes it hard for mentally ill Asians to talk about their problems (Gonzalez, 2017; Soller, 2017). It is therefore rare to see an Asian character struggling with depression, but Saren's mental illness in *The Book of a Thousand Days* is treated respectfully and realistically, and she is a well-rounded female character of colour.

Both Hale’s and Ibbotson’s texts subvert how fairy tales and fantasy stories are expected to work and how the characters in them behave. Ogres are befriended rather than defeated, pretty girls are allies rather than rivals, princesses are not helpless, and social structures and gendered traditions are questioned. All of this encourages a type of heroism that is based on empathy rather than victory in battles and contests. While Hale’s heroes are mostly female, Ibbotson shows kind and nurturing characters of more than one gender, demonstrating that, just like courage, empathy is not a gender-specific virtue and that the two are not mutually exclusive. All these texts explore issues of class and the way it affects its characters, particularly the female ones. *Princess Academy: Palace of Stone* does so in the most intricate way, and is also the only one of the texts in which the old system is changed for the better, even though the revolution fails. The texts also show some diversity when it comes to the race, class, and disabilities of their heroes and heroines.

Unfortunately, not all heroines prove themselves as effective as the author perhaps intends them to be. Even when the characterisation of a heroine is good, sometimes her role in the story is lacking and leaves her with little agency. There are various ways otherwise strong female characters can be undermined by the plot they find themselves in, which I shall discuss in the following section.

**Ineffective Heroines**

As discussed above, Edie in the “Stoneheart” trilogy is introduced as a tough, street-smart urchin, but the story undermines her repeatedly, showing her to be far weaker and far more frequently needing rescue and protection than her male counterpart, George. Admittedly, her special skills prove vital during the climax of the series in finding a magical artefact necessary to defeat the villains. All the fighting that the other, more warlike, characters do in the meantime only serves as a distraction to give Edie time to find the item. While this is a notable accomplishment, it is the only instance in the series of Edie saving the other
characters, and shortly after this happens, she is captured by the Walker once more, and George needs to rescue her again. Even though she acts like a character who likes to take charge, it is George who is portrayed as the leader and the one who is capable of heroism and independence.

This type of contradictory characterisation is more common in female characters than male ones. It appears to result from authors trying to step away from the stereotype of the damsel in distress by making their heroines feisty and skilled, but still wanting the male characters to engage in most of the heroic action, thus showing those same heroines succumbing to dangers they cannot save themselves from, despite their skills and feistiness, and needing to be rescued by their romantic interests or other male heroes. This provides only a shallow modernisation of female characters, as these kinds of heroines have little more agency and control over their own lives than characters from more traditional stories.

Diana Wynne Jones’s stories frequently feature strong female protagonists with powerful magic, such as Nan in *Witch Week* (1982), Sophie in *Howl’s Moving Castle* (1986), and Roddy in *The Merlin Conspiracy* (2003). However, in some novels the protagonists are reduced to little more than supporting characters in their own stories. Such is the case with Maewen in *The Crown of Dalemark* (1993). She is sent back in time through magic to take the place of another young heroine, Noreth. Noreth herself is also less effective than her reputation suggests. She is on a quest to unite Dalemark as its new rightful queen, a quest which she claims was set for her by the One, Dalemark’s main deity. After Maewen takes her place, she does indeed occasionally hear a deep voice that claims to be the One, although it feels more sinister than comforting to Maewen. In the future that Maewen comes from, Dalemark has been united by a single ruler, but not by Queen Noreth. Rather, this leader is the mysterious Amil the Great about whom very little has been recorded in history, so his identity is unknown to Maewen’s contemporaries.

Just before the wizard Wend sends Maewen back in time, he tells her about Noreth’s disappearance at the hands of Kankredin, this world’s version of the devil. Wend says bitterly: “That was how Amil, so-called the Great, was able to claim the crown” (p. 77). This description seems to set Amil up as a villain who

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13 All three of these protagonists are discussed in Chapter 5.
snatches the crown from the rightful queen, who has already been established to be a kind and decent person at this point. However, Amil the Great turns out to be none other than Mitt, who is the other focal character of the novel alongside Maewen, as well as being one of the protagonists of Drowned Ammet (1977), an earlier book in the series. This means that he is someone the readers are already familiar with and rooting for. He is also a hero – neither a tyrant nor a pretender – and his claims to the crown turn out to be legitimate, more so than Noreth’s, as he is descended from Dalemark’s first king. Noreth herself, while being a good person, has been misguided all along, as the voice speaking to her is actually that of Kankredin, who has been using her for her entire life to further his plans to rule the land and upset the course of history. Also, despite being a trained fighter, she cannot save herself from being ambushed and having her throat cut by an assassin.

At first, Maewen’s plan in this situation is simply to carry on until Wend’s magic brings her back to her own time. She does not mean to change history, but simply to observe it as it happens around her. But her attitude changes when she starts feeling empowered in her own abilities. Wearing Noreth’s armour excites her: “She felt a mad, hilarious pleasure. I’m a warrior maid! I’m changing into a fighting-girl under my own eyes – what I can see of myself!” (p. 75) After encouraging a group of miners to go on strike, she feels even more empowered:

This afternoon, she had done something which really would affect history and, because of that, whether it was impossible or not, she wanted this mad adventure of Noreth’s to succeed. She wanted to take it and make it work. Maybe, when the time came, she would not tamely hand over to Amil the Great. That would be changing history indeed – if only she could think how to do it. (Jones, 1993, p. 107, italics in the original)

As Maewen comes from a fairly wealthy family, rather than hailing from a working-class background herself, it does, however, seem patronising that the workers need her initiative to figure out how to fight for their own rights. Thus, while the narrative advocates for workers’ rights, it does so in a somewhat paternalistic way that fails to be truly intersectional. It bears mentioning that Mitt and Moril, both of whom are likable characters, come from poor backgrounds, although neither of them are workers, as Mitt grew up in a middle-class
household after his peasant father’s death, and Moril is a travelling musician.

Despite her bravado, Maewen accomplishes little else, and actually has barely any effect on the things that happen around her and to her. She needs to be rescued by her male companions several times and never manages to rescue anyone else (though arguably this is because she is the only one in the group without any combat training or magical skills). When Mitt rescues her, she starts crying and reprimands herself by thinking: “How – how totally – girly!” (p. 184, italics in the original) The implication is that being “girly” is silly and embarrassing – a statement that is reinforced when Mitt and Moril mock Kialan for his effeminate looks and manner.

When the time comes to take the crown, Maewen has already learned from Mitt and Moril that it is Kankredin who has been talking to her and that Noreth has been killed, so she does not try to seize it for herself. Of all the people present – Maewen, Moril, Mitt, Kialan, and Ynen – she is the only one who does not have a claim to the throne, though this is because she is out of her own time, not because she is female (although, significantly, she is also the only girl present). Mitt is deemed the most suitable candidate by all, and so becomes the new leader of Dalemark. At this point Maewen has fallen in love with him and wishes to stay with him in the past, forsaking her old life and family, even though she knows that Amil the Great, meaning Mitt, is her ancestor. She fleetingly thinks of her family, but does not really seem to care about their feelings: “The One alone knew what Mum and Aunt Liss would feel, but this was what she wanted’ (pp. 276-277, italics in the original). Despite her reluctance to go, however, she is finally sent back to her own time.

While Kankredin has been defeated in the past, parts of him have survived and in Maewen’s time they put themselves back together. This finally seems to give Maewen the opportunity to be the hero of her own story, as none of her friends from the past are there to help her this time, and she remembers a magical word of power that Mitt used earlier, which might be strong enough to banish Kankredin again. But before she gets the chance to put her knowledge to use, Mitt – who has achieved immortality – appears, defeats Kankredin with an even stronger word of power, and even soothes the traitorous Wend. Meanwhile all Maewen does is watch. In the last scene of the novel, she runs off to find Mitt to continue her relationship with him, not caring that he is now over two hundred years older than her, nor that he is her ancestor.
The story not only undermines Maewen by letting her accomplish very little, but it also undermines Hildy, the heroine from a previous book in the series, by turning her into an arrogant and mean-spirited character. When Hildy appeared in *Drowned Ammet*, she was a likeable girl who lived in constant fear of her evil, oppressive grandfather, Earl Hadd. In *The Crown of Dalemark* she makes it clear that she looks down on Mitt, who was previously her friend, for being a commoner. She also ignores her gentle brother and argues with her firm, yet kind, father. Although they grew up in the same luxurious, yet abusive, circumstances as Hildy, she is the only one of the three who starts taking after her grandfather. This makes the change in her character seem particularly sexist.

Maewen instantly dislikes Hildy when she meets her, and is upset at the way she treats Mitt:

> When Hildy nodded coolly and turned away, Maewen could have slapped her. He’s looked forward to meeting you, and worried about you – which is more than you deserve! – and you do *this* to him! she thought. You little – little *cow*! (Jones, 1993, p. 177, italics in the original)

Other characters agree with Maewen’s assessment of Hildy. Kialan calls her a “white-faced little sow”, declaring, “She’ll be worse than Earl Hadd before she’s through – she’s the image of him already!” (p. 175)

As Hildy becomes more snobbish after spending time at an expensive girls’ school, this might be a commentary on public schools. In another of Jones’s works, *The Lives of Christopher Chant* (1988), Millie becomes obsessed with schoolgirl stories and desperately wants to go to a girls’ school to play hockey and have midnight feasts. Her wish is granted at the end of the novel, but in a later book, *Conrad’s Fate* (2005), it is revealed that the school Millie goes to is unlike her romanticised fantasies. Instead, she is bullied for being a misfit and is deeply unhappy. Hildy, on the other hand, adapts to public school life quickly, and seemingly internalises its elitist attitudes, which is what makes her reject her former friends. However, the fact that the only other girl from the school whom the readers meet is portrayed as being a very nice person – as well as being Hildy’s best friend – rather confuses this point. In reality, the narrative reason for Hildy’s change in character is probably to make her seem less compelling as a romantic interest for Mitt, freeing the role for Maewen.
Perhaps the only female character in the novel who is not undermined by the narrative in some way is Cennoretth, who first appeared in *The Spellicoats* (1979) as a young girl, but is now a powerful, benevolent witch. She sees through Maewen’s disguise straight away, recognising that she is not Noreth, and her cabin is the only place where Kankredin’s influence cannot be felt. Unfortunately, she only appears in one scene.

While the story certainly plays with readers’ expectations, it does so in a way that makes the heroine more passive than the male characters around her. Some of the depictions of class in the novel are also interesting, such as the commentary on the elitism of public schools, and the fact that a commoner ends up inheriting the crown, rather than a noble girl. Even so, the fact that Hildy becomes an unlikable snob, whereas her brother and father, who come from the same background as herself, remain sympathetic, makes her arrogance seem like a result of her gender rather than her class, and so fails to be subversive. All of this makes the book a disappointing conclusion to the “Dalemark” quartet.

One of the main problems with *The Crown of Dalemark* is that Maewen ends up defining herself mostly by her relationship to her love interest. The same is true of Polly in *Fire and Hemlock* (1985), another novel by Diana Wynne Jones. Unlike Maewen, Polly does not need constant rescuing and, in fact, she manages to save her love interest, Tom Lynn, from the clutches of a wicked Fairy Queen. What lessens the impact of her achievements is that she only does these things because she has been manipulated for half her life by a man ten years her senior who takes a romantic (and possibly sexual) interest in her. They first meet when Polly is ten years old and Tom is around twenty. At this point Tom is in thrall to the Fairy Queen who, in nine years’ time, intends to spirit him away forever into Fairyland, unless someone who is in love with him releases him from the Fairy Queen’s spell. Tom notices Polly straight away as soon as she enters the funeral where they meet (probably because she is the only person who is not supposed to be there). The narrative follows Polly’s point of view, so the reader does not get an insight into Tom’s thoughts, but it is heavily implied that by the time they have their first conversation, Tom has already decided to use Polly for his purposes, and thus to groom the little girl to make her fall in love with him. They invent a game in which they tell each other stories about their heroic alter egos, and Tom uses this game as a pretext to
keep in touch with Polly. He invites her to his house, takes her on outings, and frequently sends her letters. When, as a young teenager, Polly becomes preoccupied with other things and does not write to Tom as often, he still pursues their relationship relentlessly by continually sending her gifts of books. These books not only serve to win Polly’s trust and admiration, but the stories in them are also meant to teach Polly about fairies, so that when the time comes, she will know what to do to break the Queen’s spell.

The relationship becomes explicitly romantic when Polly is fifteen and Tom is twenty-five. To protect her from the Fairy Queen’s notice, Tom pretends not to be interested in Polly, but still teasingly encourages her to take a good look at his naked back when he is injured, even while knowing that she is infatuated with him. Once the Fairy Queen discovers Tom’s plan, she uses her powers to drive him and Polly apart, but Tom gets a chance to say goodbye to her first in a very uncomfortable scene:

Polly looked round to find that Tom had come out into the hall too. “Goodbye, Polly,” he said and bent down to give her a kiss on the forehead. Since Polly turned and looked up as he did it, the kiss landed, briefly and awkwardly, on her mouth. Brief, awkward, and sideways, ...which caused Tom to take hold of her shoulder to pull her into a better position. But Seb gave a meaningful look and he let go. (Jones, 1985, p. 348)

They meet again when Polly is nineteen, and almost immediately start hugging and kissing like lovers. While running his hands through her hair, Tom even tells her, “I’ve always loved your hair” (p. 373), implying that he had already found her attractive as a child.

Polly is presented as a feisty tomboy who prefers adventures to playing with dolls. She wants to see herself as a hero, and is scornful of the girl in a fairy tale she reads, who “had only herself to blame for her troubles. She was told not to do a thing and she did. And she cried so much. Polly despised her” (p. 179). She also tells her mother: “I don’t think I will get married... . I’m going to train to be a hero instead” (p. 91). However, from the moment she meets Tom, her life and her personality are entirely dependent on him. Looking back on her time with him, she realises this:

Almost everything Polly did in those five years went back to Mr Lynn somehow. The four years after that had been formless and humdrum years. Polly had done things, true,
but it had all been without shape, as if she had been filleted away from her own motives and the things which gave her shape. (p. 319)

As a child Polly hates her long, blonde hair and begs her parents to allow her to have it cut short. She is partly inspired by her friend Nina, whom she admires for her courage to be different. Nina is described as “a big, fat girl with short, frizzy hair, glasses, and a loud giggle”, whereas Polly is “an extremely pretty little girl” (p. 16), yet Polly wants to look more like Nina. However, after Tom compliments Polly on her hair, she no longer wants to cut it: “She saw why Mr Lynn called it lovely now” (p. 112). This erases any subversiveness that was displayed when the girl who is pretty in a traditionally Eurocentric way (petite and blonde) admires and wishes to look more like the fun, fat girl with the frizzy hair. Nina grows up to become curvy and very outwardly sexual while Polly continues being conventionally attractive in a far more refined way. As Nina becomes a less likeable character and stops being Polly’s friend once she starts showing an interest in boys and sex, this can also be seen as an instance of shaming her for her sexuality. Unlike Polly, she is the one who pursues boys, rather than being pursued by them.

What is perhaps even stranger than Tom Lynn’s attentions towards a child is the fact that none of the other adults in Polly’s life seem to be concerned about this. Polly’s mother is portrayed as being a neglectful and emotionally abusive parent, but it is still peculiar that she has no qualms about driving her young daughter to a strange man’s house, and only tells her not to “let him spoil you, Polly, and don’t be a pest” (p. 74). After the visit, she does not even inquire about what Polly did at Tom’s house. Polly’s Granny, who is the only positive parental figure in Polly’s life, seems to show some concern at first, as, for example, when Tom again invites Polly to see him, she says: “I’m not sure I like it, Polly, but if he’s free to ask, I suppose he must want to see you. But be wary of what he gives you” (p. 110). However, as it turns out, she is only worried because she knows that Tom is connected to the Fairy Queen and her ilk, and not because his interest in Polly is inappropriate.

There is another boy in Polly’s life who seeks to gain her favour. His name is Seb and, like Tom, he is in thrall to the Fairy Queen, and hopes to get Polly to save him. Unlike Tom, he is only three years older than Polly, rather than ten, but the developmental differences between a thirteen-year-old and a sixteen-
year-old are still significant enough to make such a relationship problematic. Seb is more physically aggressive in his pursuit of Polly than Tom is, often kissing her without her consent. The narrative explains that

Polly was continually trying to get rid of Seb, or at least evade his grabbing and kissing her... . But each time she tried, Seb got so upset, so humble and miserable, that Polly got soft-hearted and did not send Seb packing after all. (Jones, 1985, p. 261)

The aggressive way Seb pursues Polly is possibly meant to serve as a comparison to Tom, to show that – unlike Seb – he respects Polly’s boundaries, and that despite his manipulation of her, he is still a good person, as he does not physically force himself on Polly. However, this interpretation sets the bar for human decency rather low.

Polly finally manages to break up with Seb by yelling at him: “I told you to stop bothering me. Go away and don’t come back for a year. I’m too young!” (p. 264, italics in the original). At the same time, she does not feel that she is too young to pursue a relationship with the much older Tom, and even laments that “[h]e thinks I’m just a child!” (p. 269)

Once Polly learns that both Seb and Tom have been using her, she is angry with Seb, but cannot help also feeling a little sorry for him, as “she did see that Seb had been afraid for most of his life” (pp. 375-376). She does not feel the same anger towards Tom, even though what he did is not that different from Seb’s actions. To save Tom from the Fairy Queen’s spell, Polly has to pretend to hate him, so she says things to him that are completely justified – such as, “[y]ou took me over as a child to save your own skin” (p. 386) – but she does not mean them, as she actually loves Tom and wants to be with him, and so the novel ends with her offering him the possibility of a proper romantic relationship.

Farah Mendlesohn writes about this scene:

What is startling is that Polly’s accusations are the absolute truth. He has used her; he has manipulated a child and put her in danger to save his own skin. Nikki Humble points out that this also defuses “the dodgiest aspect of the narrative,” a relationship between a little girl and a grown man. (2005, p. 164)

I disagree not only with the conclusion that this final scene defuses “the dodgiest aspect of the narrative”, but with the viewpoint that it can be defused at
all. Whether intentionally or not, *Fire and Hemlock* is a story about child-grooming, disguised as a romance. It is common in the media to portray sexual relationships between teenage girls and adult men. Sometimes these relationships are romantic in nature, at other times they are presented as a type of sexual awakening. Often they are used to show the teenage characters’ maturity. Rarely are these relationships portrayed in a negative light, as even when they do not work out, they provide the teenage characters with valuable life experiences. Feminist writer Gina Tonic discusses how these representations perpetuate harmful myths about female sexuality that have real-life repercussions. As she writes:

> By making relationships like these seem like a right [sic] of passage for young women, by normalizing them to such an extent that it can even be called a trope, a disturbing turnaround happens, in which women are seen as the victors of a predatory situation, rather than the victims. (2016, unpaged)

Tonic explains that teenage girls in fiction are often depicted as having sexual powers over adult men. This appears to be true of Polly, to some extent. Mr O’Keefe, a man she used to run errands for when she was a child, tells her: “Hey now! Don’t go doing that! …Smiling like that at the men… . You’ve a soft heart someone will take advantage of, if you go tempting us poor lads that way” (Jones, 1985, p. 314). O’Keefe is portrayed as a slightly unsavoury character, so him blaming Polly for his predatory remarks could be seen as being intentionally creepy (even though Polly appears unconcerned by it), if not for the fact that characters meant to be seen as sympathetic do not see anything wrong with being attracted to underage girls either. Narratives like the ones Tonic describes tell teenage girls that being sexually desirable to adult men is empowering and makes them more mature, but in reality it makes them more vulnerable to abuse. As Ginny Brown writes:

> Sex with adults can be incredibly harmful to teens. The power imbalance caused by age means that the teen is much more likely to feel pressured to have sex that they don’t really want or are unsure about. This coercion can lead to all the harmful effects of any sexual violence: depression, low self-esteem, PTSD, and suicidal thoughts. Young teens who have sex with older people are also more likely to experience STIs, unintended pregnancies,
These risks are increased when other power imbalances come into play between the teenager and the adult, stemming from factors such as race, disability, or social status. On this subject, Sandra Kim (2014) cites studies that find that gender non-conforming children are far more likely to be sexually abused than children who perform their gender in more normative ways, and that disabled children are more than twice as likely to be molested as children without disabilities. These findings show that marginalisation is an important factor in sexual abuse, and that this subject needs to be considered from an intersectional perspective.

Brown also addresses the argument that claiming that teenagers are less capable of giving informed consent than adults is ageist. She says that respecting teenagers and avoiding ageism doesn't mean treating them exactly like adults. Fighting oppression isn’t about pretending differences between people don’t exist. It’s about recognizing the power dynamics that affect people, and working to achieve justice despite these power dynamics. (2016, unpaged)

Ignoring such power dynamics makes for a shallow interpretation of feminism, and can be harmful for marginalised people. This is why it is important to point out that the relationships presented in texts such as Fire and Hemlock are neither healthy nor empowering for the girls in them.

Not only does the narrative implicitly approve of Polly’s and Tom’s manipulative relationship, but in the world of the novel, adults lusting after children and teenagers seems to be a common and accepted occurrence. Both the aforementioned Mr O’Keefe and a former boyfriend of Polly’s mother are revealed to have been infatuated with Polly when she was around twelve years old. Tom’s girlfriend, whom he only courts to keep the Fairy Queen’s attention away from Polly, is immediately jealous of Polly when they first meet, clearly seeing an eleven-year-old as a viable romantic rival. Additionally, one of Tom’s adult friends asks fifteen-year-old Polly to bring a school friend along to their meeting, because “[h]e loves blind dates” (p. 277, italics in the original). This is not treated as a joke.

Thus, ultimately, the novel’s feminist message fails not only because the female protagonist is deprived of her own agency, but also because it seems to
encourage relationships that are inherently predatory and harmful, especially for young girls.

Additionally, both *The Crown of Dalemark* and *Fire and Hemlock* put girls at odds with one another as they compete for male attention. This occurs with Maewen and Hildy in *The Crown of Dalemark*, and between Polly and Mary Fields in *Fire and Hemlock*. Maewen is also the only girl in a group of male heroes, and Polly often falls out with her female friends. This type of characterisation is commonly meant to make the female protagonist seem special, but is more likely to showcase internalised misogyny within them, and deprive them of female solidarity. As M.K. Rudman writes: “Many books make it clear that the strong willed, intelligent, self-managing, disobedient female heroes are anomalies. Some female heroes are extremely lonely and unhappy young women, despite their bravado” (quoted in Lehr, 2001, p. 193). In this regard, texts like *Princess Academy* are more feminist than stories about lone heroines, because they do not portray female achievements as something rare and extraordinary, but rather as a natural result of girls supporting one another and being allowed to be themselves.

As these examples show, having a girl as a protagonist does not necessarily subvert gendered expectations about heroism, passivity, or romantic relationships. If a female character needs saving far more often than she saves others, it matters little whether she is presented as being brave and plucky: she still follows the archetype of the damsel in distress. This is the case with both Edie and Maewen. Even though Polly rescues her male love interest, she is shown to have very little agency in the matter, which lessens the feminist message the book is trying to express. The fact that it seems to approve of paedophilic relationships is even more troubling, and undermines the attempt at female empowerment even further.

Optimally, a good intersectional feminist story should feature a variety of female characters from diverse backgrounds, with different roles and personalities, none of whom are solely defined by the male characters around them. And even if they need to be rescued once in a while, they should get an equal chance to play the hero.

**Conclusion**

Heroism is mostly defined in terms of defeating evil and overcoming obstacles,
but even in stories in which there is an evil force to be resisted, this conflict does not always solely revolve around violence. While books like the “Stoneheart” trilogy focus mostly on the fighting, other texts – such as the “Old Kingdom” series and *The Spiderwick Chronicles* – show that cleverness, magic, creation, and diplomacy can be just as important as physical strength in making a difference. The texts by Eva Ibbotson and Shannon Hale explore themes of cooperation and solidarity, and show that in many situations kindness and understanding are superior to violence. Occasionally these traits are even used to bring down an oppressive system based on patriarchal and elitist values, rather than simply giving a single character of low status an opportunity for personal advancement. The best example of this kind of storyline occurs in *Princess Academy: Palace of Stone*, in which Miri’s working-class background is integral to her heroism.

Not all the novels I have discussed in this chapter are successful in making the girls as capable as the boys, or in making alternative types of heroism seem as effective as brute strength. The “Stoneheart” trilogy, as well as *The Crown of Dalemark* and *Fire and Hemlock*, all undermine their own message by showing that their heroines are not in control of their own narratives and destinies.

There is little racial diversity within the texts discussed in this section. Several of the texts take place in a secondary world, and most of those worlds are based on medieval Europe, according to ethnocentric fantasy tradition, and feature mostly white characters. *The Crown of Dalemark* presents both a pre-industrial Dalemark, as well as a more modern one, with trains and computers, but the latter appears to be just as racially homogenous as the former. This type of representation appears to confirm the stereotype that fantasy is an overwhelmingly white genre, even though there is no reason for it be so. *The Book of a Thousand* subverts fantasy traditions by presenting a Mongolian fantasy world rather than a European one, featuring a number of well-rounded Asian characters who break stereotypes about how Asian women (and Asian men to some extent) are expected to behave.

The most successful feminist stories are the ones that show that heroism can take many forms and many faces, and that positive traits can be found and nurtured in anyone, regardless of race, class, or gender.

In this chapter I have addressed some of the assumptions about fairy-tale heroes and heroines and shown how they are represented in modern stories:
the characters’ activity or passivity, their social class, their rivalries, and their alliances. I briefly touched upon the way that physical beauty is emphasised, which is common in descriptions of fairy-tale heroines. Certainly, it pertains to some of the heroines discussed in this section, as, for example, the way Mirella’s plainness in *The Ogre of Oglefort* is considered to be unusual for a princess, and the way Polly’s beautiful hair is considered an important feature. While commonly being treated like an objective value, beauty is dependent on various societal factors, favouring the privileged in society over the marginalised. This is the subject of the next chapter.
Chapter 3: Beauty

The beauty contest is a constant and primary device in many of the stories. Where there are several daughters in a family, or several unrelated girls in a story, the prettiest is invariably singled out and designated for reward, or first for punishment and later for reward. (Lieberman, 1993, p. 187)

Introduction

The most important attribute of most fairy-tale heroines is beauty. Not only is their beauty emphasised, but it is also often used to contrast them with other women who are implicitly of lesser worth. In this chapter, I want to look at this notion more critically, showing how physical beauty usually intersects with other features, some visible, like race and ethnicity, age, and disability, and others, like class, less so. Before introducing this, more intersectional perspective, though, let me begin with more traditional notions of beauty.

Cinderella is beautiful; her stepsisters are ugly. Furthermore, Cinderella is kind and humble, whereas her stepsisters are cruel and vain, so inner beauty is seen to correspond with outward attractiveness. “Beauty and the Beast” features three sisters, all of whom are described as beautiful, but the narrator assures the reader that the youngest, the protagonist, “was not only more beautiful than her sisters, she was also better behaved” (Tatar, 1999, p. 32). In “Snow White”, as well, the prettiest woman is also the most virtuous one. Marcia K. Lieberman points out that this dichotomy can easily cause girls to antagonise one another:

If a child identifies with the beauty, she may learn to be suspicious of ugly girls, who are portrayed as cruel, sly, and unscrupulous in these stories; if she identifies with the plain girls, she may learn to be suspicious and jealous of pretty girls, beauty being a gift of fate, not something that can be attained. There are no examples of a cross-pattern, that is, of plain but good-tempered girls. (1993, p. 188)

Indeed, while there are beautiful wicked women in fairy tales (albeit less beautiful than the innocent heroine), unattractive women are rarely portrayed with good character traits, with the possible exception of helpful older women, such as Mother Holle. As Jennifer Waelti-Walters states, “ugliness in fairy tales is generally accepted to be the outward and manifest sign of wickedness” (1982, p. 45). Maria Tatar, however, points out that this might apply only to
women. She talks about Madam de Beaumont’s version of “Beauty and the Beast”, stating that it teaches “the importance of valuing essences over appearances”. However,

[that the... lesson should be inscribed in a tale with a heroine who embodies physical perfection and a seamless fit between external appearances and inner essences is an irony that seems to have escaped the French governess. In men, by contrast, external appearances, and even charm, count for nothing. (1999, p. 27)

Tatar goes on to quote the tale, in which Beauty expresses the view that “[i]t is neither good looks nor great wit that makes a woman happy with her husband, but character, virtue, and kindness” (p. 27). Despite this realisation, however, Beauty is rewarded for her lack of focus on outward appearances by having her lover transform from a hideous beast into a handsome prince, so while being beautiful is less important to fairy tale heroes than to heroines, male heroes can still not be allowed to be ugly unless they are under a spell and are actually good-looking underneath.

However, as Lieberman writes:

The immediate and predictable result of being beautiful is being chosen, this word having profound importance to a girl. The beautiful girl does not have to do anything to merit being chosen; she does not have to show pluck, resourcefulness, or wit; she is chosen because she is beautiful. (1993, p. 188, italics in the original)

This marks a difference between men and women in fairy tales. Even handsome men have to show other qualities than good looks in order to gain their reward. If a woman is beautiful, however, her other qualities matter less. Cinderella may be virtuous and hard-working, but it is her beauty that allows her to marry the prince and leave her abusive family behind. The same applies to Snow White. Her prince first sees her while she is lying, seemingly dead, in her glass coffin, and so never even has a conversation with her before falling in love with her for her beauty.

These double standards still exist in the media and society today. Naomi Wolf writes extensively about the damaging effects these standards have on women, saying: “The larger world never gives girls the message that their
bodies are valuable simply because they are inside them” (1990, p. 205). According to R.W. Connell, “[b]oys are not generally taught to make themselves attractive” (2002, p. 3), while “[g]irls are still taught by mass culture that they need above all to be desirable, as if their main task were to lie on silk cushions waiting for Prince Charming to come” (p. 2). The fairy tale reference here is particularly poignant and demonstrates just how much the old stories still influence our way of thinking today. The effect of these double standards is that women are reduced to objects to be looked at, while men do the looking and thus retain their subject positions. Women, therefore, are not only objectified by men, but increasingly by women themselves. All of this ties into Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Susan Faludi argues that this focus on tying female beauty to female virtue is a strategy to keep women obedient and confined within patriarchy:

the beauty standard converges with the social campaign against wayward women, allying itself with “traditional” morality; a porcelain and unblemished exterior becomes proof of a woman’s internal purity, obedience and restraint. The beautiful… woman is controlled in both senses of the word. Her physique has been domesticated, her appearance as tamed and manicured as the grounds of a gentleman’s estate. (1992, p. 241)

Similarly, she argues that beauty standards often require women to look frail, almost like invalids, thus encouraging physical weakness in women, making them easier to control.

Naomi Wolf discusses many of the cultural myths surrounding beauty in her work. She talks about how society treats beauty as if it were a natural, objective quality that women must strive to attain. According to this myth, Wolf writes, seeking after beauty

is biological, sexual, and evolutionary: Strong men battle for beautiful women, and beautiful women are more reproductively successful. Women’s beauty must correlate to their fertility, and since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless. (1990, p. 12)

The main problem with Wolf’s and Faludi’s theories is that they focus on the women who are most visible in society – namely, white, middle-class, able-bodied women – but disregard the women on the margins. Because of this,
they do not consider the ways in which beauty standards are influenced by various power dynamics, such as class, race, and physical ability. Thus, when Faludi says that women are required to look like invalids, that excludes real invalids. As mentioned in the Literature Review, women who are visibly disabled or chronically ill are considered unfeminine and sexless and need to make far more of an effort with their appearance than able-bodied women to have their gender and sexuality recognised. Thus, the beauty ideal is for women to look weak but not actually be sickly in a way that inconveniences others.

 Mostly, this emphasis on frailty is connected to class, which is another point that many feminist authors fail to address. In fairy tales, rich women who are unused to physical labour are more likely to have delicate bodies and pale skin, in contrast to strong, suntanned peasant women. While there are many examples of beautiful poor girls in fairy tales, they tend to be portrayed as looking more like noblewomen rather than working women. Some of these beauty standards have shifted since the industrial revolution, as most working-class jobs take place indoors nowadays. A tan is now an indicator of someone with enough leisure time to sunbathe regularly, rather than someone who needs to labour outside.

