

MORE THAN ESCAPISM: ENVIRONMENTALISM AND FEMINISM  
IN THE YOUNG ADULT FANTASY NOVELS  
OF TAMORA PIERCE

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## **Abstract**

Fantasy literature is often dismissed as inferior work, whose primary purpose is to provide an escapist text for its readers. The purpose of this project is twofold: to show that fantasy actively engages social issues and to investigate how this engagement occurs, using the texts of young adult fantasy writer Tamora Pierce. Pierce's works demonstrate how conventions of fantasy can be used and broken in order to create new perspectives on modern concerns.

My study begins with an examination of fantasy literature and research, with emphases on J. R. R. Tolkien and Tzvetan Todorov. From there, I move on to discuss at length the three social issues most prevalent in Pierce's work: environmentalism, feminism, and didacticism. In terms of environmentalism, animals are elevated above modern status, alien species create analogies to human affairs, and magic becomes a metaphor for responsible management and understanding of natural forces. Pierce's treatment of feminism, through the portrayals of young female protagonists, has been challenged by critics for perpetuating the male-dominated system. However, a detailed study demonstrates a variety of different reactions and approaches to feminism that cannot be dismissed so easily. Both the environmentalism and the feminism in these novels suggest a desire on Pierce's part to impart a didactic message to her young adult audience. While this message may not always be one that Pierce appears to intend, her nuanced approach to the often oversimplified fantasy binary of good and evil creates a worldview more compatible to that of her readers. Through Pierce and her work, fantasy is more than just escape- it fosters revitalization and reconsideration of the modern world.

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## Chapter One: Fantasy

Fantasy is often placed, even by those who purport to study it, at odds with reality. The modern world is serious and unpleasant, and fantasy represents an escape from the boring and mundane. The problem with this view of fantasy is that it reduces the value of fantasy literature; any fantasy work can be dismissed as “just pretend” and “not real,” and thus ignored. A careful study of fantasy literature, however, reveals a deliberate and constant attempt to engage real world issues and offer new perspectives by placing those issues in unfamiliar contexts. Tamora Pierce, a long-time writer of young adult fantasy stories, heavily features issues of environmentalism and feminism in her work, and, in doing so, creates didactic lessons for her audience to take away from her fantasy literature. Pierce’s involvement in modern social issues reflects not only a clear intent to engage readers with real world issues, but also reflects the multitude of ideas and approaches that fantasy literature can provide.

Any serious scholarly study of fantasy runs immediately into the same hurdle: what is fantasy? The question is surprisingly difficult to answer. There are works looming large in popular culture that jump immediately to mind as fantasies, such as J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* and J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter*. Both feature the most basic definition of fantasy, that it involves a transgression of the rules of the real world in order to inspire wonder in the reader—transgressions commonly known as magic. But in many cases this definition is not sufficient. Does the term fantasy extend to works that turn out to be dreams? Technically, since the fantastic events in dreams did not really happen, they did not transgress any real world rules. At the same time, adopting this stance would mean that Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* is not a fantasy at all. Excluding such works from the fantasy canon seems a step in the wrong definitional direction. Does fantasy include myth like *The Odyssey* and animal fables like Kipling’s and Aesop’s? And what of the works that are on the fringe? Woolf’s gender-swapping *Orlando* and Kafka’s species-swapping work *The Metamorphosis* both involve clear impossibilities, but labelling them as fantasies and lumping them together with such

things as *Dungeons and Dragons* seems to be a mistake. There is also the hotly debated question of how the genre of science fiction relates to fantasy, and what to do with the overlap. In George Lucas' *Star Wars*, for example, the futuristic setting is undeniable. But even with the explanation that the Force is generated by microscopic midi-chlorians, the line between the Jedi's powers and magic is very thin. Definitions of fantasy are not simple and tend to err in the extremes; either the definition is too wide and envelops virtually the entire body of literature, or it is too narrow, and excludes works that clearly seem to embody something of fantasy, even if they do not fit the terms at hand. Either way, the result is a terminology too cumbersome for use. To derive a definition of fantasy best suited for current purposes, we need to peruse the definitions created by the various scholars in the field, and extract what is necessary.

The start of modern fantasy and its scholarship is generally traced back to fantasy writer J. R. R. Tolkien and the scholar Tzvetan Todorov. Both writers approach a definition of fantasy, but reach radically different conclusions. Todorov defines the fantastic as "the hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (*The Fantastic* 25). He goes on to clarify this definition, adding that this hesitation is experienced primarily by the reader, though it can also be experienced by a character, and that the fantastic requires rejecting poetic or allegorical interpretations of the text (33). A text is purely fantastic only if the nature of the supernatural event is never resolved; if the supernatural event is revealed to have a natural origin, the work has slid into the uncanny, and if it is accepted that the event has no explanation except the supernatural, the work belongs in the realm of the marvellous. From this definition, it seems that, for Todorov, the fantastic and fantasy are actually two different things. This interpretation is furthered by Todorov's question in the last chapter, "why does the literature of the fantastic no longer exist?" (166). For his purposes, the fantastic was a reaction to nineteenth-century conditions, a reaction that has been replaced by psychoanalysis in the modern world. What is now commonly called fantasy is actually what he refers to as the marvellous.

Todorov's examination of the marvellous is not as detailed as his study of the fantastic, but he still makes several points that are worth considering for fantasy at large. He divides the marvellous into four categories: the hyperbolic marvellous, in which

events are marvellous chiefly because they are ordinary things swelled to impossible proportions, such as giants; the exotic marvellous, in which supernatural events are presented as ordinary by virtue of occurring in a far-off realm where such violations are allowed; the instrumental marvellous, in which we see modern gadgets treated as magical when they appear in earlier eras; and the scientific marvellous in which the supernatural is explained using scientific laws that are not yet recognized (54-56). These categories mark some of the earliest scholarly attempts to schematise modern fantasy, and also illustrate the difficulty with such endeavours. There is both overlap between the categories, and some exclusion; within the marvellous, a land of giants would be both exotic and hyperbolic marvellous, and both the instrumental and scientific marvellous seem to bridge the gap between the marvellous and the uncanny while skipping the fantastic altogether. The other important issue of fantasy (or the marvellous) that Todorov notes derives from most works that feature supernatural events: “There exists a curious coincidence between the authors who cultivate the supernatural and those who, within their works, are especially concerned with the development of the action, or to put it another way, who seek above all to tell *stories*” (162-3). In other words, authors who rely heavily on fantasy tend to put plot development ahead of character development. Todorov attributes this association to the tendency of both the supernatural and narrative plot to involve transgressions against normal social order. In summary, then, we can take from Todorov an early classification of fantasy, and the observation that it is often plot-driven and involves a transgression against the rules of the real world.

The definition of the fantastic may not be the definition of fantasy, but the presence of hesitation on some level is a typical fantasy element. In the exotic marvellous, the category under which most modern fantasy would fall, supernatural events are supposed to be accepted as ordinary, but usually there is some character that expresses some sort of at least temporary disbelief, whether it is Alice’s surprise over seeing a fully-dressed rabbit, or Dorothy’s astonishment in meeting a talking scarecrow. Even in fantasy stories that take place entirely in a fantasy world and contain no characters from the “real” outside world, we find characters refusing to believe that the prophecy has come true, that a new form of magic exists, that the chimera before them is real. This disbelief may not be the same sort of hesitation that Todorov is referring to in

his fantastic, but a present and persistent fantasy element is the recognition that even in a world where the marvellous is accepted as the ordinary, some sort of impossible event is occurring.