Furthermore, Western beauty standards are based on the values of white supremacy. Features connected with white gentile women (light skin, straight hair, button noses) are thus considered to be the pinnacle of beauty. In contrast, women of colour are often made to feel ugly by default. The only way non-white women can approximate Western standards of beauty is by approximating whiteness. Often this is done through physical alterations, such as straightening the hair, lightening the skin and having surgery on the eyes, nose and other features considered too “ethnic” to be attractive. As indicated above, the injunction against brown skin does not apply to white women with a tan. The same is true for many other features that are considered undesirable in women of colour. When seen on a white woman they are not only acceptable, but often fashionable. As Rachel Kuo writes: “Whiteness is simultaneously reinforced as norm while ‘otherness’ gets fetishized and commoditized as ‘exotic’” (2017, unpaged).

In fairy tales, whiteness is considered most attractive as well, as there are tales within the Grimms’ collection in which a beautiful white maiden is punished by being magically turned into an ugly black girl (“The White and the Black
Bride” and “The King’s Son Who Feared Nothing”). Patricia Hill Collins argues that this sort of contrast between black and white, between ugliness and beauty, is necessary to uphold Western beauty standards: “Within the binary thinking that underpins intersecting oppressions, blue-eyed, blond [sic], thin White women could not be considered beautiful without the Other – Black women with African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips and kinky hair” (2000, p. 89). Moreover, black women do not constitute the only “Other” to white women’s beauty. For instance, physical traits common in Jewish people – such as bushy hair, thick eyebrows, and prominent noses – are often considered not only unattractive but evil-looking, and are in fiction commonly seen on wicked wizards and witches. The same is true for physical disabilities or deformities. Lois Keith points out that fairy-tale witches are often depicted as “crook-backed, deformed and supported by crutches and sticks” (2001, p. 17).

From these descriptions, it is clear what is considered ugly in fairy tales, but what constitutes beauty, in contrast, is somewhat vague. Sometimes mention is made of traits considered attractive in former times, such as pale skin (a sign of high class, as well as being of European descent, as discussed above) and red lips, but mostly the narrative simply states that a character is beautiful or ugly, often using superlative descriptions such as: “The youngest was so beautiful that even the sun, which has seen so much, was filled with wonder when it shone upon her face” (“The Frog King, or Iron Heinrich”, Tatar, 2002, p. 116). The implication is that beauty is a universal, objective trait not subject to changing societal standards or personal taste. Even though standards of beauty are very different today and vary from country to country, beauty is still frequently treated as though it were unchanging, self-evident, and not reliant on societal prejudices.

In this chapter I will deconstruct some of society’s common assumptions about beauty from the perspective of intersectional theory by examining how physical descriptions of characters are presented in some of my primary texts. I will compare characters considered attractive with those considered unattractive, and show how dynamics of gender, race, and class influence their description, both in sympathetic and unsympathetic ways. I will finish the chapter with a detailed discussion of “fat-shaming”.

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The Morality of Beauty

Fairy tales frequently treat beauty as though it were a self-evident fact that outward good looks are a manifestation of inner goodness, showing that only conventionally attractive people are capable of goodness, and that anyone who falls outside of society’s beauty standards should be mistrusted. Kerry Mallan writes that ugliness was often considered the painful opposite of beauty, and even more cruelly, the aesthetic equivalent of evil. Fairy tales are replete with examples of the ugly character as evil incarnate – ogres, witches, crones, demons, giants, gnomes, and monsters... . Both beauty and ugliness provoke reactions in the perceiver. In the case of beauty, the reaction is often admiration and praise, whereas ugliness often may provoke fear and repulsion. (2009, p. 84)

This fixation on beauty and condemnation of ugliness is often seen as a peculiar feature of fairy tales, but modern media is just as guilty of perpetuating this view as classic tales are. Although modern children’s authors commonly attempt to teach the lesson that outward appearances can be deceiving, it is still surprisingly common to see that lesson disregarded by the authors themselves. As Mallan states, “contemporary stories continue to yoke ugliness to the undesirable, the pitiful, or the ridiculous” (p. 84). In light of how beauty is defined by the powerful in society, and ugliness is connected with the marginalised, this trope can easily foster distrust towards people of colour, disabled people, poor people, and gender non-conforming people. Descriptions of evil characters who are implicitly meant to be unappealing often resort to problematic stereotypes, demonising people with certain facial features and characteristics. For example, Diana Wynne Jones describes the titular character of “The Fat Wizard” as having “a fat, evil face with large mauve lips, a nose that was both fat and hooked at once, and dark, unfeeling, unscrupulous eyes” (2004, p. 404). This description is meant to show that the wizard is both evil and ugly, but it raises the question of what exactly is meant by an “evil face”, and what it is about “large mauve lips” or a “fat and hooked” nose that immediately evokes villainy. Mostly, the connection here is made between fatness and wickedness. The wizard’s fatness is evidence of his evilness. There are other, subtler inferences as well. Referring to someone as having a hooked
nose tends to be an indirect way of saying that someone is Jewish or Middle-Eastern. As mentioned above, Jewish features tend to be connected with evil characters, such as wicked witches; so, depicting a villain with a large, hooked nose is likely to evoke anti-Semitic associations even when the character in question is not meant to be Jewish. Examples of this include Severus Snape from the “Harry Potter” series (Rowling, 1997-2007), the Wicked Witch of the West from the film adaptation of The Wizard of Oz (Fleming, 1939), and Count Olaf in the illustrations for A Series of Unfortunate Series (Snicket, 1999-2006). Similarly, full lips and broad noses are common in black people, so even though the character described above is probably not intended to be black, referring to “large… lips” and “a nose that was both fat and hooked at once” as self-evidently negative traits has racist implications. Again, an intersectional approach is better equipped to make sense of these various aspects of discrimination, showing how complicit they are, such that, even when they are not explicit, there is a thread that insidiously links ugliness to dark skin, to economic disadvantage, and to imperfection, just as beauty is linked to racial purity and wealth.

Describing eyes as looking evil or “unscrupulous” can also have troubling implications. Eyes that are considered untrustworthy are often described in terms that evoke East-Asian stereotypes, being “narrow” or “inscrutable”. “Shifty” eyes are also usually an indicator that a character cannot be trusted, when in reality, avoiding eye contact is a common symptom of autism and other neurodivergent disorders. Thus, adding value judgements to physical descriptions can easily result in problematic connotations, even if these are unintentional.

To reiterate, in most modern instances when a villain is racially coded, it is not a case of an author deliberately demonising Jewish or Asian or black people. But when called upon to describe a character who looks evil, writers will often revert to old stereotypes that are ingrained in the public consciousness, such as equating prominent noses with wickedness, perhaps without knowing the origins of these stereotypes.

To examine how the beauty of characters is by no means restricted to their aesthetic appeal but is connected with other socio-cultural elements, it is useful to look at several characters for whom appearance, either beautiful or ugly, is a central feature.
I shall start with a few characters from Eva Ibbotson’s *The Secret of Platform 13* (1994). This story takes place on a utopian island where humans and all kinds of magical creatures live together in harmony. The island is ruled by a benevolent king and queen. The queen is described as being “young and kind and beautiful” (p. 6), while there is no such description of the king. This is reminiscent of fairy-tale traditions, in which being beautiful is an expected requirement for a young queen, more so than for most other characters. Thus, not all the sympathetic female characters are described in such a way. This, of course, not only shows how beauty is gendered, but also how it is based on class. Age is also an important factor, as the narrative emphasises that the queen is both young and beautiful, while none of the older women are described as being good-looking. Beauty is thus the privilege of the queen, due to her being young and royal, but also her responsibility, as a woman in a high position. None of the other inhabitants of the island are required to be attractive in the same way, and some of the non-human ones are even allowed to feel pride in their ugliness. This includes one of the main characters: a young hag named Odge. She comes “from a long line of frightful and monstrous women who flapped and shrieked about, giving nightmares to people who had been wicked or making newts come out of the mouths of anyone who told a lie” (p. 21). There follow some individual descriptions of the monstrous features of some of Odge’s sisters. Some of them are simply strange, such as the one with “stripey feet” (p. 21), while others have features traditionally considered ugly and disgusting, such as “black hairs like piano wires coming out of her ears” (p. 21). Despite their frightening appearance, these hags are benevolent, as is evident from the fact that they only punish bad people. Odge herself is presented in a very likeable way: she is kind and caring, but also feisty and headstrong. However, she is a bit of a disappointment to her family because she looks like a regular human girl and not at all like a hag. This plot point perpetuates the distinction between “normal” and “monstrous”. The hags take pride in their appearance, but are fully aware that they are ugly, whereas Odge is seen as disappointingly normal. Normality is thus defined as being – or at least looking – human, even though the story takes place in a world in which hags, fairies, ogres, and harpies are just as commonplace as humans. Furthermore, the type of human Odge resembles is a thin, white, able-bodied girl, so this restricts the definition of normality even further. It is also worth
noting that most of the monstrousness in Odge’s sisters simply consists of exaggerated features that appear in humans as well, such as body hair, long nails, or warts. So while the hags are proud of having warts and body hair, the story still frames these features as grotesque. Besides, even though Odge’s plainness causes her to be self-conscious, making her wish she was as ugly as the rest of her family, it is significant that she is the character the story follows, rather than her sister with the hairy ears, or any other member of her family.

The affectionate description of the hag family’s ugliness is in stark contrast with the descriptions offered of Mrs Trotter and her son Raymond, both of whom are extremely unsympathetic characters. Their large size is presented as a personal flaw, along with their selfishness and greed, making them seem repulsive. The following description, from the scene in which Gurkie the Fey meets Raymond for the first time, provides a good example:

> Feys are used to kissing children and being godmother to almost everyone, but Raymond, bulging out of his yellow silk pyjamas, looked so uninviting that she had to pretend he was a vegetable marrow before she could settle down beside him on the bed. (Ibbotson, 1994, p. 68)

Even though Raymond acts in an unfriendly manner towards Gurkie and the rest of the rescue party, it is made clear that the reason why she feels repulsed by him is not because of his behaviour, but simply because he is fat. The implication is that it is perfectly fine and admirable to be a one-eyed giant like Hans or a warty, hairy hag like Odge’s sisters, but being fat is unacceptable. This presumably means that grotesqueness is only to be celebrated in non-human characters, whereas humans like the queen are required to be beautiful. The Trottoles, therefore, being unattractive humans, must be mocked. This is a common problem in fantasy fiction, in which ugliness in creatures is more acceptable than ugliness in humans. Human beauty and ugliness are invariably presented in binary terms, opposing the dark- and light-skinned, for example, or the poor and rich, the fat and thin, thus evoking structures of power and privilege, whereas monsters can simply be monsters and thus do not have to exist within these binaries. This causes a double standard when authors such as Ibbotson attempt to use non-human characters to show that outward appearance is less important than attributes such as kindness or intelligence, but do not extend the same understanding towards human characters who fall
outside of society’s beauty standards.

In contrast, the protagonists of *Monster Mission* (1999), another of Ibbotson’s works, are three middle-aged aunts who live cut off from human society and in proud defiance of said society’s beauty standards. The oldest, Aunt Etta, is described in somewhat masculine terms as “a tall, bony woman who did fifty press-ups before breakfast and had a small but not at all unpleasant moustache on her upper lip” (pp. 1-2). Aunt Coral, “the arty one” (p. 5) who “liked to stand out from the crowd” (p. 16), is very eccentric, but in a far more feminine way, as she wears numerous necklaces and colourful turbans and likes to dance by moonlight. She is also large and plump. The youngest sister, Myrtle, is not given such a detailed description, but she appears more frail and sensitive than the other two. All three sisters have hairy legs, a source of great pride for them, as can be seen from this conversation between Coral and Fabio:

“I’ve got a kick like a mule. It’s the hair, you see?”
“What hair?”
“The hair on my legs. We’ve all got hairy legs, me and my sisters. Hair gives you strength; it says so in the Bible. Samson and all that.” (Ibbotson, 1999, p. 18)

It is rare to see middle-aged women in heroic roles in the media, much less so middle-aged women who look their age and make no attempt to appeal to the male gaze. *Monster Mission* is thus far more subversive in its approach to beauty than *The Secret of Platform 13*. The emphasis on female body hair is surprising too, as that is a subject usually ignored in children’s fiction. Body hair – particularly on women – can also be racialised. While most women grow body hair, it is often more noticeable on dark-skinned women. Features such as unibrows and moustaches are also more connected with Semitic and Latina women, even though they can appear in women of all races. The result of this racialising is that dark-skinned women are under even more societal pressure to shave than white women. When white women decide to let their body hair grow, they may be lauded by feminists for showing their individuality, but when dark-skinned women do the same, they are frequently derided and called unappealing and unhygienic. As Niloufar Haidari writes:

The personal is political, and any movement towards women spending less time, money and energy on beauty
upkeep that they feel pressured to perform rather than actively choosing to engage in is undeniably positive. However the resurgence of body-hair-feminism in the post-internet post-everything fourth wave world has almost exclusively been on the bodies of white women with little and/or fair body hair. Women of colour are often left feeling as if we are still on the outside due to our often naturally darker and more visible hair. (2015, unpaged)

Similarly, transgender women often have more body hair than cisgender women, and are also under more pressure to appear traditionally feminine, just to be accepted as female. Thus, taking pride in their unshaved legs may not seem like an option for many trans women.

It also bears mentioning that body hair or the lack thereof can be a sign of class as well, since shaving or waxing takes money, time, and energy that poor women do not always have. This is explored a little in Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* (2008), in which Katniss sometimes ponders the absurdity of having to remove her leg hair to be suitable for the televised spectacle that is the Hunger Games, in which she represents the poorest sector of the country, where people do not normally have the luxury of being beautiful. In the film adaptation (Ross, 2012) she is, of course, hairless throughout, as showing body hair on actresses is still generally considered taboo. She is also played by a white actress despite being repeatedly described as being olive-skinned in the book, thus erasing any racial significance tied to her appearance and her social status.

While second-wave feminists have discussed the significance of female body hair, they have not examined other connections between body hair and race, class, and transness. This is where an intersectional approach has more traction.

Living apart from human society, the aunts from *Monster Mission* can be said to transcend societal classes. They are never explicitly described as being white, but in the absence of obvious racial markers, most readers will imagine them so, since whiteness is seen as the default and any other race is a deviation from the norm such that it needs to be mentioned and possibly politicised. This does not mean that the aunts' rebellion against beauty

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14 The Latin prefix “cis”, meaning “on this side of”, is the opposite of the prefix “trans”, meaning “across”. “Cisgender” is thus the opposite of “transgender”. A cisgender person is someone who is not transgender.
standards is insignificant – simply that it is possibly easier for them than if they had been explicitly written as characters of colour. But just as a disparaging description of a villainous white character with a hooked nose can be hurtful to Jewish readers, so a positive description of a white woman’s moustache can be encouraging to a Middle-Eastern girl with more body hair than is traditionally considered attractive or feminine.

The aunts have another sister, Betty, who chose a more conventional lifestyle, “shaving her legs and marrying tax inspectors” (1999, p. 39). They look down on her for this, seeing her as shallow and foolish. When they talk about her foolishness, they usually mention the fact that she shaves her legs. Thus, while the aunts are admirable characters in many respects, they still set up a dichotomy between those who follow society’s beauty standards and those who do not, distancing women who make different choices with their bodies from themselves. This echoes what Wolf says about the real-world consequences of impossible beauty standards:

At present, “beauty” is an economy in which women find the “value” of their faces and bodies impinging, in spite of themselves, on that of other women’s. This constant comparison, in which one woman’s worth fluctuates through the presence of another, divides and conquers. It forces women to be acutely critical of the “choices” other women make about how they look. (1990, p. 284)

This kind of division between women is detrimental to any feminist cause, and is more likely to replace one oppressive set of standards with another. In this regard it is important to take into account issues of ethnicity, class, able-bodiedness, and other factors that determine how a person’s body is perceived by society. As noted above, dark-skinned women are under more pressure to remove their body hair than light-skinned women. Disabled women and transgender women often need to “perform” femininity more thoroughly than cisgender and able-bodied women to be taken seriously. Thus, beauty standards not only divide women by their personal choices, but by race and class and other societal factors as well, which is an issue that Wolf does not address. As a black feminist, Collins takes a more intersectional approach than Wolf. She writes about the racism and colourism inherent in Western beauty standards:
Redefining beauty requires learning to see African-American women who have Black African features as being capable of beauty. Proclaiming Black women “beautiful” and White women “ugly” merely replaces one set of controlling images with another and fails to challenge Eurocentric masculinist aesthetics. (2000, p. 169)

The same is true for other images of what is considered beautiful or ugly. Rather than changing beauty standards to privilege a different group of women, every group should be allowed to see itself as beautiful in its own way, including disabled people, poor people, transgender people, fat people, old people, and people of colour. That way women would no longer feel the need to compete with one another to achieve an arbitrary standard of beauty, or look down on one another for making different choices with regard to those standards. Thus, for example, women with hairy legs, such as the Aunts in *Monster Mission*, could be presented as beautiful and worthwhile without denigrating women with shaved legs, no matter what reason the latter have for making such a choice. But this can happen only if society starts treating people as being valuable in their own right. That way their bodies can be seen as valuable too, just the way they are, rather than as something that needs to be modified or hidden to fit an elitist – that is, white and often patriarchal – cultural narrative.

Another character defined by ugliness is Violante from Cornelia Funke’s *Inkspell* (2005) and *Inkdeath* (2008). Because of a large, conspicuous birthmark on her face she is known as “Her Ugliness”. She is also pallid and sickly-looking, and so does not meet her society’s standards of what a princess should look like at all. In the story within a story, she is never meant to play an important part, but is only mentioned as the villain’s unfortunate little daughter. Once the story moves out of Fenoglio’s hands, Violante grows up to marry Prince Cosimo, bearing him a child, and affecting the course of events in the kingdom. Another character explains her situation:

“If Violante hates anyone, it’s her father himself. She was seven when he sent her here. She was married to Cosimo when she was twelve, and six years later she was a widow. Now there she sits in her father-in-law’s castle, trying to care for his subjects, as he has long neglected to do in his mourning for his son. Violante feels for the weak. Beggars, cripples, widows with hungry children, peasants who can’t pay their taxes – they all go to her, but Violante
is a woman. Any power she has is only because everyone’s afraid of her father...” (Funke, 2005, pp. 106-107)

Although her power is limited, she uses it for good, and more than once aids the heroes of the story, either by asserting her authority over their enemies or by using subterfuge. Her husband, Cosimo – who was actually intended by Fenoglio to be the main force of good in the Inkworld, and is considered by all to be the epitome of a handsome prince – ends up doing harm to a lot of people, which leaves Violante as the braver, more heroic and more just character.

Violante is actually aware that she could mask her imperfections with make-up, but “it was her opinion that beautiful women might be desired but were never respected, certainly not feared. Anyway, she would have felt ridiculous with her lips painted red or her brows plucked to a narrow arch” (Funke, 2008, p. 299). Fenoglio even toys with the idea of using his powers as a writer to make her birthmark disappear, but eventually dismisses this notion as being too sentimental and incredible. Violante’s musings on feminine beauty can be seen as dismissive of women who try to follow beauty standards, but as she does not show any resentment toward the conventionally attractive women she knows (such as her maid Brianna), she seems to be simply expressing her personal choice in the matter. While her distinction between beautiful women who are desired and plain women who are respected is highly simplistic, it might be true for the society she lives in. Her thoughts also show that in her world beauty is solely defined by being desirable to men – as it too often is in our own world as well. At this point Violante’s worth is therefore mostly defined by the men around her, although she defies and challenges their judgement.

After the defeat of the Adderhead, Violante becomes a benevolent ruler over the kingdom. The epilogue, which takes place a few years into her reign, reveals that she is no longer known as “Her Ugliness”, but as “Her Kindliness”, showing that her righteousness and her empathy have become more important in the eyes of the people than her looks. Instead of adjusting herself to fit society’s standards, Violante manages to adjust society, so that it no longer defines her first and foremost by her appearance, although there is no indication whether the same is true for other women in the kingdom, or whether Violante has simply managed to make an exception for herself by virtue of
being the monarch. Despite being the most powerful person in the kingdom, she does not, however, redefine what it means to be beautiful. Her people no longer care that she does not fit into a conventional standard of beauty, because she champions other values, but they never seem to learn to see her as beautiful as well as being kind and strong. From an intersectional perspective there are two different ways of reading this ending. The first is to lament the fact that the society of the Inkworld never widens its views on beauty to include women like Violante, with their pale faces and large birthmarks. The other viewpoint is more radical, maintaining that it is pointless to expand the meaning of beauty, and that it would be far more productive to do away with the entire concept, and hence dispense with the need to look beautiful in the first place. Thus, Violante being chiefly defined by her kindliness rather than her appearance, provides a more feminist and inclusive interpretation of her character, as opposed to her being suddenly considered beautiful. Suzannah Weiss asks in this vein:

What would be so bad about someone not being beautiful? That’s not scary unless we believe beauty determines our worth. Not everyone is conventionally attractive, and that’s okay. (2017a, unpaged, italics in the original)

There is merit in both these views. When championing body positivity, it is easy to inadvertently adopt the rhetoric of patriarchy by simply asserting that women who are normally seen to be on the margins of society are also sexually desirable to men. As Weiss argues, “[t]his type of body positivity caters to the male gaze. It celebrates women who don’t quite fit the cultural ideal, but are still generally considered pleasant for straight men to look at” (2017a, unpaged). This merely continues to base women’s worth on their physical desirability and leaves men as the arbiters of that worth. Instead the focus should be on helping women to see the value in their own bodies, without worrying about what others think.

We know that the people of the Inkworld still do not see Violante as beautiful, but we are not given an insight into Violante’s own thoughts during the epilogue, so we do not know whether she has learned to love and accept her appearance. While her personal acceptance matters more than whether other people are attracted to her features, it is less important than the fact that she is
confident in her abilities and her intelligence, and that she treats the people under her care with understanding and compassion. As Weiss writes: “We don’t have the right to feel good about ourselves because of our beauty. We have the right to feel good about ourselves unconditionally” (2017a, unpaged). The only drawback is that, as mentioned above, we do not know whether other women in the kingdom are similarly allowed to feel pride in themselves regardless of their physical attractiveness, or whether this is only the queen’s prerogative, thus making self-love a class privilege.

The connection between beauty and class is more clear in Jasper Fforde’s *The Eye of Zoltar* (2014). The book features a princess named Shazine. While she is unpleasant and arrogant, the main character – Jennifer Strange – cannot help thinking that “she was undeniably very pretty with glossy raven-black hair, fine features and large, inquisitive eyes” (p. 38). This description is juxtaposed with that of a palace servant named Laura Scrubb, who is about the same age as the Princess. Laura “was pale, had plain mousy hair and was dressed in the neat, starched dress of the lowest-ranked house servant. She also looked tired, worn and old before her time” (p. 39). Her plainness is directly connected with her poverty and her lack of access to basic resources. She looks “undernourished” (p. 68) and has a rash that is “likely the result of sleeping on damp hay” (p. 72). There is also a comment about “Laura’s teeth, nails and skin complaints” being “hardly princessy” (p. 261). Conversely, the Princess’s beauty is at least partly a result of her privilege. She never goes hungry or tires herself out with hard work, and presumably she also has access to beauty products, which is why her hair is “glossy”, while Laura’s is “plain”.

Shortly after this comparison is made, the Princess’s mother – who is a powerful sorceress – switches the minds of the two girls to teach her daughter a lesson about humility. At first the Princess is livid about this switch, while Laura is not very concerned. But as she travels with Jennifer, the Princess learns the value of hard work and begins to sympathise with the plight of indentured servants like Laura, whose body she is inhabiting. She even gets used to her new body and starts thinking of it as her own. At one point she tells Jennifer: “Mum will be furious I’ve had a tattoo… . Yes, I *know* it’s technically not on me. It’s just that I’ve got so used to this body I’m not really sensing much of a difference. In a strange way, I’m actually *enjoying* being Laura Scrubb” (p. 374, italics in the original). Later, she adds: “I used to think Laura Scrubb was the
ugliest girl I’d ever seen… but I’ve got to quite like the snub nose, shortness of stature and lack of any agreeable bone structure” (p. 389). The tone of this declaration still appears to be mocking Laura’s plainness – and the Princess’s vanity – a little, but also expresses the view that being plain is not shameful, and can even be a source of pride.

During the course of the story the Princess loses one of Laura’s hands in battle, and replaces it with a magical prosthetic. This new hand is large, hairy, and tattooed, making Laura’s body seem even more strange and deformed.

When Jennifer and the Princess return home, they find that the kingdom has been overtaken by trolls and the entire royal family killed, including Laura in the Princess’s body. This means that Laura’s body is now the only body the Princess can inhabit. While she is distraught over the loss of her family, she accepts the situation more readily than she would have before her adventures with Jennifer:

She… smiled, and looked at her hands. The left was still raw and calloused from the previous owner’s years of toil, and the other was the hand of the ex-stoker, with “No more pies” tattooed on the back, and held on with duct tape. It wasn’t an ideal situation, and as far as we knew it, a first for royalty.

“This is my body now, isn’t it?”
“Yes, I think it is.”
“Then I’d better start looking after it. Tell me, Jenny, am I horribly plain?”
I looked at her pale, sun-starved face, her brown hair, which was still lank with undernourishment, and her dark-rimmed eyes.

“It’s not the outside that counts, ma’am.” (Fforde, 2014, p. 395)

Once again, all the attributes Jennifer names that contribute to Laura’s plainness result from her lack of privilege, though she never goes as far as to consider that Laura might have been pretty if she had been brought up in different circumstances.

As is the case with Violante in *Inkdeath*, Princess Shazine does not redefine what beauty means, but she does eventually reject the importance of it. She decides to take care of this body, not because she hopes to become beautiful again, but simply because it is hers now, and that makes it important.
Tamora Pierce’s *Song of the Lioness* quartet (1983-1988) features several characters described as great beauties, all of whom are female. For the most part, the story is told from the point of view of Alanna, a girl who does not consider herself to be beautiful at all, and the text does not openly contradict her in this. She does, however, have fair skin, red hair, and purple eyes: features which are often considered attractive and fascinating in modern society. Thus the message that a girl does not need to be beautiful to be a hero seems rather disingenuous when the role of the hero is being played by a girl who is described in traditionally attractive terms: white, slender, and able-bodied. Even though Alanna spends the first two books of the series disguised as a boy, the cover illustrations of some editions accentuate her feminine features, for example by dressing her in tight clothes that display her curvaceousness.

Princess Thayet is the most beautiful character in the series, a fact on which seemingly everyone agrees. Both George and Jonathan have very exaggerated reactions on meeting her for the first time, with “eyes widening in awe” (1988, p. 231). George whispers, “[b]less me, Crooked God” (1988, p. 220), and Jonathan breathes: “Great Merciful Mother!” (1988, p. 231) These do not seem realistic reactions to seeing a pretty girl, much less so coming from two separate people. Like Alanna, Thayet is thin, white, able-bodied, and of noble birth, so her beauty is a product of privilege. In the third book of the series Alanna joins a tribe of dark-skinned desert-dwellers. While she befriends some of the girls in the tribe and admires their skills and intelligence, she never seems to think of them as beautiful, which strengthens the assertion that beauty is connected with whiteness.

Thayet is a likeable character, so her beauty is portrayed positively, and she seems unaware of the effect she has on the male characters. In this she is contrasted with some of the other beautiful female characters in the series, namely Josiane and Delia, who are portrayed as vain and manipulative. It is probably not coincidental that both of these women are also rivals to Alanna and Thayet for Prince Jonathan’s affections. The narrative emphasises how much better-looking Thayet is than Delia when Alanna comments on a drawing Jonathan made of Thayet: “Your artwork’s improved. The one you did of Delia made her look like a cow... . Though now that I think of it, maybe that was your subject matter” (Pierce, 1988, p. 269). As mean-spirited as this comment is, it is
not unexpected to make fun of an unsympathetic character’s looks in order to build up a more sympathetic character. What is more surprising is the following description, which compares Josiane and Delia:

The room was a parlor decorated in pale green and cream, perfect for the emerald-eyed brunette on the sofa, less perfect for the striking blonde beside her. (p. 213)

Even though both of these characters are evil, one of them is shamed for being less successful as an alluring *femme fatale*. This seems odd and slightly out of place.

Despite the main character being a heterosexual girl, none of the men in *The Song of the Lioness* are defined by their attractiveness in the way Thayet, Delia, and Josiane are – including the men Alanna has sexual relationships with. Despite finding them handsome, Alanna is never stunned by their beauty in the way that she and other characters are captivated by Thayet’s looks. This reinforces the standard idea that beauty is not only more important in women than in men, but also somehow more natural, and privileges only one point of view, namely the heterosexual male one. Alanna’s masquerade as a boy could easily suggest a queer reading, but neither she nor any other characters disrupt the culturally heteronormative narrative. All of Alanna’s sexual partners are male, and her admiration of Thayet’s beauty is framed in a purely platonic way. While she is dressed as a boy, she has very little contact with other girls, so there are no females showing any sexual interest in her while mistaking her for a boy.

Most of the characters discussed above are female, as a male character’s physical attractiveness is far more rarely mentioned, even when, as in Alanna’s case, the focal character is female. Exceptions include Chrestomanci and Howl from several stories by Diana Wynne Jones, and Farid from the “Inkheart” series. Farid is particularly notable as, unlike the other two examples, he is a poor orphan rather than a wealthy sorcerer, and he is dark-skinned. These facts might make him unattractive within the class system of the Inkworld, but Meggie, who comes from the real world, considers him to be very handsome, though unfortunately she breaks up with him in *Inkdeath* and pursues a relationship with a white boy, Doria, whom she is fated to marry. This is the only interracial relationships featured in my primary texts, and it does not last.
Interracial relationships are rare in fiction, even in modern stories – particularly relationships between men of colour and white women. This is a reflection of racist fears about black manhood, and sexist ideas about the purity of white womanhood. As Jennifer Loubriel writes: “Men of Color, especially Black men, have historically been coded as animalistic abusers and rapists when it comes to white women. This stems from the idea that Men of Color literally want to steal and sully the belongings of white men” (2016, unpaged). Farid is presented as a positive character throughout, even after his relationship with Meggie ends, but it is still disappointing that in the end a white boy is considered a more suitable companion for Meggie than a boy of colour.

For the most part, men are not pressured to define themselves first and foremost by their attractiveness, so while male characters may be handsome, their good looks are rarely the first thing mentioned in descriptions. This is shown in passages such as the one above from The Secret of Platform 13, in which the Queen is said to be “young and kind and beautiful”, but the King’s attractiveness is not commented on. To some extent, men’s beauty standards are also connected with social privilege, just like the standards for women. Thus white (or at least light-skinned), able-bodied men are considered most desirable, and other men are less visible in the media and society. However, while women’s attractiveness is often connected with frailty and with careful cultivation (while being made to seem effortless), men’s attractiveness tends to be connected with physical and mental strength, and is often depicted as wilder and more natural than women’s beauty, men’s being concerned with muscles, sweat, and body hair. Even the word “beauty” has slightly different connotations when applied to men. Masculine men may be handsome or good-looking, but they are rarely considered beautiful. A man described as beautiful is feminised and possibly queer-coded. In media aimed at girls, beautiful men may still be portrayed as desirable, but in media aimed at boys, effeminate men are more likely to seem strange and untrustworthy. For example, in the comic book film Thor (Branagh, 2011), both Thor and Loki are good-looking men, but whereas the heroic Thor is muscular and bearded, the sly Loki is slim and long-haired. Even the devil’s human form is often depicted as androgynous and seductive, rather than masculine and forceful, in popular culture. An example of this is provided by the character of Lucifer in Neil Gaiman’s Sandman (1989-).