As for J. R. R. Tolkien, his views on fantasy are more in line with modern conceptions. While Tolkien's greatest contribution to fantasy is undoubtedly his fictional work, his critical essays also shed some light on the topic of fantasy. His essay "On Fairy-Stories" is one of the earliest papers on modern fantasy, even though one of its chief contributions seems to be further demonstration of lexicographic difficulties. The fairy-story he refers to is not exactly fantasy, but what it is is somewhat elusive and Tolkien declines to explain it further: "The definition of a fairy-story ... [depends] upon the nature of *Faërie*: the Perilous Realm itself, and the air that blows in that country. I will not attempt to define that, nor describe it directly. It cannot be done" (114). He is, however, willing to say what the fairy-story is not, singling out *Gulliver's Travels*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and animal fables as works that are not fairy-stories at all. Instead, these works—as well as any dream stories and animal fables—belong with the fairy-tale as part of a larger grouping that he refers to as the "marvellous tale" (117), a terminology notably similar to that used by Todorov. Unfortunately, his marvellous is never explained in any detail, so a comparison with Todorov's version of the same is difficult at best. To further complicate the terminology problems, Tolkien does use the term fantasy, but for a different purpose than describing a body of literature. Instead, fantasy is that which embraces "both the Sub-creative Art in itself and a quality of strangeness and wonder in the Expression, derived from the Image"<sup>1</sup> (139). While this definition of fantasy moves towards Tolkien's laudable goal of elevating fantasy into an art form, it is also a definition too general for most purposes, as it potentially encompasses not only all literature, but all created works and art.

However, Tolkien still discusses useful aspects of the fairy-story that can be applied to define, or at least identify, common traits that it shares with fantasy. Addressing the common complaint that fantasy is escapist literature, Tolkien states that the fairy-story is indeed a means of escape, but that there is nothing wrong with escape in

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<sup>1</sup> Tolkien defines "Art" in this case as "the operative link between Imagination and the final result, Sub-creation" (139).

itself. He champions the fairy-story as a way of responding to the modern world, and criticises those who would confuse “the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter” (148). While few would deny that fantasy has an escapist element, this element is always balanced by fantasy’s connection to the real world. Even in Tolkien’s own work, many scholars see a link between the heroics of *Lord of the Rings* and modern events and Tolkien himself somewhat ominously states that “Escapism has another and even wickeder face: Reaction” (149).<sup>2</sup> Escapism does not prevent fantasy from addressing real world issues, and escape itself is a response to the real world.

Tolkien also raises two other elements that become crucial to most concepts of modern fantasy: the secondary world and the eucatastrophe. Tolkien’s secondary world is unfortunately another vaguely defined term; Tolkien uses it both to describe the realm of Faërie and to describe a world created by the writer of a fairy-tale, two places which may or may not overlap. Under the latter definition, the idea of the secondary world, a world explicitly distinct from the real, or, as Tolkien puts it, primary world, has become a critical element of fantasy works. While the lack of a secondary world does not imply a work is not fantasy, the presence of a secondary world is generally a certain sign that a work belongs in the category of fantasy. Equally important to fantasy at large is the concept of the eucatastrophe. By Tolkien’s definition, it is “the Consolation of the Happy Ending” (with his quick proviso that fairy-tales technically have no ending), and “it denies ... universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world” (153). Again, to state that *all* fantasy follows the eucatastrophe is a gross exaggeration, and in this case, it cannot even be said by any rational assessment that every work containing the eucatastrophe is a fantasy work. However, the eucatastrophe is a dominant force in fantasy literature; in nearly any fantasy story that comes to mind, there is an ultimate sense, even a certainty, that good will triumph over evil and that after the ending, everyone will live “happily ever after.” Both

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Christine Brooke-Rose, who states that “the realistic mechanisms [of *Lord of the Rings*] encourage the reader to project his megatextual habits onto the fictional megatext, which is in fact pretty close to mid twentieth-century history” and goes on to list the network of Allies, the air raids of Nazghuls, and the radio-communication of magic crystal balls as examples of such parallels (*A Rhetoric of the Unreal* 254).

coined by Tolkien, the concepts of the eucatastrophe and secondary world have become central ideas for fantasy literature.

Other scholars present various possibilities for further central ideas of fantasy, and a grocery list of these fantasy definitions quickly becomes both repetitive and contradictory. John Timmerman opts not for a general definition but a set of traits to define fantasy: “the use of traditional *Story*, the depiction of *Common Characters and Heroism*, the evocation of *Another World*, the employment of *Magic and the Supernatural*, the revelation of a *Struggle between Good and Evil*, and the tracing of a *Quest (Other Worlds 4)*. Sheila Egoff returns to basic principles and defines fantasy as “a story in which the sustaining pleasure is that created by the deliberate abrogation of any natural law, no matter how slight” (*Worlds Within 17*). Ann Swinfen briefly mentions the apparent problem with this definition, that “in a world governed by materialism and scientific rationalism, fantasy sets out to explore the immaterial and irrational,” but the paradox at the heart of fantasy is that, in order to “create an imaginative and imaginary world it is necessary to observe faithfully the rules of logic and inner consistency within that world” (*In Defence of Fantasy 2-3*). Kenneth J. Zahorski and Robert H. Boyer use Tolkien’s concepts to create a further distinction: low fantasy is fantasy that occurs in the “primary world,” whereas high fantasy takes place in an entirely invented secondary world (“The Secondary Worlds of High Fantasy” 56). Brian Atterbery states that “Any narrative which includes as a significant part of its make-up some violation of what the author clearly believes to be natural law—that is fantasy” (*The Fantasy Tradition in North America 2*), which places the definition of a work as fantasy in the hands of authorial intention rather than reader. Atterbery also challenges another long-held belief, declaring that “pure invention plays no greater role in fantasy than in any other form of literary art” (15), which is a clear break from a tradition that generally follows Tolkien’s statement that fantasy is a higher, if not the highest, form of art. In contrast, Flo Keyes follows the traditional eucatastrophic approach, stating that the element of hope, as the fundamental tension between the real and the ideal, is a defining part of fantasy (*The Literature of Hope in the Middle Ages and Today 20*). Colin Manlove defines fantasy as “A fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of the supernatural with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at

least partly on familiar terms” (*Modern Fantasy* 1), returning to Todorov’s definition of the supernatural event, but removing the qualification that hesitancy is sustained. Finally, Katheryn Hume defines fantasy not as a genre but as an impulse, and places it on equal level with (and to some degree, in opposition to) mimesis (*Fantasy and Mimesis*).

What can be summarized from this large list—other than the fact that even if fantasy literature is generic, its scholars are diverse and many? Over and over again, we see two things in the broad description of fantasy: first, that fantasy involves a deliberate violation of natural order, and second, that within the fantasy, some sort of consistent order must be observed, if only to mark how the fantasy later deviates from it. Fantasy literature can be loosely—very loosely—defined as any work that adheres to this set of rules yet includes a deliberate deviation, via the presence of some sort of supernatural event. Within this large body, the various definitions yield several traits that do not necessarily define a work as fantasy, but are often closely associated with fantasy.