Of the explicitly non-white women in my primary texts, there are only two
who are described as being great beauties: Flower-in-the-Night from Jones’s *Castle in the Air* (1990), who comes from a country based on the fictional Arabia of *A Thousand and One Nights*, and Lady Saren from Shannon Hale’s *The Book of a Thousand Days* (2008), who comes from a land based on ancient Mongolia. Both of these characters are described as beautiful by characters of the same race. The other people of colour are, for the most part, not explicitly described as ugly, with the exception of two brides from *Castle in the Air*, but, as discussed below, their most significant attribute is their fatness, although their race may also contribute to their being seen as unattractive. As Nisha Eswaran writes, according to Western media, “brown women... are not really sexual beings, or at least, not sexual beings worthy of lasting and intentional love” (2017, unpaged). Dashti from *The Book of a Thousand Days* considers herself to be plain, but she does not consider this to be a bad thing, as she explains:

Mama said that beauty is a curse for muckers. She once told me about Bayar, her clan sister, who looked like Evela, goddess of sunlight. And what happened to Bayar? A lord fell for her beauty, got her with child, then left both girl and baby in the mud and never returned. That’s gentry’s right, I guess, but it was a bit hard on Bayar. (Hale, 2008, p. 18)

Hale points out here that beauty in a poor woman might lead to abuse rather than social advancement, but she also shows that Dashti’s opinions are coloured by her society and her upbringing and are thus not unbiased. At this point in the story Dashti still firmly believes in the superiority of the higher classes, so she might find it natural to consider the noble Lady Saren beautiful, and herself, a poor mucker girl, unremarkable. These opinions might not necessarily match those of other characters. Considering the fetishisation of East Asian women in Western media, which leads to real-life sexual and domestic violence against said women, it could actually be seen as liberating to depict an Asian woman who is allowed to be plain (Kuo, 2015). In any case, it is Dashti rather than Saren who ends up marrying the handsome prince. Amy Sun points out that the “[m]edia has traditionally painted Asian-American men as sidekicks who serve as comic relief... are extremely nervous or silent around girls... are short and deeply accented... and sidekick samurai warriors” (2014b, unpaged). Consequently, depicting an Asian man in an American novel as a
handsome and desirable romantic interest is also unusual and potentially radical, as it challenges the common association of these intersecting aspects of discrimination.

While racist beauty standards undoubtedly play a part in the lack of characters of colour who are acknowledged as being attractive, their omission reveals a deeper prejudice, in that characters of colour hardly feature at all. Thus, although most of the characters described as being beautiful do indeed have white, European features, most of the characters described as being ugly do so as well, albeit they often have other qualities – such as androgyny, fatness, or visible disabilities – that mark them as social outsiders.

For the most part, it appears that in modern stories a character’s personality is more important than looks, so that not all unattractive characters are automatically evil, and not all beautiful characters are good. Yet this is still frequently the case, especially with female characters, who are subject to the male gaze, as well as to judgement from and comparison with other women. Beauty is usually treated as an objective attribute, and authors rarely question its connection with social privilege. Yet descriptions of ugliness frequently have racist and ableist connotations, particularly in villainous characters, in which large noses and physical deformities are often made to seem objectively sinister.

Oddly enough, however, whether villains are good looking or not, as long as they are unlikeable, their appearance is subject to criticism and mockery, even by characters who are meant to be kind and virtuous. The implication of this is that rights to bodily autonomy and respect are not universal, but are dependent on whether someone is agreeable or not, and can thus easily be revoked. This state of affairs is not healthy, but it is often found in society, even in feminist and social justice circles.

So as I have shown in this section, introducing attractive villains is not necessarily an effective way to subvert existing beauty standards, for this is where differences between the genders come into play, themselves intersecting with other markers of privilege, around class, race, and able-bodiedness. It is this archetype of the bad beauty that I will consider next.
The Bad Beauty
The dangerous, wicked beauty is a common trope, both in traditional fairy tales and modern media. She uses her sexuality as a weapon against men, something that both the aforementioned Delia and Josiane from Pierce’s *Song of the Lioness* quartet are adept at, as they try to gain Jonathan’s trust by seducing him. Significantly, Jonathan does something similar when he uses Josiane to make Alanna jealous, but the narrative does not condemn him nearly as much as it condemns the two girls. Of course, just like the wicked stepmother or stepsister in a fairy tale, neither Josiane nor Delia is as beautiful as the pure, innocent Thayet. The key here might be that Thayet, like Snow White or Cinderella, is unaware of the effect her beauty has on men, whereas the *femme fatale* knows exactly how to employ her beauty to her advantage. Of this character archetype Laura Mulvey writes that she

> connotes woman as enigma, threatening active sexuality and androgyny. In the movies, the story must, in the last resort, distance itself and close off identification with this figure who is doomed to an ending of failure and probable death. (1985, p. 141)

The *femme fatale* is used to demonise women for being openly sexual, or even for caring about how they look (even though, as I have already established, women who are not considered attractive enough to solicit the male gaze are frequently not just mocked but also demonised). This archetype suggests that women’s sexuality is inherently dangerous, and that women who display sexual agency do so mainly to trap and manipulate men. It also implies that women’s main, if not only, power lies in their sexuality and their ability to have men desire them, which is very different from how sexual power dynamics tend to work in modern Western society, where being desired by men can make a woman more vulnerable rather than powerful. As Wolf writes:

> I have heard... men employed to believe in and enforce concepts of fairness speak complacently about the uses of “feminine wiles” – a euphemism for beauty deployed to the woman’s advantage. Powerful men characterize them with grudging admiration, as if “beauty’s” power were an irresistible force that stunned and immobilized distinguished men, to turn them into putty in the charmer’s hand. (1990, p. 46)
At the same time, Wolf also cites sociological studies that reveal that men are far more likely to use their sexuality and appearance to get ahead than women are. Thus, the belief in these “feminine wiles” not only perpetuates male superiority, but is also erroneous. Still, it breeds mistrust towards women, particularly conventionally attractive ones. It causes people to doubt that a beautiful woman can achieve anything by her own merits, rather than by her appearance, and to blame her for any harm that befalls her, as she must have invited it by her looks or dress or behaviour.

What Wolf fails to mention is the fact that this narrative of women’s sexual powers leaves out women who are not traditionally attractive. As Suzannah Weiss points out:

> Placing value on women based on men’s attraction makes those who don’t possess the traits society considers attractive feel worthless, and it makes women of all appearances feel like objects. (2015, unpaged)

Since, as I have already discussed, beauty is defined by the powerful, the women who are thus left out of this conversation about “feminine wiles” are mainly the ones who are marginalised on the basis of race, ability, body type, and age. As they are not considered beautiful enough to display sexual power over men, they are sometimes barely considered to be real women at all.

Mistrust of attractive women can, in fact, be seen in many fairy tales, as Maria Tatar argues:

> Beauty breeds a sense of superiority that spells disaster for suitors – think of the countless princes who line up one after another to lose their heads at the castles of proud beauties who spurn alliances. It is left to heroes to design prenuptial rites of passage that will turn these arrogant girls into marriageable women – women who are as humble and deferential as they are beautiful. (1992, p. 98)

The main sin these women seem to have committed is to have been aware of and to have taken pride in their own appearance, while at the same being desired by men for that beauty. Thus they must be tamed, but without losing their attractiveness and desirability.

It is important to note that while women’s sexuality is thus painted in a negative light, men’s sexuality is often celebrated. White men are expected to
be virile and always ready for sex. This is why promiscuous women are deemed of lesser worth, while promiscuous men are admired. This is also why men are often believed to be incapable of being raped, since they are supposedly always willing to have sex.

Again, these stereotypes apply differently to men of colour, whose sexuality is often characterised as being predatory and dangerous, particularly towards white women (Loubriel, 2016). Thus, as Ta-Nehisi Coates points out, current American president, Donald Trump, “inaugurated his campaign by casting himself as the defender of white maidenhood against Mexican ‘rapists,’ only to be later alleged by multiple accusers, and by his own proud words, to be a sexual violator himself” (2017, unpaged).

In the same vein, women of colour are more likely to be depicted as exotic seductresses than white women. There are sexual stereotypes about women of almost every non-white race, such as the black Jezebel, the Chinese dragon lady, or the sexually adventurous Roma. All of these stereotypes work to fetishise women of colour, which often results in sexual and physical violence.

An example of a bad beauty is Selia, the main villain from Shannon Hale’s *The Goose Girl* (2003). While she is described as being beautiful, her main weapon is her ability to lie and to manipulate people with her words. In a later book in the series, *Forest Born* (2010), she manages to become queen of Kel by marrying the king. Although she achieves this with her people-speaking, it is implied that her sexuality plays a part as well. However, she is not shamed for displaying her beauty and sexuality in the same way that other women of her kind, such as Delia and Josiane, are. Upon her arrival at Bayern, the workers gossip about her and make fun of her for wearing “a gaudy dress showing enough bosom for a tavern girl” (Hale, 2003, p. 136). Hearing this, the deposed princess Ani, whose dress Selia is wearing, “placed a hand on her chest and felt her cheeks warm. On her, the dress had fallen slightly lower” (Hale, 2003, p. 135). Although Ani feels embarrassed by the workers’ remarks, the narrative voice appears to be on her side, implying that there is nothing wrong with wearing low-cut dresses or being beautiful. This, after all, is not what makes

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15 Both Ani and Selia come from the neighbouring kingdom of Kildenree, where the standards regarding how much cleavage is considered appropriate to display are clearly different from Bayern.

16 While Ani is not a particularly vain character, she does show a fondness for her own long, blonde hair, being loath to cut it, even though it makes her stand out from the crowd in a
Selia evil, but rather the fact that she manipulates people and has betrayed Ani’s trust. Ani also displays her sexuality to some extent – albeit in a far more innocent manner than Selia does – when she flirts with the prince. In addition, both women lie about their identity, but while Selia lies for personal gain and to hurt others, Ani only lies to protect herself. Thus, it is specifically Selia’s selfishness and ruthlessness that mark her out as a villain, rather than her beauty, her cleverness, or her refusal to remain passive – all of which are attributes that are often demonised in women.

It can be argued that some of Selia’s actions would be viewed in a more positive light if they were performed by a man. Whereas a woman may be seen as manipulative and sneaky, a white man might instead be seen as persuasive and clever. In the context of business and politics men are often encouraged to lie to gain advantage, the way Selia does. It is also considered normal for men to lie to and manipulate women for sex. This brings to mind Coates’s reference to Trump, which I quoted above. Many of Trump’s supporters defended his comments on women, characterising them as harmless “locker-room talk”. It is unlikely that comments such as these would have gained so much support if they had been made by a white woman running for office, and inconceivable if they had been made by a person of colour of any gender.

In a way, this shows that the archetype of the *femme fatale* is a projection of men’s own sexual proclivities – particularly white men’s. They fear being manipulated by women through sex, because they themselves manipulate women. As stated above, women of colour are particularly likely to be characterised as having mystical, sexual powers. As they are more clearly social outsiders than white women, they are distrusted even more for displaying agency or sexuality, and are thus demonised for it.

Michelle Harrison’s *The 13 Treasures* (2009) introduces Morwenna, a teenage girl who has been trapped in fairyland for many decades. She is described as having “creamy skin and thickly lashed dark eyes” (p. 82), but when another character is asked to describe her, all he manages to say, with “a hazy look in his eyes”, is: “Pretty... . Really pretty” (p. 86). The mystery of Morwenna’s country where most people are dark-haired. Again, this shows that being proud of one’s physical features is not necessarily a bad trait.
disappearance lies at the heart of the events in the novel and is deeply intertwined with the family histories of the protagonist, Tanya, and her friend, Fabian. Many of the villagers believe that Morwenna was murdered — and possibly raped — by Fabian’s grandfather. As Fabian explains:

“It was common knowledge that Amos had... had a thing for her. They’d been seeing each other for a few weeks, apparently. But Morwenna had broken it off — and broken his heart... . People thought he was angry and frustrated, that he might have followed her, tried to get her to change her mind. Maybe they had a fight. Or maybe he wanted... he tried to... oh, I don’t know. I don’t know.”

But he did know and so did Tanya. But neither of them wanted to say it. (Harrison, 2009, p. 134, italics and ellipses in the original)

Once Tanya discovers that Morwenna is still alive in fairyland, Tanya hopes to rescue her. Throughout, Morwenna seems to be an innocent victim — either of Amos or of the fairies. As it turns out, however, Morwenna went to fairyland of her own free will to escape her overbearing family and to stay young forever, and is now attempting to get back to the human world by forcing Tanya to take her place. The entire time, when she seemed to be reaching out for help, she was simply using Tanya. Thus she proves herself, rather than the mischievous fairies, the real villain of the story; yet she is neither a witch nor a fairy, but simply a selfish teenage girl, obsessed with her own image and embittered by her best friend’s betrayal. Tanya thinks that

whatever the girl had once been she was beyond mercy now. Half a century in the fairy realm had put paid to that. All that remained was a shell capable only of revenge and hatred, unrecognisable as something that used to be human. (Harrison, 2009, p. 297)

Even before she became twisted into something inhuman by spending so many years with the fairies, Morwenna was manipulative and self-centred. As the story follows Tanya, who is only twelve and shows no signs of any emergent sexuality, readers do not really see Morwenna using her sexuality as a weapon in the way *femme fatales* tend to do. In the past, she has manipulated Amos by relying on his attraction to her, but other than that, she mostly uses her image as a seemingly innocent child to make people believe that she could not possibly have any wicked ideas.
Like Snow White’s stepmother and other fairy-tale villainesses, Morwenna’s wickedness is partly motivated by vanity and a desire to stay young. In the end Fabian attempts to defeat her by destroying her youth, the one thing “she values above all” (p. 302).

Both Selia and Morwenna are undoubtedly bad beauties, but their characters have more depth than the archetypal \textit{femme fatale}, and so do not simply seem like creations of the male gaze and men’s sexual insecurities. Both have been haunted their entire lives by their supernatural abilities, which alienated them from other people. While their deeds are still unconscionable, this background gives them a bit of humanity, so they are more than simply one-dimensional caricatures of female vanity.

A more one-sided beautiful villain is the Duchess from Diana Wynne Jones’s \textit{The Magicians of Caprona} (1980), who literally turns out to be a devil. While her scheme involves obtaining power by marrying the Duke, it is, however, not clear whether she uses her beauty to accomplish this or whether she simply charms him with her magic. After her evils have been uncovered, the Duke says about her: “Terrible female! I can’t think why I married her – but I suppose that was a spell too” (p. 236). The Duke himself is portrayed in a very childlike manner, so he seems to be easy to dupe. Tonino even thinks that “probably he was too stupid to count” (p. 177). His main characteristic is his gleeful love for Punch and Judy puppet shows. He is kind and mild-mannered, so he probably does not take the domestic violence in the play as seriously as some of the other characters do, although it could be a response to his feeling limited by his overbearing wife, especially since one of his Judy figures looks “uncomfortably like the Duchess” (p. 195). The Duchess is keen on puppets as well, but for different reasons. As one of the characters exclaims, “[h]er mind seems to run on puppets”, to which the Duke replies: “She sees people that way” (p. 236), meaning that she enjoys manipulating people and taking away their agency. This is a common attribute of \textit{femmes fatales}, but the Duchess does not use her sexuality much for this purpose in the story, or at least not in sight of the child protagonists, who are all under twelve years of age.

Another way to shame women for their perceived beauty is to portray conventionally attractive women as shallow and foolish. As Jarune Uwujaren expresses it: “Girls are expected to perform femininity while being put down for being girly. Girls are expected to care about their looks, but girls who care too
much are often labeled ‘fast’” (2015a, unpaged). Samantha Flynt from Jasper Fforde’s *Song of the Quarkbeast* (2011) is such a character, defined by her beauty as much as her narcissism and perceived lack of any other redeeming qualities. She is an employee at a magic company, despite having “failed to get her [magic] licence for three years running” (p. 48). Jennifer Strange baldly states that the only reason Samantha has a job is because “she’s dazzlingly pretty and Blix thinks that a physically attractive sorcerer would be good for business” (p. 48). Apart from being an inept sorcerer, she is also perceived to be very silly. Jennifer dislikes Samantha for all these reasons, calling her “Samantha ‘Pretty-but-dim’ Flynt” (p. 48) and “every bit as annoyingly pretty and perfect close up as she was from a distance” (p. 264). Notably, the other female sorcerer in Blix’s company is “the well-dressed Dame Corby, who wore far more jewellery than was good for her” (p. 227). According to these descriptions of Samantha and Dame Corby, Jennifer judges and mocks both of these women for their traditionally feminine appearance.

Later it is revealed that Samantha has been using magic – an analogue for plastic surgery – to make herself prettier. This shows that she is just as preoccupied with her own beauty as everyone else appears to be. The moment of this revelation is meant to be shameful, embarrassing Samantha and humiliating her for her vanity, despite the fact that she lives in a society that places such importance on women conforming to narrow standards of beauty, such that magically enhancing her looks might have been seen as a gesture towards fitting in and being taken seriously. In this vein, Mulvey writes:

> The female body has become industrialised; a woman must buy the means to paint on (make-up) and sculpt (underwear/clothes) a look of femininity, a look which is the guarantee of visibility in sexist society for each individual woman. (1989, p. 54, italics in the original)

Plastic surgery (or its magical counterpart) is simply an extension of this.

However, some of Jennifer’s other assumptions about Samantha prove to be wrong. When the evil Blix attempts to gain powerful magic for himself, Samantha tries to trick and distract him by offering herself to him. The attempt fails, but it does show her courage and ingenuity, though like many other beautiful characters, her attractiveness and sexuality are portrayed as being her only weapons. After this, Jennifer and the other characters start respecting
her more, though they still do not think much of her intelligence and abilities, as this paragraph shows:

For her stalwart yet rash bravery during the final Blix showdown, Samantha Flynt was granted a full cadetship at Kazam, “no matter how long it took”. She has still to get her magic licence, despite the Useless Brother’s insistence that she should have a licence anyway, “for being so utterly captivating”. She has turned him down for marriage sixty-seven times, proving perhaps that she is not quite as stupid as we think. (Fforde, 2011, p. 289, italics in the original)

All in all, the subversion of Samantha’s character is humorous and enjoyable, but not as effective as it could have been if it had been handled with a little more depth.

Samantha is the only one of these bad beauties whose sole power lies in her attractiveness, and at the same time she is the only one who is not really bad. The others all exhibit some of the behaviours of classic *femme fatales*, though the sexual aspects are often minimised, especially in works for younger children. None of them are as obsessed with their own looks as fairy tale villainesses tend to be, not even the perpetually young Morwenna. All of them appear to be white, too, Selia and Samantha having long, blonde hair, and Morwenna being described as having “creamy skin”. While these descriptions certainly link beauty to whiteness, at least none of these characters represent racist assumptions about non-white women’s sexuality.

Because of these factors, none of the works mentioned imply that it is intrinsically evil for a woman to be beautiful or sexual, which makes them more progressive than older portrayals of bad beauties. However, it is certainly significant that the beautiful villainesses are depicted with more depth than the ugly ones, which means that the social narrative on beauty is still rather one-sided, and mostly depicts only one type of beauty.

Throughout this section and the preceding one, I have frequently referred to the focus on thinness in representing female beauty. Conversely, fat people are commonly seen as an acceptable target for prejudice and ridicule. As this is a complex issue, interlinked with issues of race, class, and disability, I shall devote the next section to an in-depth analysis of “fat-phobia” and “fat-shaming”.
Fat-Shaming
Prejudice against fatness – particularly in women – is partly based on erroneous assumptions about the correlation between weight and health, but is mostly a way to control women’s bodies and self-image (Kinzel, 2013; Feng, 2015). Using the same line of reasoning as Faludi, above, Wolf argues that the ultimate goal of fat-shaming is to keep women feeble and submissive by denying them sustenance: “Modern culture represses female oral appetite as Victorian culture, through doctors, repressed female sexual appetite: *from the top of the power structure downward, for a political purpose*” (1990, p. 97, italics in original). She also writes:

The ideology of semistarvation undoes feminism; what happens to women’s bodies happens to our minds. If women’s bodies are and have always been wrong whereas men’s are right, then women are wrong and men are right. Where feminism taught women to put a higher value on ourselves, hunger teaches us to erode our self-esteem. (pp. 196-197)

Other feminists, such as Susan Bordo, feel that the desire to lose weight is more symbolic: that it is a desire to take up less space in a world that frequently thinks of women as being, as she puts it, “too much” (1993, p. 161), meaning too loud, too emotional, and too demanding.

When people fat-shame, they often claim to do so in the name of health, even though unhealthy behaviours that are celebrated in thin people are criticised in fat people. Even if it were true that fat-phobia is simply a reaction to unhealthy lifestyles, the idea that only people who attain an arbitrary standard of health are worthy of respect, dignity, and love is troubling, as it excludes many people with disabilities and chronic illnesses (Allard, 2016). Melissa A. Fabello and Linda Bacon argue that this line of thinking turns health and, subsequently, bodily respect and autonomy into a meritocracy. They write:

when we perpetuate the narrative that we all have a choice in whether our bodies are fat or thin, we push the idea that everyone should be striving toward thinness all the time – and that is something that actually harms us all.

In the meantime, we also push along the notion that since fat is unhealthy and therefore bad, the “choices” we make about our bodies also speak to our moralities and the extent to which we “deserve” good health and respect. (2017, unpaged)
Fabello and Bacon outline some of the ways in which ill health can be caused by institutional oppression, some of which are directly linked to fat-phobia. By ignoring these factors, privileged people can pretend that illness – just like poverty – is a personal failure, rather than an institutional problem that requires a restructuring of capitalist society. This also erases sympathy for fat, disabled, and poor people – and particularly for people who belong to all three groups. In this regard, it is important to note that there is a significant overlap between fat people, disabled people, and poor people. Disabled people are often poor because of medical costs and because it is harder for them to find work than it is for able-bodied people. Poor people are often fat because they cannot afford healthy food and do not have the time for exercise. Thus, fat-phobia is strongly connected to ableism and to class prejudice.

As with other beauty standards, there are elements of racism in fat-shaming, as the body type deemed ideal is one more common in white Europeans than in most other races. As Caleb Luna writes: “The idea of what we have been taught to believe a ‘normal’ body should look like is literally based on ideas of white male bodies and has become translated onto bodies of color across the world” (2017b, unpaged). As a historical example of this, Rachel Kuo names Saartjie Baartman, an African woman who was paraded around freak shows and human zoos in Europe during the 19th century, due to what was perceived as her curiously large buttocks and genitalia. Kuo writes: “While her body was similar to that of other women in her community, she was perceived as ‘abnormal’”. She continues: “Today, the gawking at Black women’s bodies continues. For example, the size and shape of Serena Williams’ body is constantly scrutinized” (2017, unpaged).

Racialised fat-shaming affects men of colour as well. Fat men of colour are characterised as lazy, gluttonous, and villainous more often than white men. While white men are sometimes fat-shamed, they are not solely defined by their bodies the way people of colour and white women are. This means that as long as they possess other admirable qualities, such as a sense of humour, chubby white men are permitted to be visible in the media in a way that chubby women are usually not, as women are expected to be attractive even when they are

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17 Note that I will be using the words “fat” and “large”, rather than “overweight” or “obese”, because, as Julie Feng (2015, unpaged) points out, the latter two terms are derived from classifications on the wildly misleading Body Mass Index Scale and are thus essentially meaningless.
funny or strong. This can be seen, for example, in television sitcoms that feature a fat husband with a thin, conventionally attractive wife (e.g. *The King of Queens* [Weithorn and Litt, 1998-2007], *The Simpsons* [Groening, 1989-], *Family Guy* [MacFarlane, 1999-]). As Ann Alston states:

> It is worth considering whether there are many fat heroes or heroines in English children’s literature. It seems that [there] are very few, for these heroes and heroines tend to be strong and slim... . The chubbier characters are often dismissed as ugly, stupid or villainous... . While there are exceptions to this pattern, it is nonetheless strong. Size is an important determining factor in whether the character is to be a hero or villain. (2004, p. 80)

Alston’s statement here is gender-neutral, and she names a few famous fat male characters who are portrayed unsympathetically. My own findings are similar to hers, except that I have found that female characters are more likely to be mocked for being fat than male ones. In the books I have studied, fat characters are rarely portrayed sympathetically. If they are not downright villainous, they are described as being stupid and repulsive. As explained above, Raymond and his mother in *The Secret of Platform 13* are portrayed as having unattractive personalities, being greedy, selfish, materialistic, and rude. But the text also takes every opportunity to point out how physically unattractive they are, due to their size, stating for example that Mrs Trottle, sunbathing in the nude, “was not a pleasant sight” (p. 11, italics in the original). This is in stark contrast with the description of Aunt Emily (who is a sympathetic character) wearing her home-made skirt in another Ibbotson novel, *The Beasts of Clawstone Castle*: “During the many years she had worn it, it had taken on the outlines of her behind, but not at all unpleasantly because she was a thin lady and her behind was small” (2005, p. 8).\(^{18}\) These descriptions seem to imply that the Trottles’ fatness is as bad as their negative personality traits, or even that having an unattractive personality goes hand in hand with being fat. Additionally, there are some repulsive descriptions of the Trottles eating, recalling Wolf’s point about the politicised repression of oral appetites. Eating is seen to be both disgusting and morally wrong when fat people do it.

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\(^{18}\) Oddly, the same novel also features a male ghost who died of an eating disorder, as well as a woman who feels she no longer recognises her own body after having had countless cosmetic surgeries to please her husband. So the author recognises how damaging the desire to be thin can be, but still comments that Aunt Emily’s behind is pleasant because it is small.
Another example of a fat, villainous character is Augusta, the wicked stepmother from Lauren Oliver’s *Liesl & Po*. She is described as being “broad, and flat, and enormous, with a wide, coarse face and hands as thick as paddles” and giving “the impression of a full-grown toad” (2011, p. 144). This is juxtaposed with a description of the beautiful heroine Liesl, with her “sweet, pale face” (p. 177) and “long, elegant fingers” (p. 178), which makes her sound like a dainty, rich white girl. Indeed, Liesl comes from a wealthy family, while Augusta used to be a teacher who married Liesl’s father for his money. Even though she is rich now and wears fur coats, she still looks “coarse” while Liesl is described as “elegant”. Augusta has a daughter of her own, who looks just as out of place in her expensive clothing and make-up as her mother does. She is described as “pale and sickly-looking despite the powder on her face and rouge on her cheeks, which she never went anywhere without, looking a little bit like a wriggly tadpole clothed in fur and lace” (p. 143). Thus, beauty is directly tied to high birth, and while the lower classes may attain the trappings of the wealthy, they cannot replicate the latter’s natural grace. Augusta’s fatness is accounted for in such terms. It is part of her coarseness, and her coarseness is part of her ugliness.

Significantly, at one point Will, a boy who is infatuated with Liesl, worries that she has been sent away to work in a factory. While there is real danger in factory work, Will’s main concern appears to be that Liesl is too pretty for such menial work, and that the chemicals and the needlework will tarnish her beauty.

Jones’s *The Merlin Conspiracy* features Sybil, who is disparagingly described by another character as looking “just like a sack of sweetcorn balanced on two logs” (2003, p. 19). When she dances, the reader’s attention is drawn to her “big square-toed feet”, “her massive legs”, and “great dark patches of sweat spreading from her armpit almost to her waist” (p. 446). Shine, from Jones’s *Archer’s Goon*, is not described in quite such humiliating terms, although the narrative states that she is “vastly fat” (1984, p. 169). There are still several offhand comments about her size. Some of these make sense, such as when her equally evil, yet thin sister taunts her by mentioning her weight (p. 176), or when Howard compares the strength of Shine’s large arms with the strength of her mind (p. 175). But the description that “Shine was fatter even than Howard had thought” (p. 176) seems to serve no other purpose than to underline the fact that, because of this character’s size, readers are not
meant to sympathise with her. Howard’s sister later complains that Shine is “fat and horrible” (p. 181). As with Mrs. Trottle, the implication is that her fatness is part of what makes her horrible.

A particularly overt example of fat-shaming occurs in another of Jones’s works, *Castle in the Air*. Early in the story, Abdullah’s relatives introduce him to two women whom they want him to marry. The first thing he notices about them is that they are “extremely fat” (1990, p. 55). He goes on to criticise their use of make-up (“Both wore a very large amount of make-up, which was, in both cases, a severe error” [p. 55]) and concludes that they must be stupid, despite not having had any conversation with them. For a moment he feels sorry for them, as he realises that his relatives are using the two brides, just as they are using him. But this does not last long as he starts comparing them to his beloved Flower-in-the-Night:

That brought Abdullah back to reason. With a bump. With the sort of bump a magic carpet might make if loaded with two such weighty females – always supposing it could even get off the ground with them on it in the first place. They were so very fat. As for thinking they would make companions for Flower-in-the-Night – phooey! She was intelligent, educated and kind, as well as being beautiful (and thin). These two had yet to show him that they had a brain cell between them... . And they giggled. He had never heard Flower-in-the-Night giggle. (Jones, 1990, pp. 58-59)

While Abdullah’s main focus is still on the women’s size, he also disdains them for behaving in a stereotypically feminine way (wearing make-up, giggling). He has only met Flower-in-the-Night a couple of times, so he really knows very little about her, but simply by being thin and not giggling, she is shown to be superior to other women in his mind. The comment about her being educated can also be seen as expressing class prejudice, since Flower-in-the-Night is a princess, and the two brides are common women who have not had the former’s opportunities for education. John Stephens writes about the “basic gender assumptions informing” this story:

Flower-in-the-Night is beautiful in a very conventional way (slim but not thin, and so on); more significantly, we read about how much Flower has learned since she was stolen from her father’s palace, but this does not present as character development. Conversely, the nieces of
Abdullah’s relatives are fat, foolish, and giggle, and Abdullah can give them to Hasruel’s brother in an utterly patriarchal gesture. (1992, p. 280)

Of course, the story is told from Abdullah’s point of view and, in a few instances, it is made clear that his viewpoint is somewhat biased and not always the most trustworthy. For example, when he first meets Sophie, he feels that she is “uncomfortably strong-minded for a young woman” (p. 197). Readers who are already familiar with Sophie from Howl’s Moving Castle (1986) know that she is a brave and admirable character, so will disagree with Abdullah’s assessment that she is too bossy to be likeable. Similarly, when he first meets a white woman from Ingall, he observes that “[h]er clothes made her into a plump hourglass-shape which Abdullah found very foreign and displeasing” (p. 107). This sentence makes it clear that Abdullah’s opinion expresses a personal bias and might not be shared by readers. However, in his encounter with the two brides there is no such qualifier, so it seems likely that readers are in this instance meant to share Abdullah’s disgust. In the end, Abdullah, thinking that “now the girls’ other relatives had deserted them, they were surely his to dispose of” (pp. 268-269), happily gives them away to a wicked genie who whisks them off to live on a secluded island with him, even though earlier in the novel Abdullah seems to support women’s independence when he argues with the Sultan, who claims that “[w]omen do not count… Therefore it is impossible to be unfair to them” (p. 71). Of course, the main purpose of this conversation is to establish Rashput as a savage, uncivilised country in which women are treated as cattle, in order to later juxtapose it with the more European country of Ingary, which is presented as more enlightened when it comes to women’s rights. This is not only racist, but also somewhat hypocritical, as Ingary has its own problems with sexism.19 “Disposing” of the girls in this way is seen as a fitting punishment, not only for the women, but also for the genie. Readers are not meant to feel sorry for them for being treated as objects to be handed around, or for having to spend the rest of their lives alone with an evil genie. The fact that they are fat and perceived not to be very intelligent makes them less human in the eyes of the other characters and not worthy of sympathy.

19 Tamora Pierce’s The Girl Who Rides Like a Man (1986) has the same problem, as the plot involves the white Alanna educating brown-skinned women on their rights in a way that suggests that her background makes her more knowledgeable about feminist issues, even though her own home country is thoroughly patriarchal as well.
Even novels with likeable large characters can have instances of fat-shaming. Nan Pilgrim, one of the protagonists of Jones’s *Witch Week* (1982), is bullied by her classmates not merely for being a social misfit, but also for being chubby. As she is a positive character, portrayed as being clever, funny, and creative, the reader is meant to take her side and feel that it is an injustice when the other girls make fun of her. But it is unclear whether the same is true of an anonymous girl Charles sees kissing and cuddling her boyfriend in the bushes outside the school. She is described as “a very fat girl – much fatter than Nan Pilgrim” (p. 66), and Charles wonders “how anyone could enjoy grabbing, or watching, such fatness” (p. 67). However, while Charles is a focal character, he is a less reliable narrator than Nan, and is, by the author’s own admission, “in many ways... awful” (2008b, p. 292). So, as with Abdullah’s description of Sophie, it is possible that readers are not meant to agree with Charles when he thinks this girl is repulsive, even though there is no conflicting point of view on this (the fat girl never appears in Nan’s sections of the story). But considering that the narrative emphasises that this girl is “much fatter than Nan Pilgrim”, it seems the reason readers are allowed to like Nan is because she is only “dumpy” (p. 9) and not really fat, as this other girl is.

Interestingly, Charles describes the witch he saw burned as “a large fat man” (p. 13), but unlike the nameless girl in the bushes, he feels no scorn or disgust towards him. There is no indication as to whether this is because the witch is male.

One of the characters in Jones’s *Crown of Dalemark* (1993) is a big girl called Enblith, nicknamed Biffa. After finding out that she is named after the legendary beauty Enblith the Fair, one of the other characters says: “Unkind, isn’t it? ...Her parents made a serious miscalculation there. Not that she’s unbeautiful, poor girl. Just too big for one to see it” (p. 186, italics in the original). Biffa is portrayed as a very kind person, and the people talking about her in this extract actually like her, but see no problem with criticising her looks in this way. When Maewen returns to her own time, she finds out that her love interest, Mitt, ended up marrying Biffa in the past. At first Maewen is a little indignant about this, thinking: “Fancy that! ...Biffa! *Biffa!*” But then she adds: “Well, Mitt had showed some sense at least! And it was really a very good choice... Biffa was nice – so nice, in fact, that it was entirely likely that Mitt had lived happily ever after” (p. 311, italics in the original). She concludes that it
must have been a political marriage, as Mitt, being a king, could not remain unmarried, and Biffa would present a sensible option as a wife and queen. It never occurs to her that Mitt might actually have fallen in love with Biffa, and the story itself dismisses this possibility when it is revealed that the immortal Mitt still loves Maewen after several hundred years, even though they only spent a few weeks together as teenagers. The implication is that a big, unattractive girl like Biffa might be married for convenience, but will never find true love, as such is reserved for pretty, thin girls like Maewen.

Of course, there are some likeable fat characters who are not undermined in this way but, as Alston indicates above, they are disappointingly rare and are often only seen in one or two scenes. Usually they are friendly older women who appear in supporting roles, rather than young heroines. One example is Mrs Fairfax from Howl’s Moving Castle, who is described as “one of those plump, comfortable ladies... who made you feel good with life just to look at her” (Jones, 1986, pp. 115-116). Here, plumpness is depicted as a positive, comforting attribute.

A particularly positive large character is Frid from Shannon Hale’s Princess Academy (2005) and Princess Academy: Palace of Stone (2013). She is taller and wider than many of the men in the village, and has a father and brothers who are even bigger than she is. However, the narrative never uses negative words to describe her and does not judge her to be ugly. Rather, she is portrayed as loyal, brave, and hard-working, and someone readers can potentially identify with. Unlike Biffa, the only person to make a nasty remark about Frid’s looks is a bandit who is clearly not likeable and not meant to be taken seriously. At this, “Frid blinked a little longer than normal, the only indication... that his comment hurt her” (p. 232). In all the examples of fat-shaming I have covered, this is the only instance of the fat person’s hurt feelings being acknowledged. Again, this encourages empathy with Frid, rather than with the person making fun of her. When the girls at the Princess Academy get ready for the ball, all of them are allowed to feel pretty in their new dresses, including Frid. In this scene, the narrative draws particular attention to Esa, who is disabled and thus also falls outside of society’s beauty standards. She is happy when the seamstress takes her disability into account when designing her dress. Thus, the text shows that all girls – including large and disabled ones – can be beautiful, but that beauty is not the main feature that defines them.
For these reasons, Frid and Nan are the two most positive fat characters in my primary texts, but when it comes to portraying fat people as a whole, *Princess Academy* is more empowering than *Witch Week* because it does not shame other large characters aside from the most important one.

**Conclusion**

In a society where the white, abled, male body is treated as the norm, all other bodies are seen as deviations. Feminist theory has traditionally focused on the way the female body is regarded as a defective form of the male body, but has ignored similar narratives around disabled, non-white, and fat bodies, even when these bodies are female as well. In this chapter I have tried to escape the notion that there is such a thing as a “normal” body, although I have examined the different connotations inherent in physical descriptions of men and women.

As I have demonstrated, beauty still tends to be an important attribute for fantasy heroes and heroines, especially the female characters, although less so than in older stories. Many texts try to subvert readers’ expectations as to what a hero or a villain should look like; for example by featuring monstrous, non-human protagonists, such as in *The Secret of Platform 13*, or by presenting characters who do not care about society’s beauty standards, as in *Monster Mission*. Even the texts that try to subvert tropes often fall back into old stereotypes, however, as with the description of the queen as being young and beautiful in contrast to the grotesque, villainous Trottles in *The Secret of Platform 13*. The texts rarely question what beauty really consists of, as they simply take for granted that it is an objective value that means the same thing to all people. While they do occasionally show that a character’s view of beauty might be biased (such as Abdullah’s opinion of women from Ingary), they do not offer a contrasting point of view (for example by having two characters disagree on what they consider attractive in a potential partner). By presenting beauty as an objective value, the texts frequently replicate various oppressive narratives surrounding the body. Thus, beauty is equated with whiteness, thinness, youth, being of a higher class, and able-bodiedness, whereas ugliness is equated with marginalisation. Feminist authors such as Naomi Wolf and Susan Faludi have written extensively on the ways in which traditional beauty standards are used to control women’s bodies, but they fail to take into account these other axes of oppression and how they impact on women who are marginalised in other
ways. I have demonstrated that an intersectional approach is necessary to deconstruct all the harmful messages created by Western beauty standards with regards to race, age, ability, and class, as well as gender.

While there are several stories where beautiful girls are friends with girls considered less beautiful (Thayet and Alanna; Maewen and Biffa), often there is animosity and contempt between girls and women who strive to follow society’s beauty standards and those who do not. This encourages girls to be judgemental towards others who make different life choices, rather than finding beauty in everybody and in every body. I noted that it is important to take into account that some women – such as women of colour and transgender women – experience more societal pressure to appear feminine, often at the risk of ostracism or even violence, so feminists who decry all women who wear make-up and shave their legs ignore the needs and realities of many marginalised groups.

I also looked at bad beauties in my primary texts, of which there are several, most of them belonging to the archetype of the femme fatale. Aside from Josiane and Delia, these characters are not as explicitly sexual or as one-dimensional as the archetype tends to be in media for adults (Josiane is also driven violently mad by the end, which displays mentally ill women in a negative light, characterising them as evil and dangerous). Samantha from Song of the Quarkbeast can also be classified as a bad beauty, as the text mocks her for being overly obsessed with her appearance. However, the story subverts expectations slightly by revealing Samantha to be brave and more capable than the other characters had assumed, even though she is also silly.

Finally, I examined the phenomenon of fat-shaming, as, it seems that when it comes to physical appearance, the worst thing a character can be is fat, which is far too often treated as an unforgivable crime. Frequently, being fat is equated with being immoral and selfish.

On the whole, while physical perfection is no longer treated as an essential characteristic for a heroine, only Princess Academy comes close to offering a more egalitarian alternative to modern beauty standards: one in which no one is considered ugly, regardless of age, size, race, class, or physical ability. As Suzannah Weiss writes: “A truly feminist, body-positive viewpoint says that everybody can be beautiful in their own way, and no group is objectively more attractive than any other. After all, beauty is personal and subjective – sweeping
generalizations just don’t work” (2016, unpaged).

Considering all of this, beauty alone is not sufficient to provide empowerment for female characters – particularly those who fall outside the cultural norm in one or more ways. A more effective tool of empowerment commonly used in fantasy literature is female magic, which is the subject of the following chapter.
Chapter 4: Magic and Empowerment

Witchcraft is the resort of women because it symbolises the only way they can work politically; by stealth, in secret, rather than on the public field of battle or debate. (Purkiss, 1996, p. 191)

Introduction

Magic is connected with power, so it is often perceived differently depending on the gender of the magic user. For a man to be powerful is normal, but a powerful woman is seen as unusual and dangerous. Likewise, the word “wizard” – which is usually gendered as male – is morally neutral, so a wizard can be either good or evil. But a witch – usually gendered female – is almost always an evil and threatening figure in fairy tales. Thus, in Arthurian myth, there is the wise, male Merlin in contrast to the wicked female, Morgan LeFey. Whether she is a frightful old hag or a beautiful sorceress, the witch usually works as an antagonist to the innocent heroine.

However, there exists a discrepancy within the fairy-tale canon between the characters said to be witches and the characters actually using magic. As Ruth B. Bottigheimer writes in Grimms’ Bad Girls and Bold Boys:

Of the successful spells actually laid in Grimms’ Tales, the overwhelming majority, if not all, are performed by young, beautiful, and usually nubile girls. Furthermore, the girls’ effectiveness in laying spells seems related to an inborn connection to nature itself. It takes close and careful reading to come to this conclusion, because the text often imputes fearsome powers to old women and young men. (p. 40, italics in the original)

She cites tales like “The Goose Girl” and “Brother and Sister” as examples. The titular heroine in “The Goose Girl”, for instance, summons the wind, and the sister in “Brother and Sister” understands the voice of brooks. In contrast, two of the best-known witches in the Grimms’ collection – the one living in a gingerbread house in “Hansel and Gretel” and the stepmother of the eponymous protagonist in “Snow White” – never actually use magic in their stories (of course, he gingerbread house itself can be seen as magical, and Snow White’s stepmother has a knowledge of poisons, which is associated with witchcraft).

While there are still wicked witches in modern fantasy literature, magic is
also presented as a tool of empowerment for female characters, an active alternative to the passive roles fairy tales offer women. Frequently the protagonist discovers her special powers in the course of the story, leading her to gain courage and confidence. Sometimes the magic operates as a metaphor for other types of talent, ones that might be more applicable to readers in the real world, such as the power of words or, maybe, simply the power of self-confidence.

However, while self-confidence and personal empowerment are important, too often mainstream feminism does not look beyond simplistic examples of female empowerment, failing to examine larger systemic issues. Thus, powerful businesswomen are often celebrated as examples of what women can achieve, even if they work for companies that exploit their workers, many of whom are women themselves. Similarly, successful female politicians are often praised as feminist heroes, though the policies they support might harm other women, particularly working-class women, disabled women, women of colour, and women in third-world countries. Ashley Truong points out how this situation operates in popular media, where

there are some [female] characters that are celebrated just because they do the same things that male characters would do — even if those things harm other people.

That's why it's important to always ask at what cost empowerment comes. Is it worth it for women to be able to do the same things as men, if doing so means that they harm others? (2015, unpaged)

In the previous chapter I mentioned the patronising attitudes that white characters in both Castle in the Air (Jones, 1990) and The Girl Who Rides Like a Man (Pierce, 1986) show towards societies that are coded as Middle-Eastern. This is an example of white women’s personal empowerment being used as a tool to silence the voices of non-white women. This type of paternalistic thinking results in the othering of Muslim women (as well as other women of colour), who are mainly characterised as victims, unaware of their own oppression until they are saved by white Western feminists. Deepa Kumar elaborates on this subject:

As several Third World Feminists have argued, a historical weakness of liberal feminism in the West has been its racist, patronizing attitude towards women of color who
have been seen less as allies/agents and more as victims in need of rescue. This attitude prevails both in relation to women of color within Western nation states, as well as women in the global South. This is what allows figures such as Madeline Albright and Hillary Clinton to be viewed as feminist saviors even while both, in their roles as Secretary of State, have advanced US imperialism. (2014, unpaged)

Thus, this narrative of the non-white woman in need of white saviours advances the aims of colonialism, imperialism, and Islamophobia, which actively harms many non-white women and girls.

In this chapter I will examine the way different types of magic are used in my primary texts, and explore how they are used either to empower the characters or to silence them. Furthermore, I will look at the effects of this magical empowerment: whether it is used to uplift other women or simply for personal advancement to the detriment of others.

First I will look at magic that is specifically characterised as being feminine. Often this type of magic originates from nature, and is contrasted with magic that comes from book learning, which is seen as a more masculine form. Then I will examine two common types of magic in fantasy literature – magic connected with vision and magic connected with words – both of which are frequently used by female characters and can thus also be described as feminine magic. I will also talk about the way race influences depictions of magic, and how this intersects with other sites of identity.

**Witchcraft and Wizardry**

Although witches are frequently portrayed in a more positive light in modern fantasy, often there still exists a difference between male and female magic. Wizards’ masculine magic often operates according to strict rules and is associated with books and institutional education (as noted above), from which women have traditionally been excluded. As Diane Purkiss puts it, “the medieval sage reproduces critical assumptions about the gendering of knowledge; he can act as the repository of knowledge about the historical past and the national future precisely because he is male” (1996, p. 184).

Female magic, on the other hand, tends to be connected to nature, and is therefore portrayed as more wild and uncontrollable. As John Stephens and Robyn McCallum express it, “what in… contemporary fantasies is referred to as
'wild magic’... is equivalent to a female sexual power often exhibited as deviance by the central female characters in adult fiction” (1998, pp. 121-122). Barbara Fass Leavy endorses this point, noting that “virtually all supernatural female folklore characters are imbued with features of the wild woman, that is, the animal side of the human being” (1995, p. 221), which makes female magic users seem uncivilised and dangerous. As mentioned in the previous chapter, wicked witches are often described as looking distinctly Semitic, with prominent noses and chins, as well as bushy hair. The traditional witch’s hat also bears some resemblance to the peaked caps that Jews, in the middle ages, were forced to wear in order to identify themselves (see Burke, 2001, p. 136), so it can easily be argued that fairy tales like “Hansel and Gretel” contribute to an anti-Semitic rhetoric about bloodthirsty Jewish women preying on Christian children.20 Because of this anti-Semitic history, even positive portrayals of crones with pointed hats – such as Terry Pratchett’s Wyrd Sisters (1988) – could be upsetting for some readers.

This mistrust of female magic and power is not universal, though. Trinh T. Minh-ha writes that “[i]n many parts of the world, magic (and witchcraft) is regarded as essentially a woman’s function” (1989, p. 128), and she outlines how witches are revered in many African societies, where they perform religious functions and continue a tradition of female wisdom and knowledge.

In modern Western stories, the wild magic of witchcraft is also frequently presented as a positive, natural thing. Alison Waller argues that the witch “offers complex and hybrid versions of femininity” (2009, p. 126), be it through the depiction of “an aged and despised hag of myth and fairy tale, a female victim of early modern history, or a compellingly sexual teenage seductress in television and film” (p. 128). Thus, the witch and her female power can be represented in a positive way, allowing readers to identify with her and share in her feelings of empowerment. As Purkiss writes, “the figure of the witch could be an occasion for female self-fashioning in the full-blown Greenblattian sense; that is, it was an identity which allowed class boundaries to be crossed for

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20 Significantly, while few people today would consciously connect witchcraft with Judaism, this traditional anti-Semitic depiction of witches means that wicked witches in film and television are frequently played by Jewish actresses. This is particularly notable in films such as Oz the Great and Powerful (Raimi, 2013), in which the evil witches are played by the Jewish Rachel Weisz and Mila Kunis, whereas the good witch is played by Michelle Williams, a blonde gentile woman. In the original Broadway production of Wicked, the Musical the Wicked Witch of the West is played by the Jewish Idina Menzel, while Glinda the Good is played by the blonde, non-Jewish, Kristin Chenoweth.
those who otherwise found them impassable” (1996, p. 162). If the witch can cross such boundaries, then perhaps she can break them to allow others the same freedom that she enjoys herself.

In this section I will compare three novels by Diana Wynne Jones that strongly feature themes of feminine magic: *The Merlin Conspiracy* (2003), *The Time of the Ghost* (1981), and *Black Maria* (1991). Each of these takes a quite distinctive approach to this subject.

First, *The Merlin Conspiracy*, which takes place in a world called Blest where magic is common. While magic in that world is divided into male and female varieties, it is never made quite clear what these different types of magic consist of, although how they are used appears to be a distinguishing feature. The story is narrated by two children: a girl named Roddy whose magic is connected with plants, and a boy named Nick whose magic lies with animals. Roddy inherits her powers from an ancient wise woman who needs to pass on her knowledge before she dies. It is indicated that she cannot pass this knowledge on to Roddy’s maternal grandfather, even though he is a very powerful magic user, but this probably has more to do with the fact that he is not human rather than because he is male. The narrative tells us that “[i]t hurt” this wise woman to stand or walk. She had been ritually injured when she was fifteen because she was a powerful witch. A very powerful witch... The village chief had smashed her right hip so that he could control her. She had never forgiven him. She had vowed never to pass on the knowledge her gifts had given her to anyone from the village. (Jones, 2003, pp. 129-130, italics in the original)

Throughout the text Roddy refers to the witch as “the hurt woman” (p. 153). As mentioned in the last chapter, certain physical disabilities are commonly connected with wicked witches, but in the case of the hurt woman, her disability makes her an object of pity rather than of repulsion. Those are the two roles disabled people tend to play in fiction, with very little in between. As Alaina Leary points out, “[w]hen we pigeonhole disabled characters into basic roles that are easily defined, such as sympathetic and pitiable or villainous and evil, we’re reinforcing the idea that disabled people don’t live full, meaningful lives the same way non-disabled people do” (2017, unpaged). Despite being unable to walk, the hurt woman is portrayed as being knowledgeable and powerful, rather than
simply feeble, but she is still chiefly characterised by her disability, especially as she is not even given a name.

On her father’s side, Roddy is descended from a coven of hereditary witches who “wouldn’t let anyone male stay with them beyond seven years” (p. 259), including husbands and sons, for fear of having their female magic contaminated. Their magic is not the same as Roddy’s and the wise woman’s, as they do not work with plants. As Roddy informs us:

Apart from a bush of lavender and a box tree cut into a round ball, there was nothing in this garden. It was all tufty grass. How odd, I thought. I’d always thought that witches cultivated herbs and were generally bowered in fertility. (p. 264)

Roddy’s grandmother, Heppy, guards an assortment of magical items. When she shows them to Roddy, she explains that the witches use these various items “according to which day it is and where the moon is. We give them all a drop of blood every time we use them” (p. 275). The connection with blood and the moon evokes the menstrual cycle. Despite this, when Heppy asks, “[c]an’t you feel how secret and how female they are?” (p. 275, italics in the original), Roddy thinks to herself, “[t]o tell the truth, I couldn’t. The strength that came out of the space lined with red velvet did not feel to me particularly much to do with women, or men either” (p. 275). In reality, of course, there are many women who do not menstruate, due to age, disability, or other reasons (in contrast, there are also transgender men, as well as non-binary and intersex people, who do menstruate, but are not women), so Roddy might be suggesting, through Jones, that defining femaleness or female power by the presence of a menstrual cycle is misleading. It is also, we might add, essentialist, ableist, and transphobic, even though mainstream feminists cannot seem to countenance the idea of a woman who either is not able to menstruate, or whose experiences with menstruation are negative rather than empowering. In Suzannah Weiss’s words, “[s]ince periods are associated with females, people project... ‘feminine’ qualities onto them. They’re said to embody women’s ever-changing, earthly, emotional, and intuitive nature” (2017b, unpaged). However, as she continues:

These ideas have been used to justify sexism. To this day, while men are seen as fit to indulge in the life of the mind,
women are viewed as limited by their bodies. Periods and the connected process of childbirth are commonly cited in arguments against putting women in power. (ibid.)

Weiss acknowledges that “these ideas are meant to empower women. A lot of them probably do – for some” (ibid.). It only becomes a problem when this connection between womanhood and nature is treated like an objective fact.

Roddy’s aunt is also part of a magic circle that practises the kind of magic that is associated with witches: “taking all your clothes off and galloping round in a ring” (p. 313). Other characters mock her and her magic circle, though, calling her Dotty Dora, albeit they admit that she is “the sane one in that group” (p. 313, italics in the original). At best, their magic is characterised as silly and inept, at worst as dangerous and far out of the practitioners’ depth.

Heppy mentions a family of male witches, but does not explain how their magic differs from hers. While it is never stated, there is some indication that communicating with animals, as Nick does, is a male skill, complementing Roddy’s female herb magic. Throughout the book, Nick talks to various creatures, and Roddy’s male friend, Grundo, can speak to salamanders, which Roddy herself is unable to do. However, both Roddy and her female cousins can understand the elephant that Nick befriends, while Grundo can hear the elephant’s voice, but is unable to make out the words, and Roddy’s male cousin does not hear the creature at all.

The best indication of the difference between male and female magic can be seen in the roles of the “Merlin” and the “Lady of Governance”. The Merlin (which is a title passed on since King Arthur’s day) is the king’s official magical advisor. He travels around with the king’s court and governs the country’s magic. The Lady of Governance is less well-known than the Merlin, as Roddy reveals when she admits that she has never heard about the Lady until she meets her in person. She does not travel with the king, but resides in one place, in her cottage. According to Roddy’s aunt, she is “as powerful as he [the Merlin] is, but she doesn’t usually concern herself with State magics [sic]. She controls the more domestic things” (p. 294). This statement is rather misleading as it seems to suggest that the Lady’s realm is household magic. In truth, while the Merlin is involved with politics, the Lady of Governance upholds the balance of the land. To do this, she communicates with anthropomorphic representations of towns and cities. Both the Merlin and the Lady of Governance are appointed
by magic, making their claim to power seem natural and possibly divine. This is particularly true for the Lady of Governance, who is named by an anthropomorphic representation of the land of Blest itself. The novel never explores the king’s lineage, and it does not directly indicate that his position is as natural and rightful as the Merlin’s, though the latter’s role as the king’s magically appointed advisor does seem to legitimise monarchy in general.

At the end of the novel, Roddy uses her inherited magic to wake the land of Blest, and, in its, or, more precisely “her”, anthropomorphic guise, this being sets everything aright, putting an end to the Merlin and his associates’ attempt to seize political power. This act identifies Roddy as the next Lady of Governance, so it is explicitly female magic, connected with the femininity of the Lady of Governance. However, throughout the novel Roddy has been working with other magic users, both male and female. So while she appears to be the most powerful character in the end, the emphasis of the novel lies on cooperation and using different types of magic to complement each other, which, as I discussed in Chapter 2, presents a more successful alternative to patriarchy than stories that focus on violence and antagonism.

As things generally go back to normal by the end of the story, the characters do not question whether the political system in their world needs to be changed. The Merlin is defeated because he intends to use his power and influence for selfish reasons, but the power and influence that come with the position are not portrayed as intrinsically negative and corrupting. The king himself features surprisingly little in the story, despite being a key part of the Merlin’s wicked plans, and his claim to the throne is never questioned. The main force to check the influence of powerful people in the world of The Merlin Conspiracy appears to be the land of Blest herself, who can be seen as a goddess, though she uses human agents such as Roddy. This appears to legitimise power as divinely appointed, turning the magical leadership of Blest into something of a theocracy.

However, the fact that Roddy is chosen as the next Lady of Governance has different connotations than if she had been chosen as the next Merlin. The Lady’s magic, which is connected to nature and the earth, is less prone to corruption than the Merlin’s political position, the implication being that the power and responsibility that comes from communing with the earth is more benevolent than political power. Thus, Roddy does not simply replace a corrupt
leader while promising to use her position more responsibly; instead, her power lies in a completely different area, one that is explicitly coded as female. This is not to say that women cannot be corrupt politicians, for one of the Merlin’s associates is a woman. She is even a fortune teller, which involves a type of magic that is often connected with femininity. Still, the Merlin’s desire to attain political power and use it to oppress others is characterised as more masculine than the Lady of Governance’s natural, feminine magic. The same point is made with the conflict between the hurt woman and the village chief seeking to control her. The hurt woman uses her powerful herb magic to help and to heal, while the village chief uses violence to subjugate her.

Thus, while male and female magic users work together to achieve the happy ending of the story, feminine-coded power is usually presented as more benign than masculine-coded power, if only because of the way the former is used to help others, rather than for selfish reasons. As mentioned above, it can be problematic to characterise femininity as connected with nature and masculinity with culture, but the overall message of the novel is a positive one; namely, that power, whether in the hands of a man or a woman, should not be used to hurt others.

In *The Time of the Ghost*, four teenage sisters are haunted by a ghost from the future. They try to perform an amateur exorcism with bell, book, and candle, thus appropriating a type of power normally reserved for adult men. Even though the exorcism nearly works, the girls later decide that they are not religious enough to succeed in performing this Christian ritual, so they try a more heathen approach instead. Rather than banishing the ghost, they collect blood in a bowl to communicate with her. Interestingly enough, they derive the idea for this ritual from one of the classical works taught by their father, who is the headmaster of a boys’ school. Their father (significantly nicknamed Himself) runs a very patriarchal institution and represents oppressive male power. He enjoys exercising authority over the schoolboys in his care, while neglecting his own daughters. For him, the classical canon of literature represents the patriarchal authority of dead white men. The girls, meanwhile, subvert this authority with its established literature by using it to inspire their pagan magic.

The sisters get help from the boys at the school to fill a bowl with blood. While the boys are happy to help, most of them are disgusted by the sight of
the blood. The girls, however, feel that it is right and natural, which suggests a female connection to paganism and witchcraft, and, possibly, to blood itself. Of course, as stated earlier, defining femininity primarily by menstrual blood is both shallow and exclusionary, and the same is true about defining femininity by linking it to nature.

Notably, while the girls enjoy the magic, the female ghost is repulsed by it, even though the magic is successful and they manage to communicate with the apparition. The ghost’s reason for being uncomfortable with the magic is probably because she has had negative experiences with a pagan goddess who has tried to kill her in the past. This shows that natural magic and power can be sinister as well, even if they derive from a feminine source.

When Himself walks in on this scene, he is furious:

Everyone well knew that Himself wanted to let rip in one of his screaming rages. He wanted to roar and shout and hit people and call his daughters bitches, but he did not want to do it with Mrs Gill looking on… .

He settled at length for sarcasm. “I seem to have spawned a coven of witches,” he remarked. (Jones, 1981, p. 162)

Like everything else about him, Himself’s religious views are expressed in a way that puts him in a position of power. Thus, when he said grace, “he had a different manner, more like a priest. Himself’s voice rolled out the few words like organ music” (p. 52). His daughters’ witchcraft is not only an affront to his religion, but to his patriarchal authority. This is why he cannot tolerate it, and never forgives them for it.

The two most important aspects of the novel are the sisters’ relationships to each other and their relationship to their parents. Sally insists that their parents are perfect, even though they are, in reality, extremely neglectful. Their mother, Phyllis, acts more maternally towards the boys at the school than she does towards her own daughters; and Himself, of course, is commanding and devoid of love.

While Sally ignores her parents’ shortcomings, she is very aware of her sisters’ flaws. For much of the story the four girls bicker and call each other names. Fenella writes a poem about how ugly her sisters are, and the ghost thinks at one point, “[w]hat a hateful family! …[w]hy did I come back here?” (p. 19, italics in the original). Additionally, Julian Addiman, one of the boys from the
school, often tries to turn the girls against one another by playing on their attraction towards him. He enjoys humiliating other people, and encourages the mean-spirited side of the four sisters. When Sally thinks back on the past, she realises that her life “had been dominated on one hand by Himself, always angry but seldom there, and on the other hand by Julian Addiman, always laughing, always demanding more and more. Between them, she had scarcely been a person” (p. 130).

But when Sally is in danger – both from the cruel goddess and from the abusive Julian Addiman – it is her sisters rather than her parents who do everything to help her. They not only reject Himself’s patriarchal authority, but they also reject Julian Addiman’s divisive cruelty. Rather than humiliating one another to make themselves feel better, the way Himself and Julian taught them to do, they find strength in their unity. It is this unity that allows them to deflect the curse of the goddess, as well as to move past the neglect and abuse of their childhood. Thus, it proves far more powerful than the magic with which they experiment.

Finally, there is the novel *Black Maria*, which is narrated by Mig, a character hoping to become a writer. Unlike Nan from *Witch Week*, discussed below, Mig’s aspirations are not an analogue for the magic power within her, but simply a reason for her to write down the events of the story.

The Black Maria of the title is Mig’s nickname for her elderly aunt, who resides in a small town called Cranbury. While Aunt Maria pretends to be too feeble to do anything on her own, she manipulates the lives of everyone in town. She and her friends (whom Mig’s brother, Chris, scornfully calls “the Mrs Urs”) have very specific ideas about what is men’s work and what is women’s, even though Aunt Maria herself never does any work. She does not approve of Mig going outside or of Chris helping in the kitchen, and she scolds Mig and her mother for wearing trousers.

Mig and Chris discover that all the men in Cranbury (apart from their neighbour, Mr Phelps21) look and act as if they are hypnotised, causing Mig to

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21 Mr Phelps is very outspoken about his misogyny, calling Mig a “stupid little female” (pp. 85-86), and saying things like, “[w]omen’s brains alarm me. Totally obtuse” (p. 164). Presumably readers are not supposed to agree with his views, but he never gets criticised for them, and he is a far more helpful and sympathetic character than any of the women in Cranbury, apart from his sister.
describe them as zombies. It turns out that the women are in control of the town, and use magic (which they simply call “the power”) to keep the men subordinate. Aunt Maria is their Queen, a position she gained by overthrowing the rule of men led by a young man named Antony Green. Antony explains this constant war between men and women in Cranbury:

“It goes back to the time when somebody here decided that men and women were different and that the rules for the way they used the power should be different…. They divided into men’s ways and women’s ways then, and they’ve been thinking up more and more rules ever since to make the difference seem even bigger. Women allowed men the strong, out-of-doors things… while the men gave over all the secret, indoors things to strong women who would work by the rules. Those are the ones we call the Queens.” (Jones, 1991, p. 178)

The representation of the current matriarchy in Cranbury is strange and sometimes contradictory. Despite being in charge, the women maintain traditional gender roles. They force their husbands to go to work and earn money, which seems to be a parody of a patriarchal society where wives are pressured into staying at home and doing housework. But this gives them very little power or authority outside their own homes, so the only one who truly benefits from this system is Aunt Maria, who has everyone in town serving her. As Nikita Redkar writes, “unlike male privilege, ‘female privilege’ corners women into benefiting from a much smaller, domestic sphere, rather than the system at large” (2016, unpaged). Although the men in Cranbury have been turned into zombies and are unable to think for themselves, Mig has misgivings:

I pride myself on having ideas, but all the time we’ve been in Cranbury, I’ve been letting Chris do all the real active thinking. Perhaps it’s because Chris is a year older than me. But I am not usually like this. I think it is the way everyone here takes for granted that having ideas is not women’s work and not nice somehow. In future, I swear to do better. (Jones, 1991, p. 110)

These thoughts seem at odds with the events of the novel, in which the women are portrayed as scheming and the men as obeying.

As the women are upholding an oppressive regime, their power is portrayed in an extremely negative light, although there are a few instances of
women’s magic being used in positive ways. For instance, Mr Phelps’s sister, Miss Phelps, uses magic to send Mig and her mother back in time to help them discover the secret of Antony Green’s disappearance. Even Mig obtains some of the power and uses it for a small show of rebellion while she is trapped in the town’s orphanage (though it does not help her escape). But in an earlier scene, she sits in the living room with Aunt Mig and the Mrs Urs, and, while looking down, starts counting their legs: “Twenty-six legs, making thirteen of us, all female. As soon as I realised that, I wanted to go away” (p. 112). Rather than female solidarity and witchcraft being empowering, they are horrifying to Mig, and she wants no part in them.

At first Mig considers herself neutral in the conflict, while Chris feels drawn to the male side. But when Aunt Maria puts a spell on Chris, Mig no longer wants to be neutral. With the help of her mother and Miss Phelps, she frees Antony Green, who has been imprisoned under the earth by Aunt Maria’s daughter, Naomi, for believing that men and women should be equal. Antony proceeds to punish Aunt Maria and share the power equally with everyone. While this is a positive gesture, showing that access to magic should not depend on gender, the fact that it is a man who sets things right makes this scene far less of a feminist action than if it had been Mig who had shared out the magic. Furthermore, the man who does this is the appointed leader of the town, so rather than a female struggle for equality finally succeeding, a benevolent male ruler generously decides to give part of his own power to his subjects.