One final definition of fantasy will clarify my own approach to fantasy literature. Though Todorov’s definitions may seem to veer into areas not related to fantasy at all, in his statement that the fantastic requires the sustained hesitation of the reader, he is identifying a key element that many of the other definitions ignore: the response of the reader. W. R. Irwin defines fantasy in two parts, first that it must present “the persuasive establishment and development of an impossibility, an arbitrary construct of the mind with all under the control of logic and rhetoric” and that “the writer and reader knowingly enter upon a conspiracy of intellectual subversiveness, that is, upon a game. Moreover, this game, led by the writer prompting participation by the reader, must be continuous and coherent” (*Game of the Impossible* 9). The first portion of the definition is the repeated formula of a balance between a deliberate transgression of the rules of the real world and some new set of rules that this transgression adheres to within the framework of the fantasy. The second portion articulates another idea, that fantasy involves, even requires, participation on the part of the reader, to respond to the work at hand knowing that it is a fantasy. This is a crucial difference to most definitions of fantasy, including many of those above, in that the latter are based more on theoretical frameworks with little to no attention towards the potential reader. However, in determining how fantasy engages social issues, it is necessary to pay careful attention to how writers use fantasy to

evoke particular responses from the reader. Using Irwin's definition as the starting point, the study of fantasy literature is in part a study of how the writer sets about creating the desired response from the reader.

Even by fantasy standards, Tamora Pierce is a fairly prolific and popular writer. To date, she has published over two dozen novels, and, according to her website, her works have been translated into Danish, Swedish, German, Hungarian and Japanese. For the purpose of this thesis, I choose to study Pierce's first four series rather than her entire body of work, and that choice is, in a sense, an arbitrary one. There is no intrinsic superiority to Pierce's earlier works (in fact, the later works show a slight sophistication in terms of writing style), and there is no burning issue addressed in the early material that is not present to some degree in the later ones. Rather, the first four series—which make a total of sixteen novels—have been chosen as a limiting point, as a way of being representative of her larger body of work without allowing the list to swell beyond a manageable set. While each series has its unique elements, a short description of each will show a basic commonality as well. Pierce's first series, *Song of the Lioness*, features the female protagonist Alanna, who spends the first two books of the series disguised as a boy in order to receive training as a knight in the Kingdom of Tortall and the last two solidifying her place as knight. The second series, chronologically, is *The Immortals*, which follows Daine, a young girl with the ability to speak with, command, and change into various animals. The plot of these four novels sees Tortall cope with an apparent invasion of immortal monsters while Daine comes to terms with her own identity and powers. The third series, and the only one of the four that takes place in a fantasy world other than Tortall, is *Circle of Magic*, which tells of four disparate children—three girls, Sandry, Tris, and Dajga, and one boy, Briar—coming to terms with their magical abilities at a school for magic, Winding Circle Temple. The plot of the series further distances the work from the other books, as *Circle of Magic* does not have an encompassing story, but is instead a close-knit set of adventures that portray the children banding together to face natural disasters and other threats. The series is characterized by an emphasis on magic as a craft, and responsible engagement with the environment. Finally, Pierce's fourth series is *Protector of the Small*. Set again in the Tortall fantasy world, the series follows another female protagonist, Kel, who trains as the first openly female candidate for

knighthood. The series examines Kel's role as protector, and contrasts it with the traditional fantasy notion of the hero. Even in these short descriptions, it should be evident that Pierce has much to say on the issues of environmentalism and feminism, and the fact that Pierce has much to say on social issues suggests that a didactic approach to the novels is appropriate.

After the run-through of definitions of fantasy, we can now mark the place of Pierce's works in the larger body of fantasy literature, on the basis of how well it conforms to these various traits and definitions of fantasy. Though it is outside the scope of this paper, a direct comparison between Pierce's work and other fantasy novels would reach the same result: Pierce's stories reside right in the normative center for fantasy literature. This residence is vitally important; by virtue of such position, they can be used as representations for a study of fantasy as a whole, and thus by answering whether Pierce's novels engage real-world issues, we can also reach an answer as to how fantasy is capable of approaching these issues. Even their deviations from regular fantasy works are important, as they demonstrate how the various conventions can be moulded to a desired goal.

Pierce's works amply satisfy many of the definitions listed above. Though clearly cleaving to the marvellous rather than the fantastic, an element of hesitation is present in the works. While the characters do not precisely doubt what they see is real, they are confronted with elements that they previously thought were impossible, whether it is the unique blending of the protagonists' magic in the *Circle* series, or Daine's encounters with the immortal races in her series. In turn, these supernatural transgressions serve, as Todorov noted, to advance the plot, although Pierce's works are noted for a level of characterization beyond the usual fantasy fare. Following the definition of Tolkien, her writings are also set entirely in Secondary Worlds, with the *Circle* series taking place in the Winding Temple and surrounding areas, and the others set in and around the kingdom of Tortall. Her series also involve a fantasy trait not found in the definitions above—they are all placed in a pseudo-medieval setting that allows Pierce to present Secondary Worlds that are at once familiar and unfamiliar to her reader.

Her works also rely heavily on eucatastrophic principles, that the reader is always aware that the protagonist represents some force of good, and that this good will

ultimately triumph. However, Pierce distinguishes herself from many writers in this area; while her works end in a eucatastrophe, she de-emphasizes the struggle between good and evil to the point where the novels are not so much the hero's journey, but the hero's personal development. It is also important to keep in mind that no matter how many of the minor fantasy traits Pierce breaks or adheres to, her works fulfill the broadest definition of fantasy as well: they transgress the rules of the real world in an attempt to inspire wonder in the reader. Throughout the paper, I will refer to Pierce's stories as young adult fantasy epics, not because they conform to any traditional definition of "epic," but to distinguish them as fantasy stories that follow a set of traits: a sense of hesitation, a focus on plots, a Secondary World with no reference to a Primary World, pseudo-medieval settings, and a concluding eucatastrophic element. Finally, following Irwin's definition, in Pierce's writing lies a game in which Pierce attempts to use a fantasy world to encourage her readers to engage with real world social issues. But who are these readers?

Pierce's work is not just fantasy, but specifically *young adult* fantasy, which means they are written for a young adult audience. For scholars working in the area, defining "young adult" has proven to be at least as problematic as defining "fantasy." In the essay "Judging a Book By Its Cover," Cat Yampell traces the young adult genre (genre being her term for it) back to the 1967 mass paperback edition of S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, and acknowledges the problematic nature of the term "young adult": "Defining and promoting the genre was, and continues to be, plagued by four major problems: audience, 'acceptable' subject matter, location in stores, and marketing and publicity" (350). "Young adult literature," then, becomes any sort of literature that is addressed to the age group that falls between child and adult and that attempts to address these four factors in some manner. In this context, the simplest definition of young adult fantasy is that it is a subcategory of both fantasy and young adult literature, the place where these bodies of works overlap. While the latter two factors Yampell highlights—location and marketing—have more influence on the text of a book than is generally acknowledged, for immediate purposes, the important factors in terms of Pierce's fantasies and the way they address social issues are audience and subject matter.

My choice to study Pierce's works—and more specifically, her first four fantasy series—arises out of recognition of Pierce's place in the wider body of young adult fantasy literature. While her work is a typical representation of fantasy as a whole, it is also distinctive enough to warrant investigation in its own right. Defining Pierce's audience is, in part, a reflection of her importance in the area of young adult literature. Her first fantasy book, *Alanna: The First Adventure*, was originally published in 1983 and the final book in her fourth series, *Lady Knight*, was first published in 2002, and she is still writing now, in 2008. In other words, her career spans three decades of written work, and her audience consists of adults who passed the “young adult” mark years ago and young adults who are discovering her works for the first time. Part of Pierce's appeal to both groups derives from her engagement with the social issues that fantasy is so often decried for “escaping,” an engagement that draws on the conventions and roots of the fantasy genre while at the same time builds on and replaces them where necessary. This social engagement, and its particular focus on environmentalism, feminism, and didactic principle, is what I propose to investigate.

Literature has always been concerned with the issue of Nature (in both its capitalized and uncapitalized form) and fantasy's connection with the environment can be traced back into antiquity. From Achilles' battle with the river god Scamander to Harry Potter being warned to stay out of the woods surrounding Hogwarts, fantasy has used the presence of magic and the supernatural to bring attention to the relationship between humanity and the environment. However, the literary criticism, or, as it is commonly called, ecocriticism, regarding this area of literature is still quite young. In *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Harold Fromm traces the origins of ecocriticism as formal discipline of literary study to William Rueckert's 1978 essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” (ix-x), but he also acknowledges that the general popularity of the ecocriticism rose more gradually with the increasing environmental awareness of the 1990s. Given this relative youth, it should come as no surprise that ecocriticism's application to fantasy is even further undeveloped, with the large majority of the work

done focusing on Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.<sup>3</sup> There is much room for further ecocritical studies in the area of young adult fantasy literature.

In terms of Pierce's work, there are many different forms such studies could take. A typical focus for fantasy is a close connection with animals, and Pierce is no exception to this rule. Each of her protagonists is accompanied by at least one or two animals, usually familiar creatures such as a horse or dog; Daine is followed by an entire menagerie of cats, dogs, horses, meercats, wolves, and even an infant dragon. With animals, the main issue is a matter of control and dominance. Fantasy allows the traditional roles of man and beast to be inverted; the wolf pack sees Daine as equal, and both Daine and Alanna receive guidance from animal deities. At the same time, animal names are used throughout the books in a derogatory manner, and the animals are constantly affected and endangered by human choices that are out of their control. The conventions of the fantasy epic allow a writer to literally give voice to animals and issues of animal treatment.

Fantasy also allows the inclusion of species that do not exist in the real world. These creatures can be superior to humans, as elves in fantasy are often portrayed; they can be direct analogues to humans, such as the typical dwarf; or they can be monstrously subhuman, such as ogres or things like centaurs that are made from human/animal hybrids. These fantasy races often serve as a commentary on human traits; elves, for example, are typically depicted as forest dwellers that are superior to humans in mind and body, implying that a close relationship to nature is preferable to the luxuries of modern civilization. In Pierce's writing, fantasy races often emphasize the link between humans and animals, in creatures such as dragons, centaurs, and minotaurs. The chief fantasy race in her novels, the half-human, half-bird Stormwing, plays a predominant role in her *Immortal* series, and to a lesser extent, in the *Protector* series. In this case, the Stormwings do not represent a single environmental motif, but several: they serve as

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, as a demonstration of the relative youth of the area and the dominance of studies of Tolkien, the University of Saskatchewan's holdings has exactly 9 entries under the subject of ecocriticism, the oldest of which was published in 1996. Of these nine, two are copies of Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans' *Ents, Elves, And Eriador : The Environmental Vision Of J.R.R. Tolkien*; in other words, 22% of the library's collection on ecocriticism is on Tolkien's work.

stand-ins for nuclear proliferation, the modern-day Frankenstein myth, and the general concept of coming to accept parts of nature that humans find uncomfortable.

Finally, the use of magic in fantasy literature is often depicted as an embrace of natural forces. This concept is somewhat contradictory, as the magic itself is invariably a violation of the natural laws of the real, primary world. In Pierce's writing, magic is often viewed by many characters as unnatural, while at the same time, those who actually wield the magical forces believe that they are harnessing natural forces. Pierce follows the fantasy convention that magic that blurs the distinction between life and death—necromancy—is invariably evil, as it is only practiced by the antagonists or darker characters of her novels. But despite cleaving to this convention, Pierce avoids depicting other magic as wholly good; Daine is deeply troubled by her ability to command animals to their deaths and Kel fears both Daine and Daine's wizard friend Numair for their unearthly abilities—while at the same time, she rationalizes utilizing their powers to defend her people. Through her depiction of magic, Pierce puts forth a number of different models for responsible use and understanding of natural forces.

In comparison to fantasy and ecocriticism, the study of fantasy and feminism is more established, although often not to fantasy's benefit. The pseudo-medieval aspect of the fantasy epic places it firmly in an era in which women's rights were nonexistent. The typical female in an early fantasy epic is either a passive damsel in distress who awaits rescue from a male figure, or a scheming villainess who serves as the antagonist of the story. In modern fantasy, and especially in young adult fantasy, these depictions are becoming increasingly rare as positive female role models frequent the books of writers such as Anne McCaffrey, Patricia Briggs, and, of course, Tamora Pierce. However, these new models face their own set of critics, such as those who see the female protagonists as merely gender-swapped versions of the male figures. Jane Tolmie, in her essay "Medievalism and the Fantasy Heroine," goes a step further and points out that even if a fantasy novel depicts a woman struggling against a dominating patriarchy, establishing that patriarchy in the first place requires its perpetuation.

Pierce is clearly interested in the roles of women in fantasy literature, as most of her works feature female protagonists struggling against the patriarchal system of Tortall. The most overt struggles involve her protagonists Kel and Alanna. In Alanna's case,

Pierce depicts a girl trying to work outside the male-dominated system to fulfill her dream of becoming a knight. Alanna disguises her gender and self by pretending to be “Alan,” and in that role, finds acceptance. Most of the scholarly work done on Pierce’s writing focuses on the scene in which Alanna’s gender is exposed during a duel with the evil duke Roger. The scene exemplifies much of Pierce’s approach to feminism in the series, and the problematic aspects of her approach. Alanna is forced to reveal her identity because of the attack of an outside male rather than by her own choice. The revelation occurs in a room full of primarily males during the male-dominated activity of a duel. The only important figures in the room who are not already aware of her identity at the time of this revelation are the king and Duke Roger, both symbols of the antagonist patriarchal system. That Alanna’s friends and mentor embrace her identity in defiance of the patriarchy is clearly a positive reaffirmation of Alanna, but because the revelation was not her choice, she cannot entirely be accepted as a proactive role model for young women.

While this revelation is the climax of the second novel, *In the Hand of the Goddess*, it occurs relatively early in the larger scheme of the series, and does not represent a final conclusion on the issue of feminism. Throughout the series, Pierce shows that Alanna is not just defying the patriarchal system, but trying to come to terms with her own femininity. Her first period is marked by her own embarrassment and disgust, and starts the slow process of accepting herself as woman, rather than as a pseudo-man. While it would be grossly misconstruing the series to say that Alanna defines herself in terms of the males in her life, her rejection of two lovers—the first who felt she was not feminine enough, and the second who felt she was too feminine—demonstrates how her understanding of what it means to be a woman has evolved. In the *Lioness* series, Alanna’s magic is generally depicted as healing magic, and represents her feminine side. While she originally rejects the notion that she needs to develop this power, by the end of the series, she is comfortable using both the sword-play she learned from male mentors and the magic that derives from her nature and being.

The other protagonist that is heavily involved with issues of gender is Kel in the *Protector of the Small* series. The chief difference between Kel and Alanna is that while Alanna disguises herself to fit into the patriarchal system, Kel is the first female to train

openly as a knight. In this series, the system is no longer represented by the king (who by this point is actually the first lover from Alanna's series, and fairly progressive for a pseudo-medieval monarch wielding absolute power) but by the chief trainer, Lord Wyldon. Lord Wyldon's opinion of Kel goes through dramatic transformations through the course of the series, and, given his own status as the personification of the patriarchal system, shows how the system itself can evolve and change. Wyldon initially views Kel, and all women, as weaker than men; in an intermediary stage, he admits that Kel would be a fine warrior, if only she were a boy; finally, by the fourth novel, *Lady Knight*, he recognizes Kel's full worth and places her above the other knights in recognition of her unique ability and skill. In contrast to the *Lioness* series which displayed a single woman creating her own individual niche within a patriarchal system, *Protector* shows how the system itself can come to change.