The fact that the female rule has been overthrown is emphasised by an exchange between Elaine, Aunt Maria’s former second-in-command, and her husband, who was previously described like this:

Mr Elaine – who is called Larry – is smaller than Elaine and I think he was one of the line of zombies who got off the train. Anyway he has a pale, drained, zombie-ish look and does everything Elaine says. (Jones, 1991, p. 50)

22 The narrative is not entirely clear on this, but this is what it seems to imply, as Naomi tells Antony, “You go on a lot about men and women all being the same this way, but I don’t think you trust me as I trust you or you’d let me put you in that mound and call you out again” (p. 154).
Apart from the blunt assertion that Larry obeys Elaine in everything, both the fact that he is smaller than her and that he is referred to as Mr Elaine, rather than having an identity apart from his wife, show his complete submission to her. After Antony has broken the spell on the men in Cranbury, he auctions off the children from the orphanage. Larry expresses an interest in adopting one of the orphans, but Elaine complains:

“Larry! That’s absolutely out of the question. I hate children.”
“[I] love them,” said Larry. “Oh, come on, Elaine. Give it a try.”
Elaine hovered and spluttered and almost refused outright, until she suddenly glanced up at Antony Green sweating on the steps above. “Oh, all right,” she said...

(Jones, 1991, p. 199, italics in the original)

This act of defiance by Larry against his wife is portrayed as admirable, even though having a child is a life-changing decision that would affect both of them. The fact that Elaine, who was previously an unsympathetic character, is redeemed by agreeing to adopt a child, also reaffirms the point of view that women who do not want to have children are cold, unnatural, and monstrous.

In the quotation above, Purkiss suggested that the witch can cross class boundaries. However, this does not appear to happen in these three stories, as all the girls in them are comfortably middle class and presumed to be white. Thus, the texts do not explore power relations beyond those between male and female, and between adults and children, which represents a missed opportunity, as such engagements would have added more depth to these narratives of opposing unjust authoritarian systems. This omission does raise questions about just how inclusive the magic in these books is. When Antony shares the power at the end of *Black Maria*, indicating that it should belong to everyone, we might ask whether he actually means everyone, regardless of race and class. Or does it include only the typical inhabitants of a small English town, who are predominantly white and middle-class? The text does not provide answers to these questions. That said, at least in the case of the hurt

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23 Most of the characters’ races are not mentioned explicitly, but – as I outlined in the last chapter – in a society where whiteness is considered the norm, most readers will imagine a character to be white unless they are told otherwise. While it is perfectly reasonable that some readers might imagine Roddy, for example, to be black (as she is described as having “dark, curly hair” [p. 117]), this cannot be counted as positive representation of a black character.
woman in *The Merlin Conspiracy*, disabled people seem to have a part to play in magic, even if only as mentors rather than heroines themselves.

Even though these three books are written by the same author, two of them present female magic in a positive light, but one shows it in a very negative way. In all of them female magic is opposed to male authority, particularly in *The Time of the Ghost*, even though that novel ultimately portrays magic as less effective than female solidarity and friendship. In *The Merlin Conspiracy*, the lines between male and female magic are less clearly demarcated than in *Black Maria*, but both have indications that magic should not really be divided by gender. While *The Merlin Conspiracy* celebrates female power, *Black Maria* depicts it as somewhat sinister when it goes unchecked by benevolent male rulers. Even though the novel ends with the power being shared equally, thus erasing the magical hierarchy of the town (something that does not happen in *The Merlin Conspiracy*, in which the positions of the Merlin and the Lady of Governance go unquestioned), the way this occurs still legitimises benevolent male leadership rather than female rebellion against an unjust system.

Despite the different approaches of these three works, the overall message of these novels is that magic and, by extension, power, should be shared rather than hoarded, and that it should not be used to control or harm other people, suggesting that personal empowerment should never come at the expense of others. As Charles Butler writes, “Magic in Jones’s books is, like any form of power, morally ambiguous, and its practitioners are continually faced with the temptation to treat people as objects of manipulation” (2006, p. 241). Thus, depictions of magic in *The Merlin Conspiracy*, *The Time of the Ghost*, and even *Black Maria* are not limited by gender, though they vary in their approach to female empowerment and its effectiveness. However, they still appear somewhat limited when it comes to other aspects of privilege.

As seen with Sybil from *The Merlin Conspiracy*, a common feature of fantasy literature is the inclusion of a character with second sight: someone who can either see the future or see creatures that most people cannot perceive, such as ghosts or fairies. Normally, however, these characters are portrayed as wise and helpful rather than cruel and villainous, as is the case in Sybil’s depiction. As I indicated above, these abilities are often gendered as female, which is what I will discuss in the next section.
Magic Eyes
Traditionally the power of vision is associated with the masculine and the ruling class. Laura Mulvey, who coined the term “male gaze” to describe the visual objectification of women, explains how the line of vision can be used to oppress women in a patriarchal society:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (1975, p. 19, italics in the original)

More simply, in the words of John Berger, “[m]en look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at” (1972, unpaged).

This insight should be linked to Rosemary Jackson’s observation that Western society is “a culture which equates the ‘real’ with the ‘visible’ and gives the eye dominance over other sense organs” (1995, p. 45). Roberta Seelinger Trites elaborates on this:

to express our understanding of something, we talk about having a “point of view” or a “perception” or “seeing” what someone means. Visual metaphors emphasize the subject/object split: whoever “sees” is automatically in the subject position... gazing at something which is in the object position. (1997, p. 33)

However, neither Jackson nor Trites considers how this emphasis on sight as the centre of identity affects blind people, especially blind women. Blind or otherwise, visually impaired people can more readily be subject to the gaze of patriarchy, given that they are less capable of returning this look, making blind women especially vulnerable; this said, they can also appear to be ignoring it, which might be interpreted as a rebellious act, making them seem more impervious or special. Either way, it is important to take blind people into account when discussing the prevalence of the male gaze, and women’s strategies to return or resist it; but this side of the issue is mostly ignored, except perhaps by disability activists. Consequently, in fiction blindness is usually treated as a narrative device rather than a regular variation of human
existence. Blind characters in fantasy fiction, for example, often have psychic visions or similar kinds of magical powers, which appear to serve as an attempt to compensate for their lack of physical eyesight. However, as this narrative device still focuses on the importance of being able to see, and is similar to the miracle cure narrative that disability activists like Lois Keith (2001) deplore, it is unlikely to be reassuring or empowering to most blind people. As partially sighted writer Elsa Sjunneson-Henry writes, discussing how blindness is treated in fiction:

The problem with this trope boils down to a single issue: Blindness never gets to simply exist in SFF [science fiction and fantasy]. It’s always painted as something to overcome and/or to reinvent in order to move forward. When writers give blind characters superpowers to divest them of disability, they aren’t just doing a disservice to their writing but also to the blind people reading or watching their work. (2016, unpaged, italics in original)

She argues that it would be far more inventive and subversive to create blind characters whose blindness is not cancelled out by magical or scientific means, and therefore treating disability as something abnormal that needs to be fixed. This said, the novelist Berlie Doherty, when collecting ideas from some visually impaired pupils, found that they were excited to imagine a blind child who “possessed inner sight of another world” (Pinsent, 1997, p. 131).

Featuring the invisible in fantasy fiction can still serve a subversive function, when it is not used to stereotype blind people, but instead to take power away from the male gaze. As Jackson points out:

The topography of the modern fantastic suggests a preoccupation with problems of vision and visibility, for it is structured around spectral imagery: it is remarkable how many fantasies introduce mirrors, glasses, reflections, portraits, eyes – which see things myopically, or distortedly, or out of focus – to effect a transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar. (1997, p. 43)

Two female protagonists from my primary texts whose power lies in their eyes are Belladonna and Tanya. Belladonna is the main character in Helen Stringer’s two books, *The Last Ghost* (2009) and *The Midnight Gate* (2011); Tanya features in Michelle Harrison’s trilogy, *The 13 Treasures* (2009), *The 13 Curses* (2010), and *The 13 Secrets* (2011). Belladonna has the ability to see ghosts,
whereas Tanya, in contrast, can see fairies. Both of these girls have inherited their gifts from the mother’s side of their respective families, and both of them initially feel that their abilities are more trouble than they are worth. On the one hand, Belladonna thinks that it cannot be that uncommon to see ghosts. In an exchange with her father, she says: “Lots of people can see ghosts – you see them talking about it on the telly all the time” (Stringer, 2009, p. 17). Her father responds by calling these people “charlatans”, which is probably accurate, considering that even Belladonna’s Grandma Johnson, who can genuinely communicate with the dead, holds fake séances by making rapping noises and telling people what they want to hear. On the other hand, Belladonna feels that her ability sets her apart from her classmates, making it difficult for her to fit in. When a ghost starts talking to her at school, the following thoughts go through her head:

This was exactly the sort of situation that she’d been trying to avoid. It had been two years since she’d started seeing ghosts, and while her mother thought it was all perfectly normal (“Everyone on the Nightshade side of the family sees them, dear – we always have”), Belladonna knew better. Being caught talking to herself by one of her classmates would just put the icing on the cake of her miserable school year. (Stringer, 2009, p. 27)

Tanya’s ability to see fairies does not just mark her as an outsider, but also lands her in trouble as the fairies silence her and punish her for trying to talk about them. In contrast to Belladonna, who is surrounded by family members who can see ghosts, Tanya initially thinks she is the only person who is aware of the fairies’ existence, until she befriends another girl with second sight: an androgynously named tomboy named Rowan, nicknamed Red.

However, Belladonna turns out to be the Spellbinder, a person destined to save the Land of the Dead. This means that she has various powers, including the power to open up gates between the world of the living, the Land of the Dead, and other realms. Her power lies not only in her vision, but in words as well. When she speaks words of power, the invocation is described thus:

The language was strange and the script unfamiliar, but she knew what it meant. She knew she was summoning something old… . Yet it had a familiar ring, as if she knew the language, knew the words and knew who it was she
was calling and had just forgotten. Like she sometimes forgot the name of the postman, or what that stuff is that you put in a cake along with the baking soda to make it rise. (Stringer, 2009, p. 210)

In both *The Last Ghost* and *Midnight Gate*, Belladonna uses her powers to save the world and restore the balance between the living and the dead.24 While she still resents her powers at times, she grows more confident and gains friends, one of whom is a teenaged ghost.

Tanya does not have a destined role in the battle between good and evil in the way that Belladonna does, but she ends up thwarting the schemes of some evil fairies and, like Belladonna, she gains friends. She no longer feels alienated by her gift, but embraces it as a part of herself and her family.

Despite second sight not being an inherently female gift in either of these texts, there are hardly any male characters with this ability. In *The 13 Treasures* the only male characters that can see fairies do so with the help of magical eye drops. The sequels feature a few men and boys with second sight, but they are relatively minor characters, compared with Tanya and Red. Belladonna has a male classmate who learns to see ghosts, but only because his powers are channeled through Belladonna.

While both sets of texts also feature characters that can see the future, these are exclusively women.25 It is not stated whether this is a female power, though in *The Last Ghost* the character in question is an ancient Greek Sybil (and, in *The 13 Secrets*, one of the characters is called Sybil). The most interesting fortune-telling character is an old Romani woman in *The 13 Treasures*, called Morag. The people in the nearby village – including Tanya’s friend Fabian – refer to her as “Mad Morag” because she lives by herself in the forest (and, most likely, because she is Romani), and is therefore deemed to be strange and eccentric. Despite the way she is perceived by the public, Morag is actually represented as a rather ordinary old woman, and so defies Tanya’s preconceptions about what a witch should be like. When Tanya marvels to herself about how ordinary Morag’s caravan is (it contains an old-fashioned broom and a cat, but also a book of crossword puzzles), the old woman snaps,

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24 In both instances, right after performing the act that sets the world aright, Belladonna needs rescuing by her friend and classmate Steve, which undermines her empowerment a little.

25 The Clayr from Garth Nix’s “Old Kingdom” series (1995-2016), which I discussed in Chapter 2, are also all women, further connecting the power of prophecy with femininity.
“What were you expecting? …Toads and spell books? A collection of pointy hats? Eye of newt and wing of bat?” (Harrison, 2009, p. 241). The narrative makes it clear that Morag is supposed to defy stereotypes at this point:

Tanya felt her eyes drawn to the puzzle book once more. She simply couldn’t help herself. Its normality made it seem alien.

“It’s prejudice,” she murmured unthinkingly.

“Pardon?” said Morag.

“Nine down. ‘Pre-conceived opinion or judgment formed without facts.’ The answer is prejudice.” (Harrison, 2009, p. 244)

However, as she lives in a caravan, knows magic, and tells fortunes, she still conforms to many racial stereotypes of Romani people (the text even uses the word “gypsy”, which most Romani people regard as a racial slur [see Vagnozzi, 2016]). On the other hand, Romani have also traditionally been seen as greedy and untrustworthy, using their magic for sinister means. Morag is none of these things, and her magic is portrayed as beneficent, natural, and female, which makes her arguably a fairly positive representation of a Romani woman. But considering that historically the belief that Romani have mystical powers has played a part in their oppression (Crowe, 2004, p. 1), it is questionable whether it is appropriate to portray a Romani character with magic at all, even if she is depicted in a benign way. As with the Queen of America from Charlie Fletcher’s Silver Tongue (2008), discussed in Chapter 2, attributes that can be positive and empowering in white characters – such as magic, healing, and a particular bond with animals – can easily be stereotypical and damaging when applied to characters of races that have commonly been characterised as savage or cunning.

In this regard, it is also worth mentioning that Tanya herself is described as being “olive-skinned”, with “brown eyes and dark hair” (2009, p. 28), meaning that she is a person of colour, like Morag. Unlike Morag, however, whose race makes her an outsider in the community, Tanya never appears to have to deal with instances of racism, although she is used to feeling different from others, due to her ability to see fairies. This suggests that examining racial issues is not Harrison’s priority in featuring a non-white protagonist. Of course, people of colour do not need a thematic reason to exist within fiction, and it is not always necessary to show instances of racism when writing about non-white
characters. That said, a non-white main character in fiction is itself a political statement, given that publishers usually shy away from such figures, and, even when they are present, they are often “white-washed” in visual representations, such as book covers (as is the case with one edition of *The 13 Secrets*, on which Tanya looks decidedly pale), illustrations, and film adaptations.

Because of these connections between the two characters, Tanya likes Morag and respects her powers. She never mocks Morag or sees her as a dangerous outsider. Fabian, on the other hand, continues deriding her for being peculiar and calls her “Mad Morag”, even after finding out that she is a real witch and seer, and despite Tanya defending her. This makes Fabian seem selective in his sexism and ableism. He speaks with great compassion about Tanya’s ancestor, Elizabeth Elvesden, who was put in an asylum for talking about fairies. According to him:

> “Women had no rights back then. Everything was decided by their fathers or their husbands. Women could even be considered mad if they had a child out of wedlock. Many an innocent, perfectly sane woman was locked up and left to rot in an asylum on their husband’s say-so... and well, if they weren’t mad when they went in, they usually ended up that way.” (Harrison, 2009, pp. 104-105)

Clearly Fabian recognises that in Elizabeth Elvesden’s day, being labelled insane was a way to suppress women who did not fit societal perceptions of what women should be like and how they should behave, but he does not realise that this is something that still happens, and that he is perpetuating this kind of suppression of women by calling Morag mad. His reference to “innocent, perfectly sane” women also suggests that he might have less respect and pity for women who are actually mentally ill. In this vein, it is important to note that neither Elizabeth Elvesden nor Morag is mentally ill, but they are labelled as such because of their magical powers. This is a far more common plot in fiction than stories about the mistreatment of people who do suffer from mental illnesses. Charlie Fletcher uses this plot point in the “Stoneheart” trilogy (2006-2008) with Edie’s mother, who – like Elizabeth Elvesden – is put into a mental hospital because of her magical powers of sight, although there is some indication that her traumatic visions have actually driven her to insanity. Thus,

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26 For a discussion on white-washing on book covers, see Flood, 2009.
mentally ill people are commonly excluded from the narratives about their own oppression and abuse, only appearing as background characters in stories about unfairly institutionalised healthy people. As Kris Nelson writes: “The problem here is that we’re taught to sympathise with these able-minded victims – and not to sympathise with those who are neurodivergent and disabled (and especially not when there are intersections of sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism)” (2015, unpaged, italics in the original). All these oppressions are deeply interrelated, and by isolating them into separate categories of specialist issues, the fight for equality becomes fragmented and aimless.

Returning to the subject of second sight, this type of magic – connected with vision – used to have negative connotations in earlier ages. As Katharine Briggs writes:

In the time of witchcraft trials, when all psychic experiences were deeply suspect, ghosts, fairies and second sight were thought to be part of the diabolic machinery for ensnaring the souls of men. Ghosts were devils in masquerade, fairies were familiar spirits, and all those who saw things not seen by other men were liable to suspicion as witches. (2002, p. 169)

However, in these texts, Stringer and Harrison reclaim these powers and make them positive, empowering, and feminine. Both Belladonna and Tanya learn to love the powers they initially felt were a burden, and both of them use these powers to help and befriend other people, which not only makes them powerful, but also gives them a network of friends to rely on.

But neither of these works deals with issues relating to eyes and vision as much as Neil Gaiman’s Coraline (2002). The villain of the story is a beldam who turns herself into a twisted imitation of Coraline’s mother. She is described as being taller, thinner, and paler than Coraline’s proper mother, as well as having long, claw-like nails, as befits a fairy-tale witch. Most striking, however, are her eyes, which are nothing but two buttons. She threatens to replace Coraline’s eyes with buttons as well. As the eyes are considered the windows to the soul, the implication seems to be that the other mother lacks a soul. This puts her in opposition to the two old ladies who use their eyes to read Coraline’s tea-leaves, and give her a seeing stone to aid her in her search for her missing parents. The two ladies are depicted as being rather eccentric, but their help
proves invaluable, making them a pair of wise women.

The story also features a magic mirror, owned by the other mother. As she serves the function of both the traditional evil stepmother and the child-eating witch in the story, her mirror is evocative of the one the evil queen uses in “Snow White”, but rather than reflecting the other mother’s vanity, it shows her control and power. She traps people within the mirror and uses it to show illusions to Coraline. Thus, she uses the power of vision to hurt and control people. Coraline turns this oppressive power around by using her own eyes to see through the other mother’s trickery. After the other mother shows her things in the mirror that are blatantly untrue, this exchange occurs:

“See?” said her other mother.
“No,” said Coraline. “I don’t see. And I don’t believe it either.” (Gaiman, 2002, p. 43)

Coraline also uses the other mother’s own magic against her, using the mirror to lead her to one of the ghost children’s souls, which Coraline needs to find in order to defeat the other mother. Kimberley Reynolds says about Coraline’s victory that, “when she eventually succeeds, she discovers that the fantasy or adventure has given her the ability to see with new eyes, and to appreciate what she has previously taken for granted” (2007, p. 149, italics added). This, of course, happens only because she refuses to let the other mother give her eyes made of buttons. Coraline’s power of sight, while not emphasised in the same way as the power of Belladonna or Tanya, is important and empowering.

The girls in these stories all achieve great things, defeating villains and saving people they care about by using the power of their eyes and trusting in the things they see, rather than the lies they are told. Unlike the villains they encounter, they do not use their powers in oppressive or selfish ways, but rather to help others. This makes their sight not only empowering to themselves, but to their communities at large – whether it is just their own family or the entire world. While Coraline is mostly independent in the novel, both Belladonna and Tanya learn to appreciate the value of friendship and community, which – as in The Time of the Ghost – often proves to be more powerful than magic.

In addition to her second sight, Belladonna also has access to words of power. Words are another common form of magic, as I will show in the following section.
“My Voice Is My Weapon of Choice”

In an oppressive system, the voice of the powerful is imbued with meaning, whereas the powerless are silenced, their opinions going unheard and their stories untold. As Mulvey writes:

The workings of patriarchy and the mould of feminine unconscious it produces, have left women largely without a voice, gagged and deprived of outlets (of a kind supplied, for instance, either by male art or popular culture) in spite of the crucial social and ideological functions women are called on to perform. (1977, p. 39)

As mentioned in Chapter 1, fairy tale heroines are often deprived of their voice; in the words of Jennifer Waelti-Walters, “they must not speak or laugh” (1982, p. 5), and sometimes they “have their hands cut off” (p. 5) to circumscribe their agency even more. She also says that wicked females in fairy tales are punished for using their voices:

The witch gathers information through her own senses and through her word-magic. “Mirror, mirror on the wall” is a way of saying that the queen has power; power to ask the right questions, to use her senses to receive answers, her brain to draw conclusions and decide on actions, power to give orders and get her will accomplished in an efficient way which has an impact upon her context… . She is aware of what she wants and able to get it – and for that she is punished at the end of the story because she is not an acceptable model in a male-oriented society. (p. 81)

Sheldon Cashdan claims that “[i]n folklore, a woman’s voice is traditionally associated with seductiveness and thus symbolizes lustful feelings” (1999, p. 167), turning the speaking woman into a mere sexual object whose main importance lies in the effects she has on the men hearing her – but not listening to her.

Showing women and girls who use their voice in a positive way and who are listened to, is therefore an empowering aspect of feminist art and literature. As Trites writes:

No longer the passive “good girl” who grows into a prescribed and circumscribed social role, the feminist

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27 The title of this section is a line from the song “Fight Like a Girl” (2012) by Emilie Autumn.
protagonist learns to recognize and appreciate the power of her own voice. Her awakening is not bestowed upon her by a male awakener; instead, she wakes herself and discovers herself to be a strong, independent, and articulate person. (1997, pp. 7-8)

Minh-ha says that “[p]ower, as unveiled by numerous contemporary writings, has always inscribed itself in language. Speaking, writing, and discoursing are not mere acts of communication; they are above all acts of compulsion” (1989, p. 52). Ways to show the power of a character’s voice include giving him or her narratorial status (Mallan, 2009, p. 9) and a sense of humour (Waelti-Walters, 1982, p. 113). Donald Haase (2004, p. 16) also points out that the power of storytelling is frequently represented as a uniquely female art, as shown in such collections of tales as Arabian Nights, which use the framing device of having a female narrator and male listener. This framing device is another tactic to give female characters narratorial authority.

As with the dominance of sight over other senses, so treating verbal language as superior to other forms of communication can be alienating to disabled people. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes that “[b]ecause English is often a foreign or second language to Deaf people” they may “have an adversarial relationship with written English or any spoken language” (2005, p. 1561). Deaf people and others who are non-verbal (such as some people on the autistic spectrum) have other ways of communicating – most notably sign language – which are often disregarded as lesser forms of language in an ableist society. I observed an example of this in discussions of the film The Shape of Water (2017) by director Guillermo del Toro, in which the main character is a non-verbal woman who communicates in American Sign Language. Some commenters argue that this is an example of a male filmmaker literally silencing a female character, thus objectifying her. Disability advocates, however, point out that the character is not silent – she simply speaks in a way that abled people are not used to. They praise del Toro for putting a disabled character in a leading role and for prioritising sign language over spoken languages.

In this section I would like to focus on works that present a mastery over language as a type of magic, thus empowering characters, not only through magic but also through their ability to speak in their own voices. This type of magic usually employs the spoken word, but in several stories the written word
is presented as equally powerful. A good example can be found in Cornelia Funke’s *Inkheart* (2004), which deals explicitly with the power of words, both spoken and written, as the following quotation indicates:

…tonight she [Meggie] wasn’t interested in written words. Spoken words were what she wanted to hear, the words being exchanged in soft, almost inaudible whispers by the two men on the other side of the door. (Funke, 2004, p. 14)

In a later scene another character tells Meggie: “I am not talking about children’s magic. I mean the magic of the written word. Nothing is more powerful for good or evil, I do assure you” (p. 422).

This is a deeply intertextual novel, suffused with other texts that the characters read or discuss, *Peter Pan* and *Arabian Nights* being two key examples.

In the world of the novel, certain people have the ability to bring characters and items out of books and into the real world by reading out loud. This gift is dangerous, as it can bring terrible villains into their world, and leave real people trapped in stories. Mo, the father of Meggie, mentioned above, possesses this gift, but he has been afraid of using it since inadvertently trapping his wife inside a book. Meggie is twelve when she witnesses the power of his voice for the first time. Despite knowing about the dangers accompanying it, she desperately wants this power for herself. When she attempts to read out loud in the same way that Mo does, nothing happens. It is not until she reads on her own terms, in her own voice, without expecting anything to happen, that the magic of her words takes effect. Thus she manages to read Tinkerbell out of *Peter Pan*.

Capricorn, the villain of the story, tries to force Meggie to read the terrifying Shadow out of a book. Meggie thwarts him by instead reading a different set of words, prepared by the writer who created Capricorn, who had, himself, previously escaped from a book. These words cause the Shadow to disintegrate and revert to its components. As it is composed of the myriad lives that it has taken, rather than bringing death, Meggie’s voice brings life to all the people, animals, and fairies that were formerly part of the Shadow. The one line that Meggie cannot bring herself to read is the one that kills Capricorn, so Mo ends up reading it for her. Meggie is a brave, powerful character, and this scene does not diminish that. Rather, it suggests that, just as in *Princess Academy,*
discussed in chapter 2, the author is uncomfortable with having a child character kill someone, even when it is someone thoroughly bad and dangerous. As Meggie thinks to herself, “it wasn’t easy to kill, even if someone else was going to do it for her” (p. 519).

The 2008 film version, directed by Ian Softley, goes a step further with this scene. Both the book and the film establish that Meggie wants to be a writer:

Meggie had a plan: she wanted to learn to make up stories like Fenoglio. She would learn to fish for words so that she could read aloud to her mother, without worrying about who might come out of the stories and look at her with homesick eyes. So Meggie decided that words would be her trade. (Funke, 2004, p. 543)

Whereas in the book Meggie reads Fenoglio’s words out uninterrupted, in the film Mortola, Capricorn’s mother, takes the paper away from Meggie as she starts reading. Meggie then starts writing on her arm, reading the words as she does so. The audience does not hear Fenoglio’s original text, so it is not clear whether Meggie is simply jotting down Fenoglio’s words from memory or whether she is rewriting the story herself. Of course, the empowerment in this scene is strongest if the words are, in fact, her own, but even if she is only repeating Fenoglio’s words, being the one to write them down gives her added power in a patriarchal system in which the pen is seen as akin to a phallus (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 3).

In the sequel, *Inkspell* (2005), Meggie enters the world of Fenoglio’s book, where she joins a band of resistance fighters. Fearing Meggie’s powers, Mortola seeks to vilify her, and so spreads the rumour that Meggie is a witch. Rather than denying this, Meggie decides to own the label of witch and use it to her advantage:

All eyes followed her – and avoided her own eyes when they met theirs. Witch. That was what they had called her before, back in Capricorn’s village. Perhaps it was true. At the moment she felt powerful, as powerful as if the whole Inkworld obeyed her voice. (Funke, 2005, p. 534)

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28 I should add, though, that it might go against the rules set forth by the story if the words Meggie uses are her own and not Fenoglio’s. The latter is able to write different endings for his characters because he is the creator of the original story. In the sequels, Orpheus can influence the story only by using words that Fenoglio has put down in the book, and by copying his style. No other words will do to change what happens to Capricorn, the Shadow, and other characters.
Again, the emphasis is on Meggie’s voice as the source of power.

While Meggie continues to be a force for good, her contributions become less significant as the story progresses. In the third book of the series, *Inkdeath* (2008), her storyline chiefly revolves around being caught within a love triangle, and she becomes a less central character than Mo. By the end, her chief purpose appears to be as a source of inspiration for her future husband, Doria, an inventor who builds devices based on Meggie’s descriptions of inventions from the real world. In a way, she is still using the power of her voice by telling Doria about her world, helping him to create his machines, but it is rather disappointing that she is relegated from being a creator in her own right to the traditionally feminine role of muse for a male character.

By the end of the series, both the complacent king of Lombrica and the evil king of the neighbouring kingdom of Argenta are dead, leaving no male heirs to take their thrones. This leaves the Adderhead’s kind daughter, Violante, as the queen of the entire Inkworld, so while there is still a monarchy, it is less patriarchal. Violante is a benevolent ruler who cares about the plight of peasants, so her subjects are happier under her reign. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, it is not clear how much women’s place in the Inkworld changes after Violante takes the throne, so the society might still function under some patriarchal rules despite having a female ruler. As the line of monarchy remains unbroken, we also do not know whether the Inkworld will go back to being ruled by a corrupt male after Violante’s death, which is always a danger in a monarchical society, even when the current ruler is benevolent.

Another work that shows the power of using one’s voice is Shannon Hale’s *The Goose Girl* (2003), which is a retelling of the aforementioned Grimms’ tale of the same name. Like the fairy tale, it tells of a princess who journeys to a distant kingdom to meet the prince she is betrothed to; but on the way there, her lady-in-waiting betrays her and takes her place. The novel gives the princess the name Ani. She starts out as a reticent girl, overwhelmed by the things expected of her, and living in her mother’s shadow. However, her aunt, a wise woman in tune with nature, teaches her at a young age to communicate with birds. She also tells Ani about other languages of nature, saying that some people are born with a propensity to learn them. Like Meggie’s power of reading, this gift is never referred to as magic, but instead as wind-speaking, fire-speaking, water-speaking, tree-speaking, animal-speaking, or people-
speaking, making the connection to language clear. Ani discovers wind-speaking while pretending to be a goose girl at the king’s court. This allows her to change the course of the wind, as well as learning about her surroundings from the whisperings of the breeze. The princess in the fairy tale only summons the wind to distract her fellow worker, Conrad, by blowing off his cap. Ani frequently uses wind-speaking to protect herself and her friends from attacks, and occasionally to fight back. In contrast to the fairy tale, Ani does not simply wait for the king to recognise her as the true princess, but takes her destiny into her own hands. She establishes bonds of friendship with the other animal workers in the city and, with their support, confronts the king and her former waiting maid, Selia; thereby, she both reclams her place as a princess and stops a war that Selia was planning. This solidarity and cooperation with the workers also emphasises the power for good that she shares with the common people, in contrast with the fairy-tale version, where it is the royal characters that are righteous, and the lowly maid that is treacherous. In fact, the first conflict in the fairy tale occurs when the main character is thirsty, but the maid refuses to bring her water from a stream, framing it as a tragedy that the princess needs to get on her knees and fetch her own water. This scene only makes sense if the reader understands the tale’s classist assumptions about the superiority of royalty. The only instance of female solidarity in the tale occurs between the princess and her mother, who gives her a handkerchief with drops of her own blood as a farewell token. In the novel, this is an empty gesture from a stern mother who has never truly loved Ani. The King of Bayern is not portrayed as the wise, righteous ruler that the fairy tale depicts either, but rather as an indifferent and rather frightening character. Thus, in most instances the poor characters are kinder and braver than the royal ones. As I mentioned in the Literature Review, the achievements and needs of working-class women are often ignored, even within feminist communities, but in The Goose Girl, the workers – particularly the female ones – prove to be Ani’s greatest allies, and their roles are even more central in the sequels. This makes Hale’s novel a more inclusive text than the fairy tale on which it is based, as it espouses a type of empowerment that encompasses working-class women and considers their stories to be important.

It is thus not only her new-found wind-speaking that gives Ani the confidence to achieve all these outcomes, but also her efforts to seek out
friendships with people in the city. At one point she considers her achievements:

> She was little like her mother, though that was all she had ever longed to be. She lacked the gift of people-speaking, that power to convince and control that laced every word her mother uttered. She did not possess that grace and beauty that all in a room turned to watch. But had the queen ever told a nursery story to a room of captivated listeners? Or handled fifty head of geese? Ani smiled at the thought, and then she surprised herself by feeling proud. *I’ve done that much. What more can I do?* (Hale, 2003, p. 166, italics in the original)

Similarly to other novels discussed in this section, friendship and community are here presented as being as powerful as magic.

As in *Inkdeath*, the monarchy is not overthrown, although both novels show the negative impact a cruel or even an indifferent king can have. Neither Violante nor Ani seeks for power for its own sake, though, nor insists upon it as her birth-right, even though they were born into royalty. Violante simply wants to help people, and Ani only reveals herself to be the true princess to prevent a war. As princess and, later, queen of Bayern, Ani continues to help people and tries to establish peace with the aid of her commoner friends.

In *The Goose Girl* there appear to be no negative consequences as a result of wind-speaking, but in the second book of the series, *Enna Burning* (2004), which, unlike its predecessor, is an original story and not based on an existing fairy tale, Ani starts feeling overwhelmed by the constant voice of the wind and fears that it will end up costing her her sanity. Meanwhile, her best friend, Enna, learns fire-speaking,\(^{29}\) which makes Enna feel powerful, but also consumes her. She is filled with a constant desire to burn that gets stronger the more she succumbs to it. At first Enna resolves never to burn people, but as the power of the fire grows stronger within her, she begins attacking both enemies and friends. After a time she succumbs to a fever that pulls her to the brink of death.