It would be unfair to claim that Pierce's works have an overt agenda in terms of environmentalism or feminism (if for no other reason of the negative connotations of the word "agenda"). In general, even those who decry the "escapist" label of fantasy, such as Tolkien, would attack the notion that fantasy is didactic, that it attempts to impose a set of moral values on its readers, mainly due to the negative connotations of the word "didactic"—even though by doing so, these individuals are ignoring the implications of the traditional "good versus evil" battle at the end of most fantasy series. However, it is generally accepted that young adult novels *do* and should serve a didactic purpose, and illustrate moral values and systems for their readers to follow.<sup>4</sup> In fact, as I will demonstrate, some young adult fantasy writers like Brian Jacques believe that presenting moral values is part of their duty as writers. In Pierce's novels, this didactic element can generally be broken down into two categories: those that are implied by the inclusion of various fantasy motifs and tropes, and those that are contained in elements deliberately introduced by Pierce, often as elaboration or variation on those same fantasy tropes.

While perhaps not a traditional trope in fantasy at large, the school has become a staple in young adult fantasy, appearing in works like Ursula Le Guin's *A Wizard of*

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<sup>4</sup> Or, in the opinion of some, completely *fail* to illustrate a proper moral system; hence the condemnation of books like the *Harry Potter* series or Philip Pullman's *Golden Compass* on the basis that the novels are anti-Christian. See Linda Harvey's "Harry Potter and anti-Christian bigotry" for an example of this approach.

*Earthsea*, *Wizard's Hall* by Jane Yolen, and, of course, the *Harry Potter* series. The school element provides an immediate anchor of familiarity in the fantasy world, presenting something with which the teenage audience can instantly recognize. It also presents a model of behavior and appropriate conduct. In Pierce's writing, the school portions are represented by the magical training in the *Circle of Magic* series and the knight training in the Tortall books. The Tortall books highlight the schoolyard experience, whereas the *Circle* books depict a different model entirely, favoring a one-on-one mentorship program over the systematic classroom. Throughout her work, Pierce also shows her protagonists facing problems outside of class that they solve after deliberately rejecting adult intervention. While the message that the children can overcome their problems by banding together is positive, less positive is the implied message that authority figures are unable or unwilling to help with the students' problems.

Violence is an almost unavoidable aspect of fantasy literature. Violence in a young adult book, fantasy or not, becomes problematic. While excessive violence in Pierce's novel is almost always assigned to villainous characters and violence is rarely instigated by the protagonists, the point remains that both Kel and Alanna—and, by proxy at least, Daine and the *Circle* children—solve their problems by fighting and killing those responsible for them. Under what conditions, if any, is violence acceptable? At what point does the violence become gratuitous, or self-perpetuating? According to Pierce herself, the violence in her books is justified by both the books' roots in pseudo-medieval and the existence of real world violence. The didactic lesson, then, is that it is necessary to recognize and address violence in the real world as well.

If we accept that the fantasy epic is marked by the presence of hope, then the most important part of the fantasy novel is the triumph of good over evil. However, even this aspect of fantasy has been subject to criticism. While teaching readers that good ultimately triumphs over evil may be fulfilling the didactic purpose of creating a positive world view, it also arguably creates a distorted world view. In the real world, good may not triumph over evil, and even creating the division of good and evil is often a vast oversimplification. In her depiction of good and evil, Pierce again distinguishes herself from many mainstream fantasy writers, as each of her series depicts a different

interpretation of this binary. In *Lioness*, we see a fairly straightforward good versus evil battle, in which Alanna represents goodness and the cunning and slick Duke Roger represents evil. At the same time, it is clear that Roger is not some abstract personification of evil, but a man driven by jealousy and ambition. In *The Immortals*, Pierce presents the idea that good and evil are not so straightforward, with the villainous Stormwings eventually becoming Daine's allies and the morally ambiguous Orzorne eventually turning into her greatest foe. In *Circle of Magic*, there is no ultimate evil at all—the enemies that the children face are almost entirely natural disasters precipitated by human mismanagement. And in the *Protector* series, the role of the hero is called into question as Kel must constantly choose between the roles of the solitary hero and the considerate leader.

By defining fantasy as a transgression of reality, by setting it in opposition to literary categories like realism and literary features like mimesis, fantasy scholars were attempting to show its significance and elevate its place in the broader literary canon. In the process, a false dichotomy has been created. Fantasy is not the opposite of reality; just as reality requires imagination to describe it in literature and art, fantasy requires the grounding of reality in order to make its transgressions evident. Though Pierce is occasionally derided for being a conventional fantasy writer, the conventions of fantasy she does follow, as well as those she twists and outright breaks, amply demonstrate how fantasy can be used to create real world significance.

## Chapter Two: Environmentalism and Fantasy

At first blush, ecocriticism and fantasy literature may seem as if they belong on opposite sides of a spectrum. Environmental awareness is an issue rooted in the modern, physical world and fantasy, using the most basic definition, invokes a deliberate departure into an imaginary world. However, if both are followed back through their literary predecessors, it can be quickly shown that fantasy and ecocriticism share common roots. Fantasy has evident links in the pastoral and the utopia, in that both commonly involve a departure from what is accepted as realistic. Ecocriticism can be found in the pastoral and utopia as well. Most utopias involve at least some sort of understanding between man and the natural environment, and the link between the pastoral and nature is indisputable. Fantasy and ecocriticism are bound together by roots as deep as they are green.

Moving to modern times, the link between fantasy and ecocriticism still stands. A large part of this connection stems from the pseudo-medieval settings of most contemporary fantasies. Given that the story usually unfolds in a pre-industrial society, a closer relationship with nature is necessitated. But beyond this convention, there is a connection between the fantasy and ecocriticism that reaches deeper into the heart of what makes a fantasy. In his book *Ecosublime*, Lee Rozelle defines ecosublimity as:

the awe and terror that occurs when literary figures experience the infinite complexity and contingency of place. This aesthetic moment prompts responsible engagements with natural spaces, and it recalls crucial links between human subject and nonhuman world. (1)

I would build on this definition, so that a moment of the ecosublime occurs when literary figures “experience the infinite complexity and contingency of place” and of *object*, when the figure has encountered a creature or some other object that inspires awe and terror and prompts responsible engagement. By this definition, fantasy can easily and legitimately be viewed as the ecosublime, as it inspires in its characters both awe—such as the awe created when the Fellowship first reaches the forest home of the elves, Lothlórien, in

Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings*—and terror—such as the terror provoked by the monstrous Trollocs and Myrddraal of Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series. Used properly, the interaction between fantasy characters and these places and creatures can stimulate the readers' own engagement with the natural environment.

But what exactly is meant by the word “natural?” Or, more to the point, what does Pierce mean by using the word “natural?” “Nature” in Pierce's novel is usually used in one of three ways: a substitute for “cultural norm,” in which case it is generally made clear that cultural norm is a matter of perspective; a shorthand way of describing objects and creatures that are minimally involved with humans; or some sort of fundamental aspect that cannot be altered. For example, when other pages protest Kel's presence because it is unnatural for women to be warriors, they are using natural as a substitute for what is normal in their culture. The animal companions that follow the various protagonists are more “natural” than they are by virtue of being nonhuman. And when the Great Mother Goddess states that Alanna's “own nature”( *In the Hand of the Goddess* 10) will not allow her to keep her sex secret forever, she is referring to some fundamental part of Alanna's character, rather than a preconceived notion of Alanna that changes depending on perspective. These versions of nature are by no means entirely exclusive, and Pierce herself is inconsistent in the way she applies them to various situations.

Two further examples will illustrate the complexity in interpreting alternating versions of nature in fantasy. In *Lionness Rampant*, an innkeeper makes the “Sign against Evil” upon realizing that the cat Faithful has purple eyes (7). This response is based on the cultural natural, specifically, the belief that a cat with abnormal eye coloring must be evil. The reader at this point knows that Faithful is not evil, and so the innkeeper is incorrect, but the reader also knows he is right, because Faithful is an intermediary between Alanna and the Great Mother Goddess, which makes Faithful not natural in the sense that he is not an ordinary cat—and yet, in his fundamental nature, he is a cat. That Faithful can be interpreted as unnatural and natural by the reader creates an apprehension about what nature truly is. In *Wolf-speaker*, Daine believes that her influence has made the wolf pack more “unwolflike” and wonders “Where would it end?”, concluding that she “had to think of a way to protect them, or to change them back to normal beasts, before humans decided that the Long Lake Pack was too unusual—too dangerous—to

live” (60). The wolves become less natural, in that they are more humanlike, which in turn contributes to them moving from their fundamental nature, and against the culturally accepted norm imposed by humans of how a wolf should behave. Pierce can pick and choose among the versions of nature, blending them or opposing them as necessary to draw attention to humans’ relation with nature. In blurring the lines between the three version, she is helped by the nature (fundamental nature?) of fantasy itself, in that asks its readers to accept the secondary world it proposes as the natural world, while still acknowledging that the transgressions are unnatural in their own world.<sup>5</sup>

For the most part, Pierce’s work on environmentalism is not meant to portray a radical departure from fantasy ecocriticism, but to be representative of the genre. Ecocriticism in fantasy often touches on three main areas: a heightened bond between the protagonist and various animals, fantasy species that exist in an area between human and animal, and the use of magic to both control and unite with nature. These areas also involve the ecosublime, as characters come to a new realization of their relationship with the environment due to the creatures they encounter, or the magical forces they bear witness to. Pierce engages in all three of these activities in her works, and often uses a variety of different approaches to produce the maximum effect.

The most evident connection to animals in Pierce’s novels is the constant stream of animal allusions found throughout all of her works, especially the later ones. These references are often derogatory. When Alanna is ordered to obey an older boy’s every command, she responds “I’d as soon kiss a pig” (*Alanna* 35). In an argument between Sandry and Tris, one or the other is described in a short section as being mulish, laughing as harshly as a crow, and acting like a snapping turtle (*Sandry’s Book* 76-77). Kel’s shy maid “creeps about like a mouse” (*Page* 57), Kel’s servant Tobe’s clothes are in such a state that she “wouldn’t let a cat have kittens on them” (*Lady Knight* 40) and her friend Neal describes the stubbornness of others by saying “You can smack some people in the face with a haddock and they’ll still call it a mouse if a mouse is what they want to see” (*First Test* 183). The animal appears most often is the pig; a crude way of referring to a

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<sup>5</sup> It should be also noted that Pierce is hardly the only one guilty in being inconsistent about which version of nature she is using; throughout the rest of the chapter, I will be using the terms “natural” and “nature” in a variety of different ways, and generally will not be clarifying which exact version of nature I am referring to unless I feel that the particular usage would benefit from clarification.

weapon is to call it a “pigsticker” and those guilty of gluttonous or unkind behavior are hogs and swine. Though they are fewer in number, there are also positive and neutral references. Alanna earns the nickname “lioness” for her skill in battle, and the God of Dreams is compared to a cat, because he always leaves without saying good-bye (*Realms of the Gods* 74-75).

Most of the animal references—aside perhaps from the haddock reference—would not seem out of place in a modern context. The issue here is not so much content as sheer volume. By constantly bombarding the reader with comparisons between animals and people, Pierce presents an image of a society that is closer to nature, closer to the nonhuman world. By doing so, she suggests that true closeness derives less from a scientific understanding of the natural environment than from actually encountering and experiencing these creatures in our day to day lives. At the same time, Pierce is not just saying that our awareness of animals in the real world is bad and, in her fantasy world, it is good. Nearly all the comparisons between animals and people are made by one character regarding another character, rather than by some omniscient narrator, and the animal references are almost universally negative. These details point to levels in two hierarchies, one between human and animals, and another perceived one between different species of animals. To refer to another human being as an animal degrades the human, but some animals are better than others. Alanna’s nickname of lioness is an honor to her, whereas Kel looks down on her mousy maid for her lack of spirit. Through the contrast between the fantasy world and our own, Pierce draws the reader’s attention towards his or her own associations with animals.

Associations with animals also play a role within the typical fantasy dichotomy of good and evil. Every one of Pierce’s protagonists is accompanied by animal companions. Kel is accompanied by a flock of sparrows and a dog named Jump. The Circle of Magic children have a dog named Little Bear and a kestrel named Shriek, while Alanna has a parade of horses and a cat named Faithful. And Daine, of course, is followed around by an entire menagerie of birds, ponies, wolves, dogs, and others throughout her books. The association between animals and morally ‘good’ characters extends beyond the immediate protagonists. The hostler Stefan is shown throughout the Tortall books to be a good and loyal man, and his first introduction is as someone “more comfortable with

horses than with people” (*Alanna* 69). In a later volume, Lord Wyldon befriends Kel’s Jump, one of the earliest signs that he is not as close-minded as he seems. Put simply, the good guys are the ones who like animals.

The opposite also holds true; antagonistic characters are invariably bad with, or actually cruel to, animals, in all of Pierce’s works. As a mild example, the stuffy and ill-liked Crane in the *Circle of Magic* series clearly states, “I hate dogs” (*Briar’s Book* 55) as he tries to evade Little Bear’s enthusiasm. More seriously, in the novel *In the Hand of the Goddess*, Faithful hisses whenever he comes into contact with the treacherous Duke Roger, whose deeds in the novel include deliberately laming a horse and controlling starving wolves, both done in order to lash out at his human enemies. At the extreme end of such behavior, a spidren, a monstrous combination of man and spider, blatantly demonstrates its evil through animal abuse as it attempts to eat its way through a sack full of kittens (*First Test* 16). The exception to this rule of the monstrous is Emperor Orzorne in *Emperor Mage*, whose concern for his birds is extreme and genuine. However, Pierce puts this concern into his character largely to contrast his paranoia and arrogance, a comparison made clear when other characters comment on the incongruity: “He can lose a battalion of soldiers in the Yamani Isles and never twitch, but the gods help us if one of his precious birds is off its feed” (*Emperor Mage* 4) and “Those birds are his only weakness” (8). Even though Orzorne’s concern for his birds is his chief redeeming feature, other characters see him as weak and flawed for the degree of his concern.

Fantasy is a genre often noted (and derided) for its clear dichotomy between good and evil. Pierce constantly reinforces her equation of good and evil with the treatment of animals. Those that help animals are good, and those that hurt animals are bad. In part, Pierce is merely drawing on a long history of animal myths and fables wherein similar associations occur. However, Pierce demonstrates at least some awareness that association with animals is not so cut-and-dried. Characters such as Wyldon and Orzorne can have an affinity for animals and still be deeply flawed, and a character like Crane can have an antipathy for animals and still be an acceptable ally. But while some grey area is allowed to the grey characters, the overall association stands. A fantasy hero, according to Pierce, must maintain a close affinity with animals.