Ani comes to realise that it is a lack of balance that is the cause of the problems she and Enna experience. They teach each other their respective gifts, balancing fire with wind. This cures Enna’s fever and keeps both of them from feeling overwhelmed. They are now both able to use wind- and fire-

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\(^{29}\) She learns this ability from a piece of vellum. In the prologue we are informed that this piece of vellum comes from a woman who hides it in a tree. This means that Enna’s fire-speaking was passed on to her by another woman, as though it was a female inheritance.
speaking without losing control, making them more powerful than before. Enna’s fire-speaking, which for most of the book has seemed to be a dangerous obsession, turns out to be beneficial as long as it is used correctly.

Bottigheimer states that in fairy tales, “fire belongs to men, and its opposite, water (or at least certain kinds of water), appertains exclusively to women” (1987, p. 29), and furthermore that fire “is closely associated with gender antagonism” (p. 25). In this light, when Enna learns to control the fire that almost destroys her, it amounts to a victory over patriarchy itself, as she appropriates a type of power that normally belongs to men, especially since she does this through female solidarity.

There are two more books in the series: River Secrets (2006), which introduces Dasha, a water-speaker, and Forest Born (2010), which features Rin, who is both a tree-speaker and a people-speaker. Each of the four books has a different focal character. River Secrets is the only one in which the protagonist, Enna’s friend Razo, is male, and also the only one in which it is someone other than the protagonist who develops the power of nature-speaking. Razo does gain confidence in other areas, though: he has previously felt insecure about his short stature and his lack of strength and fighting ability, but some of his friends make him realise that his skills with a sling and his powers of observation are unmatched, and he even grows a few inches over the year in which the book takes place, making him the same height as Enna. Nature-speaking, however, is mostly reserved for female characters. While there are a few males in the series who attempt to become fire-speakers – most notably Enna’s brother Leifer, who burns himself out on a battlefield – none of them manage to master fire the way Enna does.

People-speaking is a particularly dangerous talent. As Ani says in the quotation above, it involves the power to convince people, but also to figure out their intentions. The people-speakers the reader meets prior to Forest Born have at best been cold and stern, at worst evil and manipulative. Most notable of these is Ani’s treacherous lady-in-waiting, Selia, who uses her ability to convince half of the guards to betray Ani, and to undermine Ani’s confidence, making her feel weak and worthless.

These experiences convince Ani and Enna that people-speaking is an ability that always taints its users, turning them into worse people. As Ani says:

“It’s sad, really. You’d think people-speaking would bring
the speaker closer to people, as wind-speaking does with wind. But instead it dooms people-speakers to separation and self-destruction. I think people-speaking is the most dangerous gift to have alone, with nothing to balance it.” (Hale, 2010, p. 133)

Throughout *Forest Born*, Rin comes to realise that she is a people-speaker. She has had this ability all her life, but has been afraid to use it because of an incident that happened when she was seven years old, in which she manipulated her niece. Rin feels guilty for what she did and for enjoying it so much, but most of all she is scared of being a terrible person whose family will not love her if they know what she is really like. Afraid of being herself, she spends the remainder of her childhood imitating other people, mostly her mother and her brother, Razo. She uses her people-speaking again for selfish reasons when she is fifteen and wants a boy she likes to kiss her. Again, she feels guilty afterwards and fears that she is wicked.

When Rin travels with Ani, Enna, and Dasha, she has several opportunities to use people-speaking for positive purposes. First she persuades a panicking woman not to jump from the second-storey window of a burning building. Later she stops a mercenary from killing a child. She still feels ashamed of being a people-speaker, and does not want to tell her brother or her new friends about it, thinking that “admitting that part was about as enticing as cutting off her own finger” (Hale, 2010, p. 347). Afraid of using her powers inadvertently, she does not dare to argue or speak her mind.

Rin’s fear of and disgust with her own abilities are strengthened by meeting Selia, who always uses her powers for her own gain, often to hurt others. Rin is afraid of becoming like her, but Ani tells her: “You can allow yourself to be powerful, Rin. That’s not a bad thing…. You saw Selia. You know what not to become. So, what will it be?” (Hale, 2010, p. 373) Rin figures out how to use people-speaking without manipulation: with words of truth and comfort, and by listening to people’s needs. Eventually she embraces her powers and, by extension, herself:

She had been Ma’s shadow, and Razo’s and Isi’s – but
there she was now, ready to let herself be changed. She was not a queen – not Isi, and not Selia. She would be the Forest girl who listens to people the way she listens to trees and speaks truths the way leaves fall. (Hale, 2010, p. 381)

Later she adds:

*I’m Rinna-girl, she thought, and I’m Agget-kin. I’m a tree-speaker and a people-speaker. I’m Razo’s sister and Dasha’s, Enna’s, and Isi’s friend. I’m many things, some that I don’t even know yet.* (Hale, 2010, p. 388, italics in the original)

Only after accepting her abilities is Rin able to become her own person. But in Hale’s works, becoming one’s own person does not mean being on one’s own. Like Ani and Enna, Rin reaches her potential through the help of other women. The main message of the series is one of female solidarity, which is presented as superior to individual ambition and social class, and as essential for happiness and personal development. Through Selia and other wicked characters Hale shows how easily power can be used selfishly and cruelly, but through Rin and her friends she demonstrates that power can also be used to help and empower others, as well as oneself.

Jones’s *Witch Week* (1982) also makes a connection between magic and language, though this does not become clear until near the end of the book. The story takes place in a world where witchcraft is illegal and witches are persecuted. “Witch”, in this world, is a gender-neutral term and is applied to anyone who practises magic. Historically, the term has been used for both men and women accused of witchcraft, but is still chiefly associated with female evil. By removing the gendered assumptions around the word “witch”, Jones is challenging some of the more sexist depictions of witchcraft. The two protagonists of the novel are Nan Pilgrim and Charles Morgan, classmates in a boarding school for witch-orphans. Both are bullied by the other children in their class: Charles for being distant, Nan for being fat. Nan has low self-esteem and does not see herself as a “real girl”. She writes about her class that “[t]hey are divided into girls and boys with an invisible line down the middle”, with the girls further divided into “real girls” and “imitations”, and the boys into “real boys”, “brutes”, and “unreal boys”. She considers herself and Charles Morgan to lie outside these definitions, and further elaborates: “What makes you a real girl or
boy is that no one laughs at you... What makes you into me or Charles Morgan is that the rules allow all the girls to be better than me and all the boys better than Charles Morgan” (1982, p. 57). This is the first instance in which Nan uses her talent for describing the world in interesting ways. In a later scene she invents disgusting metaphors for the cafeteria food, and later still she thinks up torture instruments that should be found in an inquisitor’s office. Both these scenes are humorous, but initially appear to be inconsequential to the plot. However, it turns out that Nan’s powers of description are interlinked with her witchcraft.

The story starts with one of the teachers finding a note that says: “SOMEONE IN THIS CLASS IS A WITCH” (p. 7). This leads to suspicions and accusations from both pupils and teachers. The other girls tease Nan by calling her a witch, more because they dislike her than because they actually believe it. Nan is angry at these accusations at first, as she does not consider herself a witch. But when she accidentally makes a broomstick fly, Nan is convinced that she must be a witch after all. Rather than being horrified, she feels proud:

She really was a witch now. No one but a witch could fly a broomstick. She knew she was in danger and she knew she should be terrified. But she was not. She felt happy and strong, with a happiness and strength that seemed to be welling up from deep inside her... It was like coming into her birthright. (Jones, 1982, pp. 134-135)

Nan is descended from a famous witch named Dulcinea the Archwitch. She even has the same name as the Archwitch, but chooses to keep this a secret, as she does not want to be connected to a historical villain. Despite what is taught in school about Dulcinea’s evil deeds, the actual woman seems to have been kind and brave, opposing the persecution of witches. She has become a symbol for all witches, and so various people use her as an archetype of how they see witches as a whole. Charles “had been taught that Dulcinea was an evil old hag, and a stupid one” (p. 80), whereas Mr Wentworth, a teacher who is secretly a witch himself and so has a vested interest in the rights of witches, says that she was “young and pretty and clever” (p. 80). Once Nan embraces her witchcraft, she has a romantic vision of Dulcinea, imagining her flying her broomstick “gracefully, sidesaddle probably, with her long hair flowing out behind. And because it was London, she probably wore an elegant silk dress,
with lots of lacy petticoats showing from underneath” (pp. 165-166).

Nan is far from being the only witch at the school. About half of the pupils in her class turn out to be witches. Several of them perform magical pranks at some point, such as making a flock of birds appear during music class to avoid having to sing a solo, and hiding a pair of Charles’s shoes. Charles, who also finds that he is a witch, promptly uses his new-found powers to take revenge on his bullies, but then gets so scared of detection that he vows never to use magic again. Ultimately, however, his magic is just as empowering to him as Nan’s is to her, and he does not want to lose it.

While Nan and other characters occasionally use their magic to avoid detection, most of the witchcraft displayed in the novel occurs for mischievous reasons. Rather than trying to make their school a better place – and possibly a safer place for witches – the pupils mostly use their magic to bully one another or to play pranks on the teachers. Thus, while the magic in this story may be personally empowering to individual characters, for the most part it is not used in a positive manner, and the empowerment often comes at the expense of other characters who are being pranked.

When an inquisitor is on his way to the school to find the witch in the class, Nan summons Chrestomanci, a powerful sorcerer who regulates magic in all the worlds. Chrestomanci determines that there is an unnatural number of magic-users in Nan’s and Charles’s world, and the only way to set this right is to combine this world with its neighbour, which has no magic at all. This process will cause some of the children, including Nan, to lose their magic powers. At first Nan is not happy about this, but Chrestomanci tells her: “I know you are descended from the Archwitch... but talents don’t always descend in the same shape. Yours seem to have come to you in the form of making-up and describing” (p. 251). He also asks her: “Wouldn’t you say that, now you’ve been a witch, and got your confidence, you might really prefer describing things even to witchcraft?” (p. 250). Nan realises that he is right, and that her way with words empowers her more than her magic does. Farah Mendlesohn thinks that in this scene, Nan “emerges as the most powerful figure in the story, because she is the only one who can break away from the stories that are being written by authority figures” (2005, p. 179), and that she does this by reaching for words rather than magic. As Nan exercises her power over words in written as well as spoken form, this shows that the magic of language can be employed in
different ways, potentially even by people who are non-verbal, who might feel excluded by stories in which magic is purely a verbal art.

With the help of Nan’s powers of description, Chrestomanci merges the two worlds, restoring the balance. The inquisitor tries to silence her during this, but she keeps on talking: “She was bubbling with pride and delight. She had done this, just by describing what happened. It was as good as witchcraft any day” (1982, p. 279). Thus Nan participates in the most powerful piece of magic in the entire book, as well as the most positive one, as it is used to help everyone in Nan’s world, rather than just to take revenge on a bully, which is what Charles does with his magic.

The Nan in the merged world is a burgeoning writer. She has friends and confidence, unlike the Nan at the beginning of the story. She has gained her self-assurance through magic, but discovered that creativity and a way with words are also types of magic, and these are gifts that cannot be taken away from her. Trites says this about children’s heroines who write:

> Because writing and re-visioning have so much potential to help people understand their agency, quite a few feminist children’s novels explore what it means for children to write. The resulting novels seek to explore how children write, why they write, and what they gain as individuals during the process. (1997, p. 63)

Interestingly, Nan’s best friend in the merged world is Estelle Green, whom Nan had previously described as an “imitation” girl. What made Estelle an imitation in Nan’s estimation was that she was not one of the popular girls, but tried hard to be like them, which included participating in the bullying and ostracising of Charles and Nan. After Estelle comes to terms with her own magic, she decides to stop trying to fit in with the others and lets her kind nature shine through, becoming friends with Nan. Estelle’s storyline exemplifies rejecting cruelty and popularity in favour of kindness, and using magic for good, although she is never as powerful as Nan.

Another female protagonist in a Jones novel who gains confidence after discovering her magic powers is Sophie in *Howl’s Moving Castle* (1986). This story takes place in Ingary, a country in which people believe strongly in fairy-tale logic, even though it does not necessarily hold true. It begins with a description of the protagonist’s circumstances:
Sophie Hatter was the eldest of three sisters. She was not even the child of a poor woodcutter, which might have given her some chance of success. Her parents were well to do and kept a ladies' hat shop in the prosperous town of Market Chipping. True, her own mother died when Sophie was two years old and her sister Lettie was one year old, and their father married his youngest shop assistant, a pretty blonde girl called Fanny. Fanny shortly gave birth to the third sister, Martha. This ought to have made Sophie and Lettie into Ugly Sisters, but in fact all three girls grew up very pretty indeed, though Lettie was the one everyone said was most beautiful. Fanny treated all three girls with the same kindness and did not favour Martha in the least. (Jones, 1986, pp. 9-10)

Both Martha and Lettie have ambitions to escape the destiny prescribed to them by fairy-tale rules. Growing up, Lettie hopes to marry a prince, even though this is the lot of the youngest daughter, while Martha plans not to marry at all, but to become rich on her own account. Once they are older, their plans change: Lettie wants to learn witchcraft, and Martha says: “I want to get married and have ten children” (p. 25). Lettie still ends up marrying a prince whom she meets during her witch’s apprenticeship. Martha also finds a potential husband, so while some other fairy-tale traditions are subverted in the story, the heteronormative trope of a happy ending consisting of heterosexual marriage is affirmed, even if that marriage is not the only thing the female characters achieve.

Unlike her sisters, Sophie has no plans for the future. She is resigned to being the unambitious oldest child, working at her father’s hat shop. However, this is where, unbeknownst to her, she starts using her magic powers. With no one else to talk to, she speaks to the hats she makes, jokingly inventing futures with good fortunes for them. These fortunes come true for the people who buy the hats. For example, feeling sorry for a hat that does not turn out too well, she tells it: “You have a heart of gold and someone in a high position will see it and fall in love with you” (pp. 17-18). A young woman whom the other ladies in the hat shop describe as “a perfect disgrace the way she did her hair” (p. 16), buys the hat and ends up eloping with a count.

One day a witch turns Sophie into an old woman in a fit of rage. Sophie takes this transformation in her stride, as she has been living like an old woman anyway. But now she finally has the confidence to leave her home and seek her
fortune, because she no longer feels the need to be concerned about what other people think of her. When faced with things that would normally frighten her, she simply thinks: “The way I am now, it’s scarcely worth worrying about” (p. 35). This defies expectations of what a fairy-tale heroine should be like. Old women in fairy tales may be wicked witches or benevolent wise women, but not heroines. Young women in fairy tales might be cursed to lose their beauty, but normally this kind of transformation is seen as distressing rather than comforting, whereas Sophie is happy being old. She clearly does not consider being attractive a priority, as she never mourns the loss of her youth, her beauty, or her physical fitness. The only thing she occasionally regrets is that her family no longer recognises her, although she manages to fashion a new kind of family with Wizard Howl, his fire demon, Calcifer, and his apprentice, Michael. This creation of family bonds begins when Sophie seeks refuge in Howl’s magical moving castle and bullies him into letting her stay as his cleaning lady. Howl has a terrible reputation as a Bluebeard who steals young women’s hearts, but it turns out that he is only a vain coward, albeit one with powerful magic. As an old woman, Sophie is not afraid of him, and manages to boss him around when he is being lazy or immature. She even persuades Calcifer to obey her, which is something that previously only Howl himself could do. As with Enna in *Enna Burning*, this can be seen as an appropriation of masculine power over fire. In one scene Howl throws a tantrum, which causes magical, green slime to ooze all over the room. Sophie has no patience with this. As she forcibly washes the slime from Howl, she tells him: “Stop it! ...Stop it at once! You are behaving just like a baby!” (p. 90, italics in the original)

When Sophie finally discovers that she is a witch, she is not as surprised by this revelation as might be expected: “It was as if Sophie had always known this. But she had thought it was not proper to have a magic gift because she was the eldest of three” (pp. 169-170). As she does in the scene in the hat shop, above, she works her magic by talking to things. For example, she brings a stick and a scarecrow to life, by talking to them as if they were already alive. Rather than reciting magic spells, she enchants items by simply telling them what they should do, which shows that her voice is powerful and persuasive. In most instances, however, rather than giving orders, she uses her voice in ways that are sympathetic and encouraging.

It also turns out that Sophie is the only one who can remove the spell
placed upon her. Once she stops viewing herself as old, the spell disappears, and she becomes young again, but she still has the self-assurance she gained from her experiences as an old woman. She no longer relies on the fate she thinks the world has set in store for her, but takes her destiny in her own hands, using her magic and her voice.

In addition to helping herself, Sophie also saves Howl’s life. The two become a couple and are known as the most powerful magic users in the country. They appear as secondary characters in two sequels, Castle in the Air (1990) and House of Many Ways (2008a), in which they are married, but still quarrel frequently, as Howl still tends to behave childishlly at times, while Sophie is still headstrong and constantly speaking her mind. It is a little problematic that such an adversarial relationship is portrayed in a positive light, as if it is normal and expected for married couples to be constantly at odds with one another. Most of the heroines in The Books of Bayern also wind up in heterosexual marriages, but at least their relationships with men are borne out of friendship rather than enmity. The animated film version of Howl’s Moving Castle (2004) handles this part of the story better. In the novel Sophie first meets Howl when he accosts her in the town square, calling her a “mouse”. Sophie does not take this as a compliment, but is mortified at having a stranger comment on her appearance, even if this kind of male behaviour is considered “perfectly normal for May Day” (p. 21). In the anime it is a pair of soldiers who accost Sophie, and Howl saves her from this sexual harassment by using his magic to make the soldiers leave, and then takes her on a romantic flight across the town. Thus, accosting strange women and giving them pet names is portrayed as a rude and possibly menacing act, rather than as innocent and even charming behaviour.

In the texts discussed in this section the girls and young women all achieve happy endings by discovering new talents connected with words. While they all have magic, their talents also manifest themselves in other ways: Nan and Meggie write stories, Ani and Rin bond with people by talking to them, and Sophie persuades those around her to be more responsible. Most of the girls gain friends (and even husbands, in the case of Ani and Sophie) through their stories. This is also presented as a positive outcome of their speaking out and telling their stories, and an important part of their happy endings. In these ways, readers can emulate these characters and explore the power of their own
voices or writings, even without magic.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have shown different ways in which female magic can be seen to be empowering. Usually the magic is used to help others, to defeat villains, and to oppose an oppressive regime, which means that the magic is not just personally empowering for the characters themselves but also liberating for others. The only main exception to this is the way witchcraft is utilised in *Witch Week*, where characters mostly use it for pranks and mischief and to harm one another. This is possibly why Nan emerges as the most powerful witch in the novel, as she uses her magic most responsibly.

*The Merlin Conspiracy*, *Inkdeath*, and *The Books of Bayern* all take place in monarchies in which corrupt people in dominant positions are overthrown, but the system of government itself is not challenged and remains unchanged, except for having a more righteous person placed in charge. However, all these novels also emphasise the importance of kindness and of treating others as equals, particularly *The Books of Bayern*, which centres on the experiences and voices of working-class women.

I also discussed two common forms of magic that can be seen as metaphors for real powers or talents. The former is the power of sight, as exhibited in the “Thirteen” series, in *The Last Ghost* and *Midnight Gate*, and in *Coraline*. The latter is the power of the word, as shown in the “Inkheart” series, *The Books of Bayern*, *Witch Week*, and *Howl’s Moving Castle*. Both of these powers have historically been attributed to men only, so it can be empowering for women and girls to appropriate these aptitudes for themselves. I noted that stories like these might potentially be alienating to people who are blind or non-verbal, particularly when disability is treated as a magical plot device, rather than a real human condition. However, none of the texts discussed suggest that speech or sight are the only types of power or magic, and the characters’ strengths are shown in other ways as well. I linked the analysis on the powers of sight with Laura Mulvey’s writings on the male gaze, but also pointed out that feminists rarely discuss how blind women are affected by said male gaze, which shows one of the shortcomings of non-intersectional feminism that does not take disability into account.

I also discussed race and mental illness in regard to how characters in *The
Treasures perceive the old Romani woman, Morag, whose powers are most likely connected to her race. She is called “mad”, not because she is actually mentally ill, but because her race and her powers make her an outsider. Using “mad” as an insult demonstrates how mentally ill people are derided in society, even when the word is used against neurotypical people (just as heterosexual men using sexist and homophobic slurs against one another reveal their disdain for women and gay men). Treating certain women – in this case women of colour and disabled women – as outcasts is part of the “divide and conquer” strategy of patriarchy. It allows women to distance themselves from those who are more marginalised, or marginalised in different ways from themselves. In this case, the white townswomen might think, “I may be a woman, but at least I am not a mad gypsy like Morag”. This encourages them to identify with the dominant force, rather than with other women, which goes against the goals of feminism. Therefore, it is important to include all women within feminism, rather than replicating the divisions created by patriarchy.

I also looked at a few works in which magic is strictly gendered. In The Time of the Ghost, feminine magic is directly opposed to paternal authority, while in The Merlin Conspiracy it is used to bring down a potential tyrant. Both of these novels provide examples of powerful girls threatening a patriarchal system. Often female magic is connected with the Earth and nature and it thus forms a contrast with male magic, which tends to be more connected with books and learning. Gendered magic is not necessarily empowering for readers, though, as it provides rather limited definitions of masculinity and femininity, reinforcing a binary between female/nature and male/culture. As shown in Black Maria, this kind of thinking can foster an antagonism between genders. Furthermore, it leaves no room for identities other than the conventionally male or female. Attempts to escape this binary way of thinking seem to be hinted at in The Merlin Conspiracy when Roddy feels that the magic connected with blood and the lunar cycle is neither male nor female. Whilst such expressions might seem more inclusive for transgender people, this was probably not Jones’s intent, as transness is never mentioned, or even hinted at again, in the novel. It is notable that Deep Secret (1997), which takes place in the same world as The Merlin Conspiracy with some of the same characters, features at least one transgender character, although she is treated as little more than a curiosity, and her subjectivity is not really considered (her partners
even reveal her transgender status to strangers, which is an act that can endanger a transgender person’s safety).

Thus, while none of my primary texts openly deal with transgender issues, there are some scenes that explore potential spaces between male and female. These spaces deserve to be analysed in detail, which is what I will do in the next chapter.
Chapter 5: Outside the Gender Binary

Ideologies of “natural difference” have drawn much of their force from the traditional belief that gender never changes. Adam delved and Eve span, Men must work and Women must weep, Boys will be Boys. Serious analysis begins with the recognition that exactly the opposite is true: everything about gender is historical. (Connell, 2002, p. 68, italics in the original)

Introduction

When studying gender and feminism, it is common to distinguish between the concepts of “sex” and “gender”. Whereas sex is based on anatomy, gender is both a personal identity and an outward performance which is dependent on social context. According to Judith Butler, “[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its result” (1990, p. 25). Gender is thus a social construct, which has little to do with biological differences, but is rather determined by the way society expects people of a certain gender to act and dress.

In contrast, the concept of sex seems to be far simpler and more natural, as it is determined by physical characteristics. However, sex is also a social construct. Social norms determine which body parts are considered “male” and which are considered “female”, and people whose bodies do not fit neatly within these categories are either ignored or surgically altered to be more socially acceptable. As Butler expresses it,

“sex” not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce – demarcate, circulate, differentiate – the bodies it controls. Thus, “sex” is a regulatory ideal whose materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices. In other words, “sex” is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. (1993, p. 1)

The social tendency to divide people into the categories of “male” and “female” is known as the “gender binary”. This division is mainly based on people’s genitalia, so that people with vaginas are called females, and people with penises are called males, except that – as mentioned above – this ignores a wide variety of gender identities and expressions, as well as biological
formations. While there are numerous cultures that recognise more than two genders (see, for example, Chang, 2001; Allen, 2008; Williams, 2010), Western colonialism made the gender binary the most commonly accepted way of perceiving gender, often by violently enforcing it in those cultures under its dominion (Deerinwater, 2017). Despite this, many people in Western society seek to break free from this prescriptive view by using different definitions of both gender expression and gender itself.

Rebecca Rabinowitz writes about how literary critics can transcend the gender binary in their analyses of gendered characters:

Although many gender studies powerfully probe multiple literary messages about what it means to be each gender, both feminist analysis and new masculinity explorations... often leave behind the space inbetween – the neithers, the boths, the incoherencies. Queer theory endows these spaces in between with significance. (2004, p. 20).

She goes on to assert that queer critics consider these “incoherencies” to be proof “that the very structures and definitions of gender and sexuality are rickety” (p. 20), which is what sets a queer analysis apart from a traditionally feminist one.

Fantasy provides an ideal arena for this type of exploration. Unlike realist fiction, characters in fantasy are not necessarily tied to their bodies and, through shapeshifting, possession, or reincarnation, can find themselves in bodies that are not their own. As Rosemary Jackson points out, “[m]etamorphosis plays a large part in fantastic literature", and as examples she cites “[m]en transforming into women” and “children changing into birds and beasts” (1995, p. 81). Additionally, authors can introduce species with different conceptions of gender than the Western gender binary dictates. Devices like these can examine the stability or instability of a character’s gender identity and determine how it relates to the character’s self-image. Jackson says that many of the themes in fantasy are, indeed,
In this chapter I will examine gender expressions that transgress the boundaries of a “cisnormative” gender binary. When discussing this subject, literary critics and scholars of gender studies tend to treat it in a theoretical manner, Judith Butler’s prose often being cited as particularly difficult and abstruse. She was, for example, the 1998 winner of Philosophy and Literature's annual “Bad Writing” competition. Martha Nussbaum, Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago, spent a whole article criticising not just Butler’s style, but also its implications for practical change. As Nussbaum complained, theoreticians such as Butler “do politics in safety of their campuses, remaining on the symbolic level, making subversive gestures at power through speech and gesture” (1999, p. 45). Unfortunately, as she continues, “[h]ungry women are not fed by this, battered women are not sheltered by it, raped women do not find justice in it, gays and lesbians do not achieve legal protections through it” (p. 45). As noted at the end of the previous chapter, transgender people are also a high-risk category when it comes to hate crime. And, aside from this, there is the fact that transgender people and others on the LGBT spectrum are more likely to suffer the hardships of poverty and lack of education, making them less likely to encounter, let alone understand, the theoretical ideas of academics like Butler. Brad Sears and Lee Badgett cite the National Transgender Discrimination Survey, which finds that “transgender people are four times as likely to have a household income under $10,000 and twice as likely to be unemployed as the typical person in the U.S.” (2012, unpaged). The rates of poverty for transgender people of colour are even higher than for white transgender people.

Despite these factors, Butler claims that this kind of abstruse language is necessary to deconstruct concepts of gender, while blaming complaints about her prose style on “an upsurge of anti-intellectualism in the academy” (2004, p. 328). This implies that only people with advanced degrees in formal education are qualified to consider the subjects of gender identity and gender presentation.

Additionally, works that specifically study transgender people often seem voyeuristic and fetishistic. As transgender activist Riki Ann Wilchins writes, gender studies texts written by cisgender academics “escalate the politicization of our bodies, choices, and desires, so that, with each new book, while their audience enjoys the illusion of knowing more about us, we find ourselves more
disempowered, disembodied, and exploited than before” (quoted in Samuels, 2002, p. 69).

This is where transgender activists are invaluable in making such ideas accessible to all. For example, Sophie Labelle, whose work I refer to below, shares her views on transgender issues in the forms of comic strips and picture books. Like Butler, she points out the artifice of the gendered structures of society, but does so in a way that makes it clear how real people are affected by them, and what can be done to make it easier for children to explore their identity and their gender expression.

What sets my analysis of gender apart is that, as a transmasculine person, I do not have the luxury of treating transgender people as merely a fascinating concept or the subject of a thought experiment. Rather, I will consider not only how the texts under scrutiny portray gender transgression, but also how they might affect actual transgender readers. I will also attempt to take into account the writings of other transgender scholars and activists in my analysis, although – because of marginalisation – they are harder to find than writings by cisgender scholars. Thus, I aim to suggest that a purely cisgender perspective is often insufficient to analyse texts that deal with gender identity. My intersectional approach will also include considerations of other axes of marginalisation to examine how breaking gender barriers might be easier for some people than for others. This analysis will focus on notions of whiteness, of class, and of disability within the books under consideration and within the queer community at large, and will show that the attempts at “queering” within my primary texts are limited, due to their lack of intersectionality.

First I will explore instances of cross-dressing, where characters temporarily pretend to be a different gender, and analyse what these narratives reveal about gender performance. Then I will look at depictions of bodies that transgress gender categories. This section includes representations of bodies that change shape, or are created through magic rather than biology, as well as examining various bodiless entities. This theme is explored further in a section on ghosts. Most of the ghost characters are shown to have lost their sense of self, including their gender identity. This type of gender representation raises further questions about what gender means and where it resides.

But before I begin this discussion, it will prove useful to explain some of my terms.
The Politics of Gender Terminology

When describing transgender individuals, common phrases include “a man in a woman’s body” or “a woman who used to be a man”. These descriptions are misleading, and do not convey how most transgender people feel about their gender and their bodies. The former phrase implies that our bodies are not really our own, and that those bodies are “wrong” somehow. The Canadian transgender activist Sophie Labelle expresses this view more personally, stating: “I wasn’t ‘born with a boy’s body’. I am a girl and my body is mine. So it’s a girl’s body… I was born in the right body. It’s the way people look at it that is wrong” (2018). Similarly, saying that a transgender woman is “a man who became a woman” reduces gender to outward physical characteristics, and to a simplistic binary, one might say, ignoring the reality of those transgender people who have no desire or opportunity for medical transition, but still feel strongly about their gender identity. As Butler points out in the quotation above, speaking of biological sex can also be reductive, especially when considering intersex people, who are either born with ambiguous genitalia, or whose outward genitals do not match their internal organs and/or chromosomes. Thus the terms designated – or assigned – male/female at birth are more accurate and inclusive of all genders and sexes. These terms refer to the gender that is ascribed to a child by doctors and parents when it is born, rather than to a person’s actual gender.

People who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth are cisgender, or cis for short, while people who do not are transgender, or trans. This latter, umbrella term covers not only trans men and trans women, but also those whose identity is a mixture of male and female, or even something completely different (genderqueer or non-binary), those whose gender is fluid (genderfluid), and those who do not feel they have a gender at all (agender).

Cross-Dressing

The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism by Sarah Gamble defines cross-dressing as “a range of behavior which involves adopting the uniform of the opposite sex: although their motivations may differ widely, drag

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30 According to a study by Blackless, et.al. (2000), up to 2% of the human population may be intersex, but around 0.1-0.2% of children receive “corrective” genital surgery at birth.
queens, female impersonators, transsexuals,\textsuperscript{31} transvestites and butch lesbians are all cross-dressers" (2001, p. 209, bold in the original). However, this description is somewhat loaded, not only because it implies that transgender people are merely dressing up, but it also seems to imply that there is such a thing as dress that is intrinsically male or female, so that individuals who move outside their allotted range are pretending to be something they are not. Stand-up comedian Eddie Izzard, who famously wears dresses and make-up, once said in an interview: “Yes, I wear dresses. They’re not women’s dresses. I buy them” (2011, italics added). Thus, he rejects the gendering of clothes. Gamble’s definition also ignores the reality of intersex and non-binary people, who are not strictly male or female. Accordingly, in this section on cross-dressing, I will specifically talk about characters pretending to be a different gender for story purposes, rather than female characters who prefer clothes traditionally considered masculine or vice versa.