Names often crop up as controlling forces in fantasy works, in stories from *Rumpelstiltskin* to Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* series, where they form the basis for magical exchanges. In Pierce's work, names are rarely assigned direct magical power, but she uses them in a manner that highlights issues of control and choice. As a preliminary example, Pierce's character from the *Magic Circle* series, Briar, demonstrates how names can be altered to fit new notions of self. Originally, Briar was a thief living on the streets and went by the name "Roach." Other child thieves went by similar names: Weevil, Alleycat, Viper, Slug, and Turtle (*Sandry's Book* 10). These were not the names they chose for themselves, but names chosen for them by a man known as the Thief-Lord. All the names are animal-oriented, but the animals are either associated with viciousness, like the viper, or considered inferior, like the roach and the slug—no hawks or lionesses here. Considering that the names were forced on them by another, they mark an attempt to denigrate the children by reducing them to the status of "mere" animals, while elevating the Thief-Lord for having this power of naming over them.

The circumstances of Briar's original name are immediately contrasted with the event of his new naming. Just prior to starting his new life at the Winding Circle Temple, Briar is granted the chance to give himself a new name, and the comments of the wizard Niklaren make explicit what is at stake: "You can pick a name, one that's yours alone. You can choose how you will be seen from now on" (13). Given this choice, Briar selects the new name Briar Moss. That Briar is allowed to choose his own name foreshadows the new degree of freedom that will come with his new life; that he chooses a name intimately connected with the natural environment highlights Pierce's own environmental concerns. Even at this early stage in the series, Pierce is delivering a clear signal: Roach, admittedly, is a name that still possesses a close association with nature, but it is also a name that represents nature as opposed, reduced, and reviled, a status that is forced on Briar and is associated with Briar's original conditions in an urban slum, whereas the plant imagery represented by the name Briar Moss is to be associated with improvement and growth.

The *Circle of Magic* series contains other examples connecting names with environmental concerns. To signify the full mastery of their magical talents, mages at the Winding Circle Temple choose a new last name that reflects their abilities. In itself, this

choice suggests a connection between the mastery of magic and the understanding of one's identity in fantasy literature, an idea that will be explored more fully with Alanna in the next chapter. More significant to the present issue, nearly all of the mages choose names that feature a close relationship to the environment. A short list of names includes Rosethorn, Gorse, Lark, Crane, Frostpine and Moonstream. In some cases, the names serve as a marker for the type of magic a person practices, with Moonstream being water mage, and Rosethorn a plant mage. The names also reflect the personality of the individual, using "nature" in the sense of a fundamental aspect; Frostpine is named for the perseverance he shows in difficult conditions, and the "thorn" in Rosethorn suggests her difficult disposition. Significantly, the only wizard who chooses a name that can be interpreted as adversarial to the natural environment is Yarrun Firetamer, who appears in *Daja's Book*. Rather than suggesting a harmony with nature, "Firetamer" suggests that nature, in the form of fire, is something to be controlled and mastered, which is Yarrun's own philosophy. Yarrun's attitude towards nature is by no means presented as the correct one. His actions with regards to fire lead directly to his own death and the near destruction of several communities and forests. By tying an awareness of nature to the mages, the characters in the *Circle of Magic* who represent wisdom and learning, Pierce is using names to endorse a nonconfrontational approach to nature in general.

The *Circle of Magic* series is hardly the only one in which Pierce makes a connection between environmental awareness and names. Throughout all her works, Pierce engages in the activity of naming animals. In the real world, naming animals often comes down to an act of ownership. In a fantasy, animals are allowed more autonomy, which reflects differences in the animal-human relationship. In *Wolf-speaker*, Daine comes into contact with three different species that demonstrate different concepts of naming. When Daine comes across a wolfhound, it proudly gives its name as "Prettyfoot" and when she laughs, it insists, "It is the name the man gave me ... It is a good name" (238). Similarly, a tomcat explains to her that he was "named by men Blueness" (254), and another cat explains that Blueness received the name after he fell into a vat of blue food dye as a kitten. The wolves Daine encounters, on the other hand, name themselves: Short Snout, Battle, Sharp Nose, Frolic, Frostfur, and Longwind (12-13). The exceptions to this naming are three wolf pups, which are deemed "too silly to

have names” (43). There is a contrast between the two types of names. The domesticated animals are clearly given names that they would not have chosen for themselves. Prettyfoot realises there is cause to be defensive over her name, and Blueness regards the circumstances of his naming as an affront to his dignity and refuses to explain it to others. In contrast, the wolves name each other, based either on accomplishments, such as Longwind and Battle, or on distinctive physical traits. That the wolves aren’t given a name until they reach an age of maturity strengthens the connection between naming and identity. Through these characters, Pierce shows how the act of naming animals can be an imposition humans place on them.

Elsewhere in the *Immortals* series, the conflict between human and animal naming becomes more apparent, if never quite becoming an issue on the forefront. In *Wild Magic*, Daine is made the caretaker of a young dragon that she is told is named Skysong (361). However, by the next book, *Wolf-Speaker*, she has taken to calling the dragon by a different name: “This is Skysong ... That’s the name her mother gave her, anyway. Mostly we just call her Kitten” (11). In a similar manner, Daine takes it upon herself to name the wolves that are deemed “too silly for names”, naming one of them literally “Silly” (44). While Pierce doesn’t seem to put any particular significance on Daine’s renaming, it speaks volumes about the way Pierce is portraying relationships between humans and animals. In both cases, Daine replaces or creates a name for an animal that, while affectionate, also has a slightly degrading quality. Given her abilities, Daine is by far the most empathetic human when it comes to animals, yet even she cannot resist interfering and imposing her view of the animals onto them rather than accepting their own view. Since much of Daine’s story, in both *The Immortals* and in *Protector of the Small*, revolves around Daine’s fears that she is changing the animals around her beyond their natural state, her well-intentioned interference in altering the animals’ chosen names becomes part of an overall pattern of human intrusion into the animal world. Pierce uses naming both to emphasize a connection to the natural world—as in the *Circle of Magic*—and to emphasize a disconnection, as in *The Immortals*.

One of the most common elements in fantasy literature is the use of imaginary races which do not exist in the real world. These species can range from entirely beastlike, to a partial mix between human and animal, to a direct analogue of humans,

like the common fantasy races of dwarves and elves. Most of these races also demonstrate a connection between ecocriticism and fantasy. The connection for animal and animal-human hybrids is obvious, but there often exists a connection between the direct analogues as well. Elves, for example, are portrayed as far wiser and far closer to natural environment than their human counterparts, in works such as *Lord of the Rings* and Christopher Paolini's *Inheritance* trilogy. Dwarves present more of a paradox. Their association with the earth shows a closer relationship to the natural environment than humans, but at the same time, their oft-depicted greed for gold and metals demonstrates a crass materialism. Pierce, for her part, eschews both elves and dwarves in her fantasy novels, but maintains the tradition of using fantasy races to explore figurative ideas.

Of all Pierce's fantasy species, the Stormwings best exemplify how imaginary creatures can serve as a wide variety of metaphoric devices. On their first appearance, Pierce immediately casts the Stormwings in an antagonistic light:

Shrieks, metallic and shrill, tore the air. Eight giant things—they looked like birds at first—chased the hawk out of the cover of the trees. Immense wings beat the air that reached the women and ponies, filling their noses with a stink so foul it made Daine retch. The ponies screamed in panic ... These were *monsters*. No animal combined a human head and chest with a bird's legs and wings. Sunlight bounded off talons and feathers that shone like steel. (*Wild Magic* 32)

At this point in the novel, several fantastic elements have been introduced, including Daine's affinity for animals, the Trader Onua's protective magic, and the badger figure that appears in Daine's dreams. However, the presence of the Stormwings marks the first fantastic element that is introduced specifically as an intrusion, as opposed to an acceptable element of the fantasy world the characters inhabit. Immediately, they are presented as an unnatural force, in all three versions of the word natural, striking fear in the hearts of the ordinary animals that observe them. Beyond their identification as monsters for combining animal and human body parts in one form, their unnatural state is further emphasized by repeated references to their "metallic" shrieks and "steel" feathers, as in the passage above. Pierce states on her website that this "unnaturalness" was intended: "I ... wanted my Stormwings to be clearly unnatural and therefore frightening, which is where the steel feathers and claws came in".