There is a marked difference between portrayals of female cross-dressers and male ones. As Victoria Flanagan writes:

\begin{quote}
For females, the cross-dressing experience is liberatory. It exposes the artifice of gender constructions, permitting the female cross-dresser to reconstruct for herself a unique gendered niche which is not grounded within a single gender category, but incorporates elements of both... .
\end{quote}

(2002, p. 79)

Male cross-dressers, on the other hand, do not normally lose themselves in the female experience, and rarely learn a lesson about gender performance. As Flanagan continues:

\begin{quote}
The masculinity of male cross-dressers is seldom as fragile as the femininity of female cross-dressing subjects, nor is it as easily forsaken. Because their behaviour presupposes the superiority of masculine over feminine, their self-assured masculinity permeates every aspect of their cross-dressing experience, rendering comic their...
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{31} Transgender terminology has changed in recent years, and the term “transsexual” has mostly fallen out of use, as it focuses on sexual characteristics rather than gender identity. Nowadays most transgender people regard “transsexual” as a slur. As the Routledge Companion is over a decade old, I do not blame Gamble for using the wrong terminology. What is more distressing is the fact that in her entry on “transsexualism” (pp. 328-329), she repeats the openly transphobic views of Germaine Greer and other trans-exclusionary feminists. As she also briefly quotes Sandy Stone – a transgender writer – Gamble might think she is being fair by presenting both sides of the argument. Instead she treats transgender lives as a subject for debate, and legitimises transphobia as a valid position.
inability to comprehend femininity as separate to their own biologically male experience of gender. (p. 79)

Thus, for girls, cross-dressing can be a liberating experience, allowing them to do things they would normally not be able to do, whereas boys usually treat cross-dressing as a joke. The difference lies in how society views masculinity and femininity. As masculinity is viewed as superior to femininity, a boy dressing or acting in a way considered “girly” is seen to be debasing himself. This makes it difficult for children who are assigned male at birth to explore their gender identity seriously, even if they like aspects of femininity and would find them as liberating as the female cross-dresser might find aspects of masculinity (Flores, 2015). As Madonna Kolbenschlag writes:

Because the masculine role is dominant and associated with superior status, deviation from it by males is less tolerated. Girls, on the other hand, belong to a class of “outsiders,” a group that has inferior status in the cultural paradigm. Like members of minority groups, they often show greater adeptness in role changes and are more psychologically free to experiment. (1988, p. 11)

Besides allowing female characters to break free from strictly gendered bonds, cross-dressing narratives also serve to break the bonds of the gender binary itself. As Flanagan says: “Cross-dressing is used strategically to make the socially constructed nature of gender apparent” (2010, p. 33).

In my primary texts there are three main reasons for cross-dressing: to overcome gendered oppression, to ensure personal protection, and to deceive others. The most notable cross-dressing character with the first of these three motives is Alanna from Tamora Pierce’s Song of the Lioness quartet (1983-1988). The first book in the series, aptly named Alanna: The First Adventure (1983), starts with Alanna reacting in horror to her father’s decision to send her to a convent to teach her to become a lady. She sees this as a waste of her abilities and a restriction of her potential: “As if that’s all I can do with myself!” (p. 1), she says scornfully. Her twin brother, Thom, is to be sent off at the same time to become a knight, even though he would much rather study magic. To serve both their interests, the children decide to switch places. Alanna cuts her hair, puts on her brother’s clothes, and spends the rest of her adolescence pretending to be a boy named Alan, so that she can become a knight. As they set off to their respective locations, Thom wears one of Alanna’s dresses to fool
their father and the servants, but he arrives at the convent as himself, a boy wishing to study magic, rather than a girl wanting to be a lady. So while he performs femininity for a short time to achieve his goal, he does not adopt a feminine persona in the way that Alanna adopts a masculine one; nor does he find fulfillment by taking on a traditionally female role. Although he is uncomfortable with the violence and physical activity involved in knighthood, magic is still a mostly male pursuit in his world, so he simply chooses a different type of masculinity; namely, a scholarly kind. When Alanna is asked whether Thom disguised himself as a girl, she laughs and responds, “Of course not!” (Pierce, 1986, p. 34). In line with Flanagan’s observations, Alanna finds the thought of her brother cross-dressing ridiculous, while her own experience of performing as a boy is serious. This is a bit of a missed opportunity in the text, as Pierce could have shown a true role reversal and presented femininity as a liberating experience for a male character.

The first two volumes of the series focus on Alanna’s attempts to perform masculinity in order to fit in with the boys she is training with. This involves, for example, not seeking help when she is bullied by an older boy, but dealing with the problem herself by training privately until she is skilled enough to defeat him in a fight. She does not seem to define masculinity primarily by violence, as at one point she says to her bully, Ralon, “I don’t have to pick on someone littler’n me to prove what a man I am” (1983, p. 77), and after she finally beats him, she feels ashamed rather than triumphant. Still, she feels that beating Ralon in a physical fight “would mean that she could do anything larger and stronger males could” (1983, p. 86), and “would show everyone – including that part of her that was always wondering – that she was as good as any boy in the palace” (1983, p. 93). Thus, she hopes to prove herself by being self-reliant and physically capable, both of which are attributes traditionally connected with masculinity. A traditionally feminine approach might have involved seeking strength from the community and solving the problem through means other than violence. Interestingly, while the narrative, as well as the other characters, expresses disapproval of Ralon’s bullying and consider it cowardly to beat up someone smaller and weaker, it is said of Raoul, a sympathetic character who is larger and stronger than the other boys, that “[h]e likes hitting Ralon” (1983, p. 71, italics in the original), implying that using violence on someone weaker is acceptable if that person is not likable.
Even while in disguise, Alanna does not completely suppress her femaleness. At first she appears to resent being a girl. While becoming tearful after being beaten by Ralon, she laments that this “wouldn’t have happened to a real boy” (1983, p. 79, italics in the original). She turns indignant and angry when she starts growing breasts and menstruating, and her friends need to remind her, “[y]ou can be a woman and still be a warrior” (1983, p. 135), and, “[y]ou’re a female, child, no matter what clothing you wear. You must become accustomed to that” (1983, p. 174). This turns out to be true in Alanna’s case, as she eventually learns to take pride in being a female page, and later a female knight. Once she no longer has to pretend to be a boy, she takes pleasure in occasionally wearing pretty dresses and earrings, and connecting with other women. She also scowls when her brother implies that she always wanted to be a man. However, Mistress Cooper’s assertion, that Alanna is female “no matter what clothing” she wears, is also cissexist. The implication is that people who are uncomfortable with their assigned gender simply need to learn to accept it rather than seek alternative ways of identification.

Of course, Alanna is not meant to be read as a transgender boy, but as a cisgender girl. Pierce’s purpose is to create a feminist story in which a girl learns that femininity is not weakness, and that she can be a female warrior. Thus Alanna’s femaleness is constantly emphasised. As Stephens and McCallum write:

The admiration and respect most characters show for “Alan” exists in a dialogic relationship with the constant textual reminders that she is always still “Alanna,” and that neither she nor the text’s narrator ever think of her as “Alan.” In other words, while Pierce has followed sword-and-sorcery practice in constructing a female hero by situating her within a conventional male role in a conventional structure – training in the Code of Chivalry and other aspects of cultural heritage designated as parts of a male domain – she constantly reasserts Alanna’s femaleness and hence, it can be argued, deconstructs such gendered classifications. (1998, pp. 146-147)

Pierce’s agenda would thus be undermined if Alanna identified fully as male, rather than finding joy in her femaleness. The text still states that gender identity – if not gender expression – is defined by the body and is thus unalterable. This assertion is cissexist and potentially harmful for transgender
readers. When Alanna suggests that she can use her gift of magic to change her body, Mistress Cooper even insists:

“You cannot use your Gift to change what the gods have willed for you, and you would be foolish to try! The gods willed you to be female and small and redheaded, and obviously silly as well—” (Pierce, 1983, p. 174)

Pierce’s intention in bringing up the gods is probably not to provide a spiritual angle meant to mirror religions in the real world. But, considering that transgender people are often told that their gender identities and their desire to transition is an affront to God, it is difficult not to read it that way. This point is not brought up in any of the other analyses of the series that I have read, which demonstrates that a purely cisgender perspective on texts such as these is insufficient and might miss some significant readings.

Once Alanna’s masquerade as a male squire ends, she tries to reconcile herself to being a woman, while also being a warrior. She discovers that femininity is just as much of a performance as masculinity is: “It’s going to be as hard to learn to be a girl as it was to learn to be a boy” she says. Someone replies: “Harder... . Most girls don’t have to unlearn being a boy” (1984, p. 145). Thus Pierce points out the artifice of all gender performance. She further deconstructs sexist definitions of what it means to be a man or a woman in the following exchange in the third book of the series, The Girl Who Rides Like a Man:

“You are a terrifying creature,” the Voice told her [Alanna] solemnly. “You do not take your place in your father’s tent, letting men make your decisions. You ride like a man, you fight as a man, and you think as a man—”

“I think as a human being,” she retorted hotly. “Men don’t think any differently from women – they just make more noise about being able to.”

As Coram chuckled, Mukhtab said, “Have you not discovered that when people, men and women, find a woman who acts intelligently, they say she acts like a man?” (1986, p. 49)

As Alanna is slowly realising, “acting like a man” or “acting like a woman” are phrases that have no meaning outside each person’s definition of masculine or feminine behaviour. Even the title of the book becomes ironic in this light. As Rabinowitz writes:
Mapping the gender signifiers in Tamora Pierce’s Song of the Lioness series reveals that the blatant feminist message is perched precariously: it leans simultaneously upon notions of essentialism and notions of performativity. A war exists at the series’ very core about whether Alanna is a girl or a boy, whether gender is essential or performative, and whether selfhood is internal or dialectical. (2004, p. 23, italics in the original)

Thus the series proves a fairly effective – albeit limited – subversion of the gender binary. Alanna’s gender is frequently destabilised, and she upsets the binaries of her world by not acting the way that women are expected to act. However, as Alanna ends up being decidedly female, despite her unusual gender presentation, the series does not allow for a transgender reading, or even for the existence of transgender people, in that it closes off the narrative of the body. It is also unfortunate that Alanna’s gender is the only one to be destabilised, and not that of any of the other characters, especially the ones designated male at birth.

Female-to-male cross-dressing is mentioned a few times in Cornelia Funke’s “Inkheart” (2004-2008) trilogy, but is never actually shown. Meggie’s mother spends some of her time in the medievally inspired Inkworld dressed as a man so she can work as a scribe. When Mo and Dustfinger go to rescue Meggie from Capricorn they pretend to be two of his henchmen. Elinor wants to come along as well, disguised as a man, but they do not have a spare suit for her. The former instance is inspired by self-preservation as well as a desire to take on a role proscribed to women in the Inkworld, the latter being simply inspired by a desire not to get caught by the enemies. At one point some of the Black Prince’s robbers are hidden in the marketplace, dressed as women so as not to arouse the suspicions of the guards, but this barely features in the story more than the aforementioned incidents.

Both Diana Wynne Jones’s The Crown of Dalemark (1993) and A Tale of Time City (1987), as well as Michelle Harrison’s The 13 Treasures (2009), use cross-dressing as a form of misdirection. In The Crown of Dalemark, Mitt encounters a “small tough boy” (p. 25) named Rith. It never occurs to Mitt to question Rith’s stated gender, so he is surprised to find her, in her regular clothes, as Lady Noreth:
Mitt turned and found himself facing an elegant lady. He was utterly dismayed. The only thing that was the same about her was the longish freckled face with its eager, cheerful look. But that was surrounded by clouds of fair frizzy hair, done in a most fashionable style, and she had on a slender dress of grey-blue that hung in sheeny folds round a thoroughly female figure. (1993, p. 39)

Noreth informs Mitt that she always pretends to be a boy when she travels, for her own protection. This involves her wearing masculine clothes and hiding her hair, but other than changing her appearance, her masquerade seems to require little adjustment, as she is proficient in traditionally masculine skills, such as sword-fighting and horse-riding.

In *A Tale of Time City* (1987) the Time Patrol is looking for Cousin Vivian amid a crowd of evacuee children, but she manages to evade the patrol several times. The protagonists are unable to figure out how she keeps staying out of sight until they discover that she has simply been wearing boys’ clothes and a cap to hide her hair. As the Time Patrol is searching for a girl in the 1930s, at a time when the differences between feminine and masculine appearance were very marked, it does not occur to the patrol to look more closely at the children with short hair and trousers. This is in spite of the fact that, back in Time City, most people wear androgynous jumpsuits, and long hair on boys appears to be common. Vivian Smith, at least, who comes from 1938, thinks that “she had never seen a boy so much in need of a haircut” (p. 15) as Sam, and she stares at Jonathan because he “had twice as much hair as she had” (p. 17). It bears mentioning, however, that Jonathan is Chinese. Rather than being consciously androgynous by wearing his hair long, Jonathan might thus be performing a traditional Chinese type of masculinity, instead of the English masculinity that Vivian is used to.

*The 13 Treasures* (2009) takes place in modern times, when children’s clothing can often be more androgynous than it was during World War II, but the characters in it make use of a similar ruse as Cousin Vivian. Red, who is described as having a “boyish figure” (p. 226), is on the run from the police, along with a stolen baby boy. She disguises herself by cutting her distinctive red hair short and dying it black, and then putting on some men’s clothes. Disguising the baby is even easier, as babies are naturally androgynous: all she needs to do is dress him in pink to make people assume the child is a girl. As
Red says: “They’re looking for a redheaded girl with a baby boy. So I need to be the opposite of that… And so does he [the baby]” (p. 226).

All of these occurrences destabilise gendered expectations. The characters in question completely conceal their identities simply by changing their clothes, without even changing their behaviour. Cousin Vivian acts in a rude and unladylike manner, but this is not part of her masquerade; it is simply her natural behaviour, even when she is wearing a dress. Red is a tomboy, so presumably has no problems passing muster as male, although the readers do not see this. The most destabilising element is the baby, who is too young to have learned and internalised gendered behaviour, so the only outward marker of his sex are his clothes. As he is referred to as a boy, his assigned gender is clearly male, but as he has not yet developed his own identity, this might not even be his actual gender. Altogether, the cross-dressing incidents in these three texts point out the ridiculousness of assuming a person’s gender based on their clothing, or even, as in the case of the baby, on the colour of their clothing.

That said, all these female cross-dressers are thin, white girls. Within the queer community, the abiding images of transmasculinity and androgyny tend to be thin, white, and boyish, which leaves out any other race and body type. This makes it harder for people who are not thin or white to explore their gender identity and have it respected by others. As Kris Nelson writes, “we need more than just another white, thin, masculine-centered person speaking for our community. Anything less than that works to make the world less safe for non-binary and GNC [gender non-conforming] folks, not more secure” (2016, unpaged). The unfortunate truth is that – just like mainstream feminism – the LGBT movement often fails to be intersectional and to take into account the ways in which the needs of queer and transgender people of colour may be different from those of the white members of the community. As Alan Pelaez Lopez writes:

My Blackness is visible. My accent marks me a foreigner. And my gender presentation makes me a target of violence in a world where femininity is devalued and to be destroyed.

The LGBTQIA+ movement has failed at being an intersectional movement because I don’t feel safe entering
spaces that market themselves as “LGBT-friendly.” (2016, unpaged)

Non-binary writer Caleb Luna discusses how their fatness is feminised and therefore constrains their gender expression. They write: “Regardless of how I feel and how I view my gender, there are material limits to what gender my body is allowed or – more appropriately – disallowed to access” (2017a, unpaged, italics in the original). Both Lopez and Luna explain that their marginalised status, a product of their race, their body type, and their economic class, limits the ways in which they can interact with their own queerness as well as with the queer community at large. This is why an intersectional approach is needed when discussing queerness and gender, and a cultural narrative in which only petite, white girls are permitted to experiment with gender expression is insufficient.

Incidentally, while Elinor in *Inkheart* is white, she is also fat and middle-aged. She could therefore have been a far more subversive cross-dressing figure than the young, white, and conventionally attractive girls, had Funke presented her in these terms. But this opportunity is missed in the novel, and Elinor’s suggestion that she could have disguised herself as a man to help rescue Meggie is met with no answer.

In *The 13 Secrets* (2011), one of the sequels to *The 13 Treasures*, a boy named Jack asks Red and her companions for help because he believes that his mother has been replaced by a fairy. One of the things Jack has noticed is that “[h]er voice sounded different sometimes. Sort of scratchy... and deeper” (p. 112).

While the fairy eventually turns out to be male, most of the members of the coven refer to him as “her”, accepting the gender he has adopted as a masquerade. Fabian is the only one to refer to the fairy as “it”, but this might be because he is less used to the fey folk than the others, and might still think of all fairies as “it”. Since the fairy is using magic to disguise himself, he looks exactly like the woman he is impersonating, but his masquerade involves

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32 According to the author profile on Everyday Feminism, Luna’s preferred pronouns are the gender-neutral they/them/their.

33 The nature of this magic is glamorous rather than transformative, as is evidenced by the fact that even while in the guise of Jack’s mother, who still has both her hands, the fairy is unable to use his missing right hand. This means that the fairy’s image changes, but underneath the glamour, his body remains the same.
imitating her behaviour as well. One of the things that he struggles with is cooking, a skill considered particularly motherly. He complains: “I’ve tried to act like a good mother, haven’t I? But it’s not easy. Never easy. And what does a mother do? She makes dinner. But cooking isn’t the thing. Cooking spoils it” (2011, p. 177, italics in the original). As the mothers in Harrison’s books are rarely housewives, it is probably only the fairy’s opinion, rather than the author’s, that cooking is a necessary part of acting feminine (and perhaps Jack’s mother is someone who enjoys cooking for her family, although the fairy characterises this as something that all mothers do, rather than this particular mother).

The plot thickens as it turns out that the fairy, Eldritch, was never interested in Jack’s family and never intended to provide a perfect imitation of the boy’s mother. His plan was from the beginning to make Jack suspicious, so he would go to Red for help, allowing Eldritch to wreak vengeance on her. Thus, he treads a thin line between being convincing enough as a double of Jack’s mother to trick Jack’s father, and being just wrong enough to arouse Jack’s suspicions.

This is the only extended incident in my primary texts in which a male cross-dresses as a female, and it is done for sinister purposes. While Harrison’s text in no way condemns this type of cross-dressing – it even presents it as beneficial in the case of the stolen baby – the fact that there are rarely positive examples of characters, assigned male at birth, who dress or behave in a feminine manner, is problematic. Effeminate men and trans women are often represented as either villainous or ludicrous in the media (and repulsive in either case), and for the most part the same is true in my primary texts: the thought of Thom living as a girl for an extended period of time is laughable to Alanna, and Eldritch only makes himself look like a woman because of his evil scheme.

The only man in my primary texts who is explicitly referred to as feminine is Ishta, one of the traitorous guards in Shannon Hale’s The Goose Girl (2003). Not only does he betray Ani, but he also sexually harasses her at one point, which perpetuates the view that effeminate men are sinister and sexually threatening. Unfortunately, there are very few role models in fiction for gender non-conforming boys and transgender girls. It can therefore be difficult for them to feel pride and confidence, rather than shame, in their identity. As Vivian
Taylor points out, in the popular consciousness, “[b]eing trans is something to avoid, to exclude, to escape, at worst to nobly bare [sic] up under” (2015, unpaged), rather than something to enjoy and celebrate.

The instances of female-to-male cross-dressing are fairly effective and enjoyable, though. Whether performed to take on a masculine role or to hide from enemies, these stories deconstruct and poke fun at gender norms. They show that gender can be flexible, fluid, and does not need to define a person. However, it has also been shown that all the female cross-dressers are young, white, and thin, which makes cross-dressing and androgyny appear limited to a single body type. It also means that these texts only explore gender in a very limited way, without considering the myriad ways gender norms are influenced by age, race, body type, and other factors of intersectional marginalisation.

Of course, in fantasy fiction cross-dressing is not limited to changing one’s clothes, but can be achieved through transforming the physical body, as discussed in the next section.

**Transforming and Performing Bodies**

Explicitly transgender characters are rare in children’s media, and when they do appear, it is usually in stories that specifically deal with being transgender, rather than fulfilling the same variety of roles that cisgender characters do. However, as authors do not generally take the time to specify that their characters are cisgender, it is possible to speculate about characters’ gender identities. For example, Coraline (Gaiman, 2002) thinks that the voice of the cat, despite being a male voice, sounds like the voice of her thoughts, which might imply that she sees herself as an androgyne. It is more likely, however, that the cat represents Coraline’s Jungian animus, which is simply a more abstract way of representing humans’ androgynous roots. There is also Mallory in *The Spiderwick Chronicles* (2009), who becomes embarrassed and defensive when her family brings up the fact that she is growing into a woman: Jared teases her for looking as though she has breasts, Simon teases her about a boy she likes, while their mother, in a more positive way, tries to encourage her, which only embarrasses Mallory further. But since puberty is an embarrassing state for cisgender children as well as transgender ones, this does not necessarily mean that she resists becoming a woman. The strongest example of a transgender child character in my primary texts is arguably Awful
in Jones’s *Archer’s Goon*, who “looked smug” when someone referred to her as Howard’s little brother, because she “loved being mistaken for a boy” (1984, p. 71). However, as her nickname implies, she is not a particularly nice person, so she is not the best role model for transmasculine children, even though she is feisty and often funny. Her main role in the story is to allow Howard to become more mature and less selfish, which makes her less sympathetic than Howard himself.

Arguably, the only genderfluid character in my primary texts is Loki in Neil Gaiman’s *Odd and the Frost Giants* (2008). The story refers several times to an episode from Norse mythology in which Loki turns himself into a mare to distract a magical horse, which results in him giving birth to Odin’s eight-legged mount, Sleipnir. In Gaiman’s story Loki mentions several times that he was a horse once, and at one point Thor interjects: “A mare, you mean” (p. 41). But it is never stated outright in the narrative what happened. The brother of the owner of the magic stallion that Loki seduced tells Odd: “A mare, the most beautiful animal one had ever seen, ran across the plain and lured away the stallion who was hauling the stones for my brother. It used womanish wiles” (2008, p. 67). At this point Odd “was beginning to have his suspicions about who the mare had been” (pp. 67-68). The sexual dimensions of this are implied, but – presumably because the book is aimed at young children – not explored further, and Loki’s subsequent pregnancy is not mentioned. In the text Loki seems slightly embarrassed about the whole incident, and the other gods tease him about it occasionally. They say that Loki’s actions while in horse form were a result of him succumbing to his animal nature. As Thor puts it:

“It’s something that happens when you have taken on animal form. Stay in it too long and you become what you pretend to be. When Loki was a horse —”

“We don’t talk about that,” said the fox [Loki]. (Gaiman, 2008, p. 33)

Loki, Thor, and Odin spend most of the story in animal form (a fox, a bear, and an eagle, respectively), but presumably these animals’ sexes correspond to their actual genders when in their natural form, which is why Loki’s previous transformation into a female horse is considered a lot more transgressive. Since the horse’s nature took over Loki’s mind, this means that, at least briefly, Loki was female, both in body in mind.
This sort of transformation happens regularly in mythology, in which gender and sexuality are frequently less stable than in modern stories. Gods often take lovers of more than one sex, transform themselves into various human and animal forms, and male gods sometimes give birth by strange means. While in *Odd and the Frost Giants* Loki is shown to be embarrassed at having performed a female role, mythologically it is likely that his transformation and resultant pregnancy were not considered that peculiar or shameful, and these events are certainly characteristic of his chaotic personality. In this regard, the myth is more accepting of gender deviance than Gaiman’s book, in which Thor and Odin – who are traditionally portrayed as being more masculine than Loki – mock the latter for his perceived femininity, thus showing that men who are not sufficiently masculine are worthy of ridicule. Gender-fluidity is thus not really portrayed in a positive light.

Transformation of the body is a common theme in fairy tales, and is often presented as a transitional stage. While frequently used as a punishment that male characters need to be freed from (“The Frog Prince”, “Beauty and the Beast”, “The Six Swans”), for female characters transformation can itself be a liberatory experience. As Marina Warner writes:

> This phenomenon of metamorphosis as liberty saturates the imagery of the tales and the language in which they are conveyed; the animal disguise of the heroine equips her to enter a new territory of choice and speech; the apparent degradation works for her, not against her. Being a beast – a she-bear – can be preferable as a temporary measure to the constrictions of a woman’s shape. Animal form marks a threshold she passes over, before she can take control of her own identity. (1994a, p. 354)

Like many other fairy tale tropes, the concept of transformation as punishment is subverted in Eva Ibbotson’s *The Ogre of Oglefort* (2010). The titular ogre has the ability to turn people into animals, but rather than being feared for this, he keeps being sought out by people who are tired of their human lives and would rather be animals. Here, being an animal is neither a punishment nor a transitional stage that leads to eventual self-fulfilment, but the happy ending itself. Significantly, some of these transformed people are specifically seeking an escape from the constraints of their gender. In Warner’s words, for these characters “[b]eing a beast... [is] preferable... to the constrictions of a woman’s
[or a man’s] shape” (p. 354). For example, Hamish has himself turned into a gnu because he cannot cope with the pressures of hyper-masculinity (with its passion for hunting), and is now happier as a peaceful herbivore. Bessie has herself turned into a hippo to escape her demanding children and grandchildren, choosing self-fulfilment over constant nurturing and motherly self-sacrifice. She probably also had a negative body image when she was human, as she says about the hippo: “It was so clean and so smooth and it didn’t mind being fat” (Ibbotson, 2010, p. 143). Finally, Nandi used to be a beauty queen until she lost a competition because she tripped. After her boyfriend breaks up with her, she decides to live on her own as an aye-aye, “where nobody can hurt me” (p. 146). When Ivo and Mirella ask her for help, she agrees on the condition that “there must be no cruel men – and no competitions” (p. 146.). All three of these characters are unable to function within the gender roles set for them by society – being aggressive, being endlessly nurturing, being beautiful – and they escape these roles by turning into animals which they admire. Unlike Loki’s mare, it is never stated whether these people’s animal forms have the same sex as their human forms, but this is not really important, since the animals are made to seem rather removed from their human gender, which makes them appear sexless and androgynous. None of them turn back into humans at the end of the story, but continue living happily as animals – the only change being that they make friends and learn to trust people again.

Unlike the texts on cross-dressing I examined, the gender deviance in The Ogre of Oglefort is not limited to young, thin, white girls. Hamish is a man, Bessie is old enough to be a grandmother and, it is implied, was fat, and Nandi, given her Indian name, is presumably a woman of colour. Bessie’s age and size are, in fact, presented as some of the reasons why she felt the need to escape her human body. By taking these factors into account, the book thus takes a more nuanced approach than texts that only focus on gendered oppression.

Initially Princess Mirella, one of the protagonists of The Ogre of Oglefort, goes to the ogre’s castle to make him turn her into a bird, in order that she can escape an arranged marriage to a money-hungry suitor who is far older than her. Being a princess, she is made to feel that her only role in life is to get married and produce heirs, so she too is fleeing from gender constraints. Once she escapes from her demanding family and her sleazy fiancé, however, she
manages to be happy in her human form, being independent and having her own friends. The main difference between her and the people who are transformed is that she is a child, whereas the others are adults, and so she still has her entire human life ahead of her. She is also more likely to be someone child readers can identify with, who might feel trapped within their social roles but cannot simply turn into animals to escape these constraints. While the story does not really provide an answer for children who have such concerns, it does validate them by telling the children that their families are not necessarily right about who they are and what they are meant to do with their lives, and this itself can be liberating. Overall, the message in *The Ogre of Oglefort* is that being an animal can be rewarding and liberating, but being human can be just as good, as long as one is free to express one’s identity, which is a positive message for both transgender and cisgender children.

Helen Stringer’s *The Last Ghost* (2009) features an unusual instance of bodily transformation. Belladonna and Steve encounter a Sybil who was once beautiful, but her body has decayed to the point where only her voice is left. As in *Odd and the Frost Giants*, this book features another character from ancient mythology, this time Greek. Warner tells the story of the Sybil in *From the Beast to the Blonde*:

In Ovid, the Cumaean Sybil tells Aeneas that Phoebus Apollo had fallen in love with her and offered her anything she wanted if she would only sleep with him – she then asked for as many “birthdays as there were grains of dust” in a heap she scooped together in her hands. But she had forgotten to ask for eternal youth as well… . When she meets Aeneas, she tells him she will “shrink from her present fine stature into a tiny creature... shrivelled with age”, and that, eventually, her outer form will disintegrate altogether. Then she concludes, “But still, the fates will leave me my voice, and by my voice I shall be known.” (1994a, p. 10)

First and foremost, this story demonstrates the power of a woman’s voice. It also intimates that even when the body is gone, the remaining voice is still that of a woman. Again, this ventures into subversive territory as it implies that it is not the body that makes a person a man or a woman. After all, the Sybil does not have a body any more.

Steve and Belladonna do not ponder these things, and they do not hesitate
in referring to the Sybil as female. The Sybil is wise and prophetic, but also human, despite her lack of a body. She becomes irritated and impatient at Steve’s cheekiness, and also displays a sense of humour. Presumably her personality – just like her gender – is the same as when she had a body.

Garth Nix’s series about the Old Kingdom (1995-2016) features some disembodied characters but – in contrast to the Sybil – they never had a body to begin with. Some, like Mogget and the Disreputable Dog, occupy a physical form temporarily, so it is not really representative of their real selves. Mogget has been bound in the form of a cat, which limits his powers and keeps him subservient to the Abhorsen. In both Sabriel (1995) and Abhorsen (2004) Mogget is released into his true form, which is both malleable and immensely powerful. When this happens in Sabriel, he is still referred to as Mogget, using the pronoun “he”, but in Abhorsen, Mogget’s true name is revealed to be Yrael and he is referred to in the narrative as “it”, so it seems that freeing the creature from its body also frees it from its perceived gender.

Like Mogget, the Disreputable Dog is a powerful, ageless creature from the Beginning. She has been given a physical form but, in her case, it was with her agreement. She appears to come into being when Lirael uses magic to create a dog companion for herself to ease her loneliness but, as it turns out, the spirit inhabiting the dog body that Lirael makes is that of an ancient being. Unlike Mogget, the Dog is benign in either form, and she chooses to become Lirael’s friend and companion.

Both Mogget and the Dog take on characteristics of the physical forms they inhabit: Mogget is lazy and loves fish, while the Dog is playful and loyal. Since Yrael does not appear to have a gender, it is likely that Mogget’s and the Dog’s genders (male and female, respectively) are also characteristics that they have picked up from being in the bodies that were made for them. It is also possible that the Dog chooses to appear female so as to match Lirael’s gender.\(^34\)

The evil force to be defeated in Abhorsen is Orannis the Destroyer, an ancient creature from the beginning, like Mogget and the Dog. Unlike them, though, Orannis has never had a body, and is always referred to as “It”, with a capital “I”. Its lack of gender serves to make it seem less human and thus more

\(^{34}\) This actually happens in Diana Wynne Jones’s House of Many Ways (2008a), in which the magical dog Waif changes its sex to match Charmain’s, when formerly it had been male while it was living with her uncle.
monstrous, though it is unclear why Orannis’s pronoun has a capital letter, when the same is not used for Yrael or other creatures from the Beginning. This capitalisation appears to have some resonance with the use of capitalised pronouns for the God of religions like Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, but Orannis is never referred to as a god or as a creator, and has equal standing with the other creatures from the Beginning.

The fourth creature from the Beginning encountered in the series is Astarael, who appears in the form of a spindly woman. This is only a manifestation, however, and not an actual body, although there are indications that she might have had a body at some point, which may be the reason why she is always referred to as “she”.

Most of the “sendings” – servants created by magic – are also “of indeterminate sex” (1995, p. 88). Many of them wear clothes that hide their features, though it is likely that they only have the features that they need to fulfil their tasks and so lack faces and sexual characteristics. However, Sabriel encounters one whom she first mistakes for a strange man, who turns out to be a Charter-ghost whose “face wouldn’t stay fixed, migrating between scores of possibilities. Some were women, some were men – but all bore tough, competent visages” (1995, pp. 83-84). As the sendings have bodies made of Charter magic rather than of flesh and blood, they do not need to be sexually differentiated, but unlike the Dog, whose body is also made of magic, they do not seem to have a sense of themselves, so they have neither a sex nor a gender.

Ultimately, gender seems to be defined by physical characteristics in this series, even after the soul is removed from the physical body. Therefore, the ever-disembodied Orannis is the only truly genderless character, but as it is a force of evil rather than a person, this is not a particularly positive representation of genderlessness.

Another plot point that bears mentioning involves Lirael’s boat, Finder. While this craft does not talk, it is clearly gendered as female, following the widespread tradition of referring to boats using feminine pronouns. Moreover, she clearly has a mind of her own, and so could be said to be a character in her own right. She is benevolent, helpful, and clever. Just like the Disreputable Dog’s gender, the boat’s femaleness aligns well with Lirael’s own, giving them a more egalitarian relationship, like friends or sisters, rather than the rather
patriarchal one of a male sailor commanding a female boat. It is not surprising then, when Lirael has to leave the boat behind at the end of her journey, that she “kissed Finder's figurehead on the cheek and pushed the boat off the jetty. She thought she saw the carved face of the woman wink, and her lips curve up in a smile” (2001, p. 502, italics in the original). The figurehead of a woman seems to represent Finder's feminine personality, and possibly her soul. While this figurehead resembles a human body, it is, of course, made of wood rather than borne of flesh and blood, and so is not subject to the same gendered expectations as a real woman. Still, it is likely that she would appear less markedly female without the figurehead, so even in this instance gender is linked with a body, albeit in a slightly unusual way.

Overall, while modern texts often play with gender markers by destabilising the body – either by transforming it or by featuring characters that do not have a physical body – for the most part a character’s gender is still portrayed as being dependent on a body in one way or another. This implies that people’s genders are mostly defined by the body they inhabit, which is a troubling notion that excludes the existence of transgender and non-binary people entirely. There are only two non-binary characters I have found within my sample of texts, and neither of them invites identification with readers: the gender-fluid Loki, who is mocked, and the agender Orannis, who is a force of evil. However, texts such as The Ogre of Oglefort show that transformations can provide an escape from gender roles, showing that leaving thoughts of one’s body behind is not necessarily a bad thing, and that people should be allowed to define themselves in their own terms.

The only way to escape gender fully in these texts appears to be by being without a body, as Yrael and Orannis demonstrate. This leads me to an interesting theme that I have found in several of my primary texts, namely the effect of death on gender identity.

**Ghosts and Other Undead**
The “Old Kingdom” series, Coraline and Lauren Oliver’s Liesl & Po (2011) all feature dead characters who cannot remember what gender they used to be when they were alive. In these stories, it is implied that the characters are losing their humanity, although for different reasons and with differing effects. These depictions are different from those of Mogget and the Disreputable Dog,
for example, as they show beings who were once accustomed to having a body now navigating their existence as a soul without a body (or – in the case of some of the undead in Sabriel – a body without a soul), rather than bodiless entities who end up tied to a physical form to which they adjust.

Liesl & Po shows most clearly how death removes certainties, and that everything in the world of spirits is more vague and ambiguous. When Liesl first meets the ghost Po, she asks it: “Are you a boy a girl?” The following conversation ensues:

“Neither,” the ghost replied.
Liesl was startled. “You have to be one or the other.”
“I don’t have to be anything,” the ghost replied, sounding irritated. “I am what I am and that’s all. Things are different on the Other Side, you know. Things are... blurrier.”
“But what did you used to be?” Liesl pressed. “You know... before?” (Oliver, 2011, p. 6, italics and ellipses in the original)

After some thought, Po replies: “I don’t remember” (p. 6). Po also introduces its pet, Bundle. Just as Po is neither a boy nor a girl, Bundle is neither a dog nor a cat, but something in-between. This state of liminality is not portrayed as being good or bad, but simply as something that just is. It does not seem to make the ghosts sad to have lost memories of their former lives, but it does not make them happy either. This is made clear in a later scene when Liesl is already used to Po’s and Bundle’s liminality, but her new friend, Will, still questions it:

He had noticed... that the girl called Po “it,” and he wondered about that. “Isn’t Po a boy or a girl?”
“No neither. And both. Those things lose meaning on the Other Side. Just like Bundle is both a dog and a cat, and also neither.”
Will found it all very strange. “But they must have been one or the other at some time. When they were, um, on this side?”
“Oh, yes, I suppose so.” The girl seemed unconcerned. “But they can hardly be expected to remember. They’ve been on the Other Side for a very long time. So now they are just Bundle and Po, and my friends.” (Oliver, 2011, p. 190)

Sadly, the text does not allow the world of the living the same liminality. There a boy is a boy, a girl is a girl, a dog is a dog, a cat is a cat, and there is nothing in-
between. Again, this is not presented as being better or worse than the Other Side – simply different.

For most of the text Po is referred to as “it”, although the author slips up a couple of times and calls it “he”. However, this could be because Po is talking about what little it remembers from the time when it was still alive. At the end of the story Po remembers that it used to be a boy called Peter, at which point his identity seems to solidify, and he becomes, once more, Peter rather than the ambiguous Po. He no longer appears to Liesl as a shadowy form, but as a child with “tan brown arms and shoulders, and a ring of curly yellow hair, and a laughing smile” (p. 296). Similarly, Bundle “turned into a small, bounding, yellow mass of fur. A dog” (p. 296). Peter thanks Liesl for helping him regain his identity, so this is portrayed as a good thing, although he fades away shortly after it happens, so it is not shown how this is going to affect his existence on the Other Side. Most likely he will lose himself again over time and become a genderless shade once more.

The ghost children in *Coraline* have lost their identities as well but, in this case, it is not portrayed as a natural aspect of death, but rather a consequence of having their souls trapped by the other mother. When Coraline asks the ghost children who they are, one of them replies: “Names, names, names... The names are the first things to go, after the breath has gone, and the beating of the heart. We keep our memories longer than our names” (Gaiman, 2002, p. 98). She also asks one of them:

> “Are you a girl? ...Or a boy?”

> There was a pause. “When I was small I wore skirts and my hair was long and curled,” it said doubtfully. “But now that you ask, it does seem to me that one day they took my skirts and gave me britches and cut my hair.”

> “Tain’t something we give a mind to,” said the first of the voices.

> “A boy, perhaps, then,” continued the one whose hand she was holding. “I believe I was once a boy.” (2002, p. 99)

These children remember more about their lives than Po does, but what they remember seems to be mostly what struck them as beautiful or interesting, rather than what others might see as the things that define them as people, such as their names and assigned genders. Thus one of the ghosts remembers the clothes that it used to wear, but not the meaning that adults placed on those
clothes. This is further underlined by the fact that this child wore both skirts and breeches in its lifetime, as it comes from a time when infants were considered genderless and were dressed in skirts.

When Coraline finds the children’s souls, it awakens their memories: “A voice whispered in her mind, ‘Indeed, lady, it comes to me that I certainly was a boy, now I do think on it’” (p. 116, italics in the original). When she first meets them, the children are described as “three shapes, each as faint and pale as a moon in the daytime sky” (p. 99), so they seem to be just as vague and formless as Po when it first meets Liesl. Near the end of the story, after Coraline has freed their souls, she has a dream about the three ghost children in which they appear to her in what are presumably the forms they had when they were alive (although one of them seems to have angel wings). Here, they are confidently described as a boy and two girls, with all ambiguities removed, just as they are in Liesl & Po when Po remembers who he was. This happens because their souls are once more their own and not the other mother’s, and the implication is that they can now move on to heaven as themselves, rather than the mournful, soulless spectres Coraline first encountered in the other mother’s realm. On the one hand, this shows that the children’s genders are part of their soul and part of what makes them human, but on the other hand, since they forgot their genders so easily, it seems that they are less important than the memories of people the children cared about and things they found beautiful.

Similarly to Po and the ghost children, spirits who appear in the “Old Kingdom” books are shadowy and androgynous. For example, when Sabriel has her first menstruation, she summons a spirit advisor to answer her questions about things she does not learn at school. This spirit advisor is as formless as any other ghost, but Sabriel suspects it to be her departed mother, and its knowledge about menstruation and similar bodily functions at least implies that it once had a uterus when it was alive. This and other similar beings are natural and not to be feared. As their speech is usually limited, it is unclear how much they remember about their mortal lives and whether their personalities are as shadowy and ambiguous as their forms.

As the series is concerned with necromancy, there are other undead beings that are not natural, but were created through dark magic. One such being is Thralk, who preys and feeds on the living. Thralk is not the creature’s birth
name, but it chose it because it is a “simple name, not too difficult for a partially decomposed mouth to voice. A male name. Thralk could not remember what its original sex had been, those centuries before, but its new body was male” (Nix, 1995, p. 70). As Thralk is always referred to as “it”, even while inhabiting a male body, it is clear that it never identifies with its current physical form the way Mogget, for example, does. As in Liesl & Po and Coraline, the implication is that Thralk has lost its humanity, more so than Po or the ghost children, as they at least retain some vague memories of their human lives and are capable of human emotions and relationships. Thralk’s loss of humanity is not natural, like Po’s, but sinister and dangerous. While the ghost children losing their names and genders makes them sad and hollow, Thralk is turned into a monster with no conscience and no regard for living beings.

Jones’s The Time of the Ghost (1981) approaches the subject of ghosts and gender differently from the other three texts discussed in this section. This story introduces a ghost who does not remember who she is. At first she remembers nothing at all, but as she haunts her old home, some of her memories gradually return, and she realises that she is one of four sisters, though she is not sure which one. Even when she remembers nothing about her identity, she seems to be certain of her gender. The text never refers to her as anything other than “she”, and does not even pause to question whether she is, in fact, a she. When the ghost slips through the walls of a classroom at the boys’ school that her parents run, she feels uncomfortable and slightly dreamlike because she knows she is intruding on a male space. This happens before she encounters anyone she knows from her life, so she does not yet understand where she belongs, but she is sure that she does not belong in this classroom full of boys with “not a girl in the room” (p. 13). Unlike the ghosts in Coraline, this ghost’s gender is the last thing to leave her memory, rather than one of the first. It bears mentioning, however, that this ghost is not actually dead, but simply in a coma, so while she is currently away from her body, she retains more of a connection to it than the other ghosts I have discussed. However, even when she is returned to her body, her memories are still patchy and unclear, so it seems unlikely that the existence of her functioning body is the reason why her gender identity stays intact. Rather, her gender appears to be independent of her body and even her memories of herself. At one point she does, however, encounter an entity that has been disembodied for far longer
than she has. Like herself at the start of the story, it does not remember its life, but unlike her, its gender identity seems to be lost as well, and so it is consistently referred to as “it”.

In all of these stories, gender identity is portrayed as an important part of being human and is tied into people’s sense of themselves, rather than simply their bodies or social roles. Unfortunately, none of the texts allow living people an identity outside the gender binary. Thus, it seems as though the living have to be male or female, whereas the dead can be anything at all. This makes it difficult for people who have a gender, but not one that fits within the strict male-female dichotomy, to identify with either the living or the dead characters. Still, these depictions transcend gender norms, albeit imperfectly, and so they do raise questions about what it means to be a man, a woman, a boy, a girl, or even just a person in general, as most of the characters mentioned are still people, despite being dead and not quite human anymore.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have explored the way characters are shown transcending the gender binary using various strategies. Cross-dressing and transformations prove to be liberating experiences in these texts, which help the characters escape gendered expectations and learn more about their own identities. I also explored genderless beings, as well as ghosts and other undead characters who have lost their gender identity. All these various groups show that gender is more complex than a simple distinction between different types of genitalia. However, most of these transgressions are impermanent and none of them are perfect. As Kerry Mallan writes:

Subversion, as a strategy for destabilising gender, is one that often fails in children’s literature and film. The examples of gender-switching through cross-dressing... or transformations of the sexed body..., or in drag performance... can be seen as failed performances as their narrative closures of reinstatement of gender norms reinforce existing gender binarisms and sexual hierarchies within a heterosexual and heteronormative framework... . (2009, p. 16)

For the most part, this is true of my primary texts as well. Characters who transcend gender distinctions tend to return to their place within the gender
binary at the end of their story: Alanna goes back to being a girl once she no longer needs to hide her gender, and Po remembers that he is a boy and becomes Peter once more. There are no characters who are seen to identify with a different gender than their body or their society dictates. Even when characters do not have a body any more, their gender identity tends to be linked to the body they once had. Thus, all these texts have a cissexist bias. *Alanna: The First Adventure* shows this bias most clearly by having a character assert: “You’re a female, child, no matter what clothing you wear. You must become accustomed to that” (1983, p. 174). Statements like this can be potentially harmful to transgender readers. By explicitly making these connections and bringing in a transgender perspective, I have attempted to show the limitations of a purely cisgender analysis.

But while the texts rarely free their characters completely from the divisiveness of gender, they do play with gender expectations and so suggest that the binary can be crossed, if only for a short time. Through the use of cross-dressing and transformation, these texts also assert that gender identity and gender performance are separable as concepts.

Several characters who were (presumably) assigned a female gender at birth (Alanna, Meggie’s mother, Red, Norith, and Cousin Vivian) are seen experimenting with masculinity, but they are all white and thin, suggesting that androgyny or gender fluidity are only valid in people of a single race or body type. This is a prejudice that non-binary people of size and colour frequently face, even though non-binary identities are a part of several non-white cultures (such as various Native American and Aboriginal Australian tribes). There is also an unfortunate lack of characters who are assigned male seen experimenting with femininity in wholesome ways. Thom dresses as a girl for a short time, but the idea of him performing a feminine role for a longer period is seen as ludicrous. Eldritch stays in female disguise longer, but he is portrayed as deceitful and villainous. Even Loki, the most fluid of the characters, is embarrassed by his foray into femaleness in Gaiman’s version of the story. The only male character described as feminine appears to be a sexual predator. For the most part, characters assigned male at birth are only permitted to transcend their designated gender by losing their gender identity completely, the way some of the ghost characters do. Transgender girls and gender non-conforming boys are thus left without positive role models, and their gender identity is
mocked and demonised, as is distressingly common in popular culture.

For all their limitations, the novels raise important questions about gender and the way it can be deconstructed by each individual. These questions are necessary to establish a society that is more welcoming of transgender people.
Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to compare modern children’s fantasy literature with older texts from an intersectional feminist standpoint. My concern has been to consider the extent to which patriarchal values structure these original tales and how contemporary children’s fantasy texts have addressed this legacy. To do this I have looked at several themes and subjects from these texts; namely, heroism, beauty, magic, and gender expression.

In the Literature Review, I discussed intersectional theory, which was an approach advanced by black feminists to make sense of the fact that they were often excluded from mainstream white feminism, as well as from the male-dominated Civil Rights Movement. Today the term is used to encompass all the different axes of oppression, exploring how these intersect to create different life experiences for different people. As all oppressions are part of a single system that is designed to maintain the power of an elite group of rich, white, able-bodied, heterosexual men, it is vital that this “divide and rule” tactic, whereby each oppressed group pursues its own insular concerns, is challenged, which is what intersectional theory aims to do: to make clear the commonalities of oppression and discern their overarching source in patriarchy. This is where, I am convinced, intersectional theory can help children’s literature scholars develop a more persuasive and comprehensive understanding of young people’s fantasy literature than is currently provided by readings that concentrate simply on one facet of this oppression – isolating feminism, or race, or indeed class, sexuality, disability, fatness, and so on.

I also defined fantasy fiction as fiction involving mythical creatures and magic. I used this definition as a guide when choosing my primary texts, even when the magic in them was not specifically referred to in these terms, as is the case with Shannon Hale’s books, which instead talk of “nature-speaking”, “quarry-speak”, and “healing songs”. While I disagree with scholars who claim that fantasy fiction is inherently conservative, I do concur with them that medievalist fantasy easily runs the risk of replicating prejudices from the past. As I have argued throughout, even when authors try to subvert one oppressive
element of a medieval society, they tend to ignore intersecting axes of oppression. For example, girls who successfully oppose patriarchy – such as Alanna in *The Song of the Lioness* by Tamora Pierce – are invariably wealthy, white, and able-bodied, and often deny opportunities to girls who are less privileged.

Before considering my sample of contemporary fantasy stories in more detail, though, I briefly discussed their main source material: traditional fairy tales. In particular, I traced some of the history of their editing and censorship, which often involved the erasure of matriarchal elements and their replacement with narratives in which heroines are silenced and isolated.

Such patriarchal issues were then examined in detail as they emerged in my corpus of texts. These substantive chapters began with one entitled “Heroes and Heroines”. Here, I discovered that violence is still a common form of heroism in modern children’s texts, though it is treated in two different ways: sometimes portrayed as honourable and sometimes as an unfortunate, but unavoidable, last resort. The most patriarchal of the texts discussed in this chapter is Charlie Fletcher’s “Stone Heart” trilogy, which glorifies warfare and makes power and leadership seem more legitimate when it comes from a male source. The enemies in this series are allowed little subjectivity, which erases any need for a discussion of whether destroying them is ethical. This can lead to the type of binaristic worldview that can justify wars and other atrocities. As most of the villains in Garth Nix’s “Old Kingdom” books are evil entities or mindless zombies, this series can be seen to have similar problems, although the human villains in Nix’s texts are, at least, more nuanced in their depiction. For instance, Chlorr of the Mask, one of the villains in *Lirael: Daughter of the Clayr*, is actually given a sympathetic backstory in the prequel *Clariel* (2014).

*The Ogre of Ogletort* by Eva Ibbotson, and Shannon Hale’s *The Book of a Thousand Days* and the “Princess Academy” series were seen to propose a different type of heroism, one in which war and conflict are averted rather than won. As a result of this shift in values, friendship and cooperation, often between very different characters is emphasised, with a particular stress on the strength and beauty of female solidarity. Another consequence of this shift is that class differences are seen as anathema. *Princess Academy: Palace of Stone* is most explicit in this, intricately showing how the class system exploits the most vulnerable members of society. However, the heroines manage to
change things for the better by securing rights for the common people, without losing the friendship between the princess and a common quarry girl.

While *The Book of a Thousand Days* was also seen to be ground-breaking in that it featured two Asian girls that rebelled against class prejudice and sexism, thereby subverting cultural expectations that Asian women are demure and submissive, it is unfortunate that, as the author has noted, this book has proven to be less popular than her works featuring white protagonists. Hale’s work, then, provides a good example of the intricacies of oppression, and shows how this can extend beyond the texts themselves; for, though this book championed feminism and opposed both class prejudice and white privilege, readers found themselves less able to accept such colour blindness, thereby revealing that a tacit racism still operates in Western society. Once again, this is where an intersectional approach can prove more subtle and revealing.

In this chapter I also looked at a few heroines who do not realise their potential as feminist characters. For, even when they are the ones engaging in the main action, their character arcs still rely heavily on the males around them. These included Maewen from *The Crown of Dalemark* and Polly from *Fire and Hemlock*, both written by Diana Wynne Jones. Each of these novels also gives a strange, and possibly paedophilic, view of romantic relationships. Maewen pursues a romance with her own ancestor, while Polly’s love interest is a manipulative child-groomer, ten years her senior. Within the respective narratives, each of these relationships is regarded as being positive, whereas, as I have argued, there are clearly problems with such inequalities in power, especially given its patriarchal basis. Even in stories with strong female protagonists, these characters are often paired with older men who patronise them. Presumably, these pairings are meant to show that the female characters are mature and sexually liberated beyond their years, but, in reality, they simply reaffirm the prevailing patriarchal view that it is natural for men to have more power within sexual relationships than the women they are with. Men who actively seek out relationships with much younger women or teenage girls enjoy the feeling of having authority over their sexual partners, so depicting women in such relationships as being empowered and liberated results in a shallow definition of feminist agency that ignores how gender intersects with age. The fact that unequal and abusive heterosexual relationships are considered appropriate subject matter for children’s literature, while loving
homosexual relationships are not, also reveals the way queer people have been pushed to the margins by heteronormative society. Finally, it is worth noting that romances in traditional fairy tales have also often been blithely paedophilic. Both Snow White and Little Red Riding Hood are sexualised by the narrative, despite being children, so this is another misogynistic aspect of fairy tales that is commonly repeated in modern texts.

Thus, while I concluded that modern heroines are usually more active than women in fairy tales, it is still the case that too many stories depend on limiting the character arcs of their female characters, as well as on elitist definitions of heroism.

In the next chapter, called “Beauty”, I explored some of the racist, ableist, and ethnocentric standards surrounding the concept of beauty. I discovered that characters of colour are far rarer than white characters, but even in texts that do feature people of colour, they are rarely described as being beautiful or handsome. There are some exceptions, of course, including Khan Tegus from *The Book of a Thousand Days*. Khan Tegus is notable because, within Western media, Asian men are normally seen as effeminate and unattractive, whereas he is depicted as being handsome and desirable. Dashti from the same book considers herself to be plain, which might be a result of her internalised class bias, as she feels that it is not a peasant’s place to be pretty. However, the fact that she is an Asian woman who is allowed to be average, rather than being depicted as an exotic beauty, is also subversive.

Like many previous researchers, I have found that while men are more likely to be described in neutral terms, women are more commonly defined by whether they are beautiful or not. Some of the stories attempt to subvert expectations by putting ugly women in heroic roles (such as Violante in *Inkspell* and *Inkdeath* by Cornelia Funke) and beautiful women in villainous ones (such as Morwenna in *The 13 Treasures* by Michelle Harrison), but most of these texts still seem to assume that beauty has universal and objective criteria, and that these are particularly important in female characterisation. When authors try to subvert stereotypes by presenting plain women as heroines, they often show an antagonism between women who seek to follow society’s beauty standards and those who do not. Thus, the aunts in Eva Ibbotson’s *Monster Mission* mock their sister for shaving her legs, and Jennifer Strange in Jasper Fforde’s *The Song of the Quarkbeast* is irritated by Samantha Blix’s beauty.
Rather than empowering women who consider themselves ugly, this tactic simply upholds patriarchy’s “divide and conquer” strategy to foster animosity between women.

In my primary texts I particularly noted instances of fat-shaming, which are surprisingly common. When villainous characters are fat (such as Mrs Trottle in Ibbotson’s *The Secret of Platform 13*, Sybil in Jones’s *The Merlin Conspiracy*, and Augusta in Lauren Oliver’s *Liesl & Po*), their size is presented as a reason to be repulsed by them, though there is usually a repulsive personality as well, to justify our reaction. Even likeable fat characters tend to be mocked, as is the case with Biffa in *The Crown of Dalemark*. Sometimes fatness is depicted in a positive manner, as is the case with a few older, motherly women, but there are hardly any fat, young heroines. The only fat protagonist in my primary texts is Nan from Jones’s *Witch Week*. While the narrative sympathises with Nan, she proves to be the exception, as another fat girl in the novel is mocked at one point for her size. I explained how fat-shaming is not only sexist, but also has racist and ableist undertones, as the body type considered ideal is a European one, arbitrarily accepted to be the paragon of health. When society treats fat people as though they are intrinsically of lesser worth because they are ostensibly not as healthy as thin people, this indicates that disabled and chronically ill people do not deserve the same rights as able-bodied people. As it can be difficult for disabled people to exercise and have access to healthy food, there is also some overlap between conditions of disability and fatness.

In the chapter called “Magic and Empowerment”, I explored different types of female magic and showed how it is viewed differently from male magic. I acknowledged some cultural differences in this because, while witchcraft has traditionally been seen in negative terms in Europe, many African cultures revere witches and wise women. I also made a link between the archetypal image of the witch and anti-Semitic depictions of Jewish women. Thus, portrayals of witches that are meant to be empowering to gentile girls can instead serve as a painful reminder to Jewish girls of an anti-Semitic history.

In the chapter comparing witchcraft with wizardry, I examined texts in which magic appears to be gendered. It was good to see that all of them go beyond the traditional associations of male magic with culture and learning, and female magic, in contrast, with nature and instinct. Rather, these works stress the importance of sharing power and not restricting people to narrow gender roles.
However, the fact that all the powerful characters are white and middle-class lessens the feminist impact of the message, as it makes magic seem limited to one race and class, even if it is not limited to one gender. A more diverse cast would have made the feminism espoused in these works more inclusive to readers on the margins of society. Featuring a disabled woman in *The Merlin Conspiracy*, a person with great magic powers, comes nearest to achieving this. However, she only has a supporting role. Just as fat women can sometimes appear as sympathetic mother figures, but rarely as heroines, so it appears to be the same with disabled women.

I found magic connected with vision and magic connected with words to be two common forms of female magic. I explored how, when these types of magic are used by women, they reverse patriarchal power relations. Normally men are placed in the subject position, with the agency to look at women, who are placed in the object position; however, women with second sight can return that look and see things that are normally hidden. Similarly, men are commonly the ones who control language and determine how it should be used. But women who use word magic can reclaim that power and use it to rewrite their own stories. Of course, both of these powers depend on physical ability, whether it is the ability to see or to talk (although in most stories about word magic, the power is still there when the words are written down), which can potentially be alienating to disabled people. This is another instance where intersectional theory can give us a more encompassing interpretation of the power relations operating in texts.

In examining the portrayal of second sight within *The 13 Treasures*, I discussed a Roma character called Morag, who is the only character whose powers are directly linked to her race. In some ways, Morag is a stereotype of Romani people, who are often portrayed as sorcerers and fortune-tellers. However, these depictions are often negative as Romani are still commonly considered to be strange and untrustworthy, whereas Morag is kind, wise, and does ordinary things like solving crossword puzzles. Despite these qualities, her status as a racial and social outsider earns her the demeaning nickname “Mad Morag”, which led me to discuss how women who do not conform to certain societal standards are often labelled insane. I found it particularly interesting that the protagonist’s friend, Fabian, shows sympathy towards women who have been institutionalised for sexist reasons in the past, but does
not realise that he is perpetuating the same sort of behaviour by calling Morag mad, which suggests that he has double-standards about his sexism and ableism. His views on mental illness thereby mirror the orthodoxy of an ableist society, in that most narratives about women who are mistreated in mental institutions feature women without mental disorders. The implication is that this type of abuse is only cruel and inhumane when it is inflicted against healthy people, whereas it may possibly be justified in the treatment of mental illness. Thus mentally ill women are marginalised even within stories about their own oppression.

Finally, in the last chapter, called “Outside the Gender Binary”, I provided a transgender perspective on issues of gender identity and gender performance, again showing how patriarchal control operates in ways often neglected. I found that it is common for characters to transcend the gender binary for a short time, but only to be returned to their own place after this brief period of liberation. In the section on cross-dressing, I demonstrated that female characters often find the adoption of a male role liberating and empowering, whereas the thought of male characters taking on a female role is usually treated as a joke. This is disheartening for transgender girls, who have few role models, and are often mocked and bullied for transgressing gender norms. The instances of female-to-male cross-dressing are also somewhat limited, as they all feature thin, able-bodied, white girls. Cross-dressing narratives can provide an outlet for children who are questioning their gender identity, but only if they are more inclusive, not only around issues of body size, skin colour, and ability, but also around matters of sexuality, as such narratives habitually exclude members of the queer community. Queer people come in all sizes and colours, yet the movement is mainly represented by wealthy, conventionally attractive, white people, whose needs are seen as the main goals of gay liberation. Transgender women of colour, who are the most vulnerable members of the queer community (Avery, 2017), therefore continue to find their struggles ignored.

When discussing transformations, I found that being turned into an animal is often seen to be a liberating experience for characters who feel trapped within their gender roles. In The Ogre of Oglefort, being in animal form is a happy outcome for many vulnerable adults rather than a punishment for a beautiful princess, as is often the case in traditional fairy tales. I also looked at the depictions of bodiless entities within the “Old Kingdom” series, most of
which appear to have no fixed gender. The same is true for most of the ghost characters I discuss. They do not remember what gender they are, suggesting that they have lost part of their humanity. The only exception is the ghost from Jones’s *The Time of the Ghost*, who remembers little else about her life, but is sure from the beginning that she was female.

Despite these interesting subversions, overall, the texts tend to link gender with the body, and there appear to be no characters whose gender is completely at odds with their biology. The only characters whose gender lies completely outside the gender binary are the following: the genderless beings in the Old Kingdom, who have no body, the ghosts, who no longer have a body, and Loki, who can change his body to that of a mare. Thus the narratives leave little room for transgender and non-binary people. However, they do ask questions about what gender means and why it is performed in certain ways rather than others.

In this thesis I have tried to demonstrate that an intersectional approach gives a fuller view of the way sexist tropes are constructed, both in traditional fairy tales and in modern fantasy literature. Intersectional feminism examines and questions the ways in which the status quo favours the powerful in society and how this viewpoint is reflected in the stories we tell. A feminist approach that takes only the experiences of rich, white, able-bodied women into consideration is often insufficient in such examinations. For example, it is only through intersectionality that we can fully understand the way Western beauty standards are constructed to elevate whiteness, able-bodiedness, and gender conformity, while demonising anyone who falls outside of this norm. This is why modern fantasy texts that attempt to subvert fairy tale tropes that centre around beauty standards fall short of their intended feminist goal unless the question is asked: why do such standards exist in the first place? Even when these texts turn beauty standards on their head, by claiming that traditional beauty is ugly and vice versa, they still end up branding someone as ugly, rather than celebrating diversity.

As indicated in the quotation at the start of this chapter, when encountering problematic elements in popular children’s fiction, the solution is not to censor or ignore them, but to give children the tools to think for themselves and question the media they encounter. As Pat Pinsent writes:
We need to help children appreciate the fictional nature of literature, so that they don’t believe everything which is presented to them. They need to be aware that an author, with a full range of normal human prejudices, has written the book, that a publisher has decided it is economically worth publishing and a bookseller that it is worth selling. (1997, p. 142)

She also acknowledges that “there are very few totally ‘safe’ books” (p. 142), which means that it is impossible to shield children from all problematic content. Being a consumer of media while also being a feminist means being willing to criticise certain elements of the works that we otherwise enjoy.

As I have shown, modern texts are certainly better than most earlier collections of fairy tales in presenting strong and active female characters. However, these characters are usually privileged in many other ways, too. Most contemporary heroines are white, able-bodied, and conventionally attractive. They are also, predominantly, middle-class, though there are several working-class characters whose struggles are directly linked to their poverty. People of colour and disabled people rarely appear in the texts I have examined, and when they do, they are usually supporting characters, though there are some exceptions (namely Fabio from Monster Mission, Tanya from the “Thirteen” series, Dashti from The Book of a Thousand Days, and Abdullah from Castle in the Air). The existence of transgender and queer people is not even acknowledged. While it is rewarding to see so many strong female characters, the texts would be even more inclusive and empowering if they featured more diverse heroines. For white, able-bodied, cisgender girls see themselves represented in stories every day, but girls of colour, disabled girls, and transgender girls have far fewer positive representations, particularly if they happen to belong to more than one marginalised group.

Fantasy literature has the potential to be truly radical as it has the freedom to present worlds that are not bound by the power structures that operate in the real world. Rather than being circumscribed by these prejudices, then, fantasy authors could create visions of society that are truly diverse, including the experiences of those who are normally invisible. My thesis has demonstrated that this potential is currently not being realised. That is why I have argued for a more inclusive, intersectional approach which, in turn, should result in a more progressive and inclusive literature. Current approaches that focus on only one
issue at a time will continually fail to see many of the intricacies of patriarchal power structures and how they intersect, affecting all areas of life. It is on this basis that I have championed this more nuanced approach, which I consider a valuable contribution to knowledge in the way that it allows the children’s literature critic to engage more holistically, productively, and often adversarially with the subject matter; in this case, with contemporary children’s fantasy literature.

The goal of intersectional feminism is to dismantle oppressive power structures and create a society that upholds the rights of all women, men, and non-binary people. This requires cooperation between the different minority groups, making them see that, collectively, they constitute a majority. Therefore, the texts that I have praised the most in this thesis are the ones that develop themes of friendship and solidarity, particularly between girls. As Stephanie Hodgson-Wright states: “One of the crucial features in feminist activity is that women come together as women in order to provide mutual support against patriarchal oppression” (2001, p. 12). Similarly, Audre Lorde writes: “For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered. It is this real connection which is so feared by the patriarchal world” (1984, p. 111). Friendship and solidarity have always been regarded as core elements of mainstream feminism, but discourses of difference have tended to erode that solidarity, and thus feminist spaces are not always open to women of colour or working-class women or transgender women. Of course, solidarity is not the same as similarity. There is no single unifying experience of womanhood, so differences between women should be celebrated rather than ignored.

Intersectionality, as a discourse of difference, is needed to challenge the “essentialism” of patriarchy, which flourishes by promoting hierarchies and asserting fixed identities. The greatest challenge to its power structure is to unite across the divides. Potentially, fantasy literature would seem the obvious vehicle for proffering alternative futures because it can rewrite existing antagonisms. Thus, rather than antagonising one another and upholding racist, ableist, homophobic, or transphobic power structures, women should work together to celebrate womanhood in all its myriad forms and create a world in which girls and, indeed, boys can grow up in safety and have their choices respected. This is the kind of world that I want to see represented in feminist
fiction, including fiction aimed at children.
Bibliography

Primary Texts


**Secondary Texts**