Besides their scouting actions to support various other villains, the chief function of the Stormwings is that they can sense violence before it happens and they are drawn to battlefields, where they desecrate the corpses of the fallen. In *The Realms of the Gods*, the fourth book in the *Immortals* series, the origin of this behaviour is explained, solidifying the links between several different social issues present in Pierce's texts. The creation of the alien Stormwings turns out to be a human endeavour:

Ages ago, a traveler in the mortal realms went from place to place and found only the leavings of war ... That traveler sickened of waste—of death. She wished for a creature that was so repulsive, living on war's aftermath, that even *humans* would think twice before battle. That creature would defile what mortal killers left, so that humans couldn't lie about how glorious a soldier's death is. *She* dreamed the first Stormwing. (218-219)

The only defining characteristic of the human who created the Stormwings is that she is a woman, thus becoming another one of the well-meaning female protagonists of Pierce's novels. Since the presence of the Stormwings failed to make much difference to the actual amount of fighting, the creation becomes another example of a female with good intentions who is standing up against the male-dominated society and its wars.

Additionally, the emphasis on dreaming up fantasy creatures allows the unnamed female to be interpreted as a proxy for Pierce herself, since in the act of writing, she performs a similar ritual of dreaming. On those terms, the passage is a comment on the use of fantasy, with the readers cast as the humans Pierce wants to "think twice before battle."

The passage also draws comparisons with other modern concerns, namely the still-prevalent Frankenstein myth and nuclear proliferation. The concept behind the Stormwings' origins, that their presence would make war too horrible to fight and would serve as a deterrent to other violence, was—and is—the same sort of argument that the supporters of the nuclear arm race use<sup>6</sup>. The failure of the Stormwings' presence in preventing war shows Pierce's own commentary on a modern situation. By similar means, the Stormwings can be viewed as a variation on the Frankenstein myth, not so much because they represent someone scientifically tampering with the laws of nature

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<sup>6</sup> This argument can be traced to French general Pierre M. Gallois in the 1960s and continues through to modern proponents such as John Mearsheimer and Kenneth Waltz. Waltz states: "In a conventional world, deterrent threats are ineffective because damage threatened is distant, limited, and problematic. Nuclear weapons make military miscalculation difficult and politically pertinent prediction easy" (*The Spread of Nuclear Weapons* 17).

(though this version of the myth is explored at greater length in the *Circle of Magic* books) but as creations that turn on the creators who refuse to acknowledge their responsibility for their creations. As nuclear weapons or Frankenstein's monsters, the Stormwings represent the same basic principle: Pierce uses them to demonstrate how humans have an effect on their environment, and have a responsibility for the changes they create.

In the *Immortals* series, the Stormwings represent the intrusion made by the immortals into the natural environment of Daine's world, both in terms of the nonhuman aspect of nature and in terms of what is culturally accepted as normal. Initially, Daine loathes the Stormwings for their unnatural state, naming them monsters again and again, but by the end of the series, her position has changed considerably, as shown in two key passages. First, Daine comes to a realisation concerning her own animal allies:

She did not like raids on nests for eggs and nestlings, but her squirrel, crow, and snake friends did just that ... The sight of living prey fighting a hyena's devouring jaws or of a killer whale beating a seal pup to death might reduce her to tears, but those predators could not help their natures any more than Uusoae [the goddess representing Chaos], or the Great Gods, could. (*Realms of the Gods* 320)

This realisation informs her argument against the gods, that the Stormwings should be permitted to remain in the mortal realms: "[Stormwings] are what they were made to be. If you punish them for that, you may as well punish yourselves for what you are" (321). Putting aside the thorny issue of biological determinism, whether the Stormwings, as neither humans nor animals, have the free will to act against their nature, Daine's speech on the Stormwings' behalf shows her growing awareness of the environment around her. Just as she acknowledges that her animal friends possess negative traits—thus moving away from the tendency to idealize the nonhuman version of nature—she accepts the actions of the Stormwings as part of their nature, and thus accepts the Stormwings themselves as a part of nature, in all three versions of the word. The intrusion that began the series was not an intrusion at all, but a slow movement towards restoration and greater harmony. In the *Immortals* series, the Stormwings ultimately represent accepting what seems alien as a part of one's environment and a part of nature.

But in her next Tortall series, Pierce assigns the Stormwings a different metaphorical purpose. Again, they are quickly set up in an antagonistic role, as they are

compared to vultures in their first appearance, with their human parts described as “naked,” “hairless,” and “grimy.” And again, the most important part of their appearance is to emphasize a violation in the proper course of things, in this case, that the Stormwings have been spotted for the first time on castle grounds (*Lady Knight* 4). Whereas the *Immortals* series drew upon a growing realisation that the Stormwings were to be accepted, in the *Protector* series, they are entirely symbols of the negative aspects of war. *Lady Knight*’s primary conflict is Kel’s choice between protector and hero. The Stormwings’ place in this choice becomes evident when one of them speaks to Kel after her fort has been stormed: “I said we were sorry. If only you were not stingy, perhaps we might have held off” (242). The Stormwings become another facet of the uncontrollable nature of war. By implying that Kel’s attempts to minimize the damage made the later levels of destruction worse, the Stormwings push Kel towards taking desperate measures to end the war entirely. Thus, in the *Protector* series, the Stormwings fulfill their original role above all others, showing those that see them the full extent of the horrors of war. In either series, Pierce’s use of the Stormwings demonstrates how a created fantasy race can be used as a parallel for modern violations of the natural order.

Even more than imaginary races, the most commonly shared element of fantasy is the presence of magic. Magic in fantasy is generally presented in one of two ways: either it works entirely with the forces of nature (in the nonhuman sense), or it works directly against it. Since magic can be at least loosely defined as anything that violates the causality of the normal world, it would automatically seem to be unnatural. However, anyone trying to declare magic as unnatural in a fantasy runs directly into the problem of the secondary world. Readers can accept inconsistencies with the rules of the real world in a fantasy story as long as the inconsistencies are *not* inconsistent in the constructed imaginary world. In other words, magic is acceptable if—and, according to some theorists, only if—it conforms to the natural laws as established by the boundaries of that fantasy world. Thus, the reader is faced with two contradictory yet inescapable versions of magic, at once both natural and unnatural.

Pierce is aware of these two sorts of magic in her writing. In fact, her first novel raises both interpretations of magic immediately. Both Alanna and her arms teacher, Coram, are made “nervous” and “afraid” in the presence of magic (*Alanna* 5, 17). They

both feel the use of magic is, at best, a form of cheating, a violation of the natural order of things. An honest knight, to them, is one who has no need for magic. The wise woman Maude puts forth a different view:

Have you thought of the lives you'll take when you go off performing those great deeds? ... I didn't think so. But there's lives taken and families without fathers and sorrow. Think before you fight ... And if you want to pay for those lives you take, use your healing magic. Use it all you can, or you won't cleanse your soul of death for centuries. (10-11)

To Maude, fighting is analogous to acting in an environmentally-unfriendly manner in the real world; in both cases, it is a matter of people acting without concern for the larger effect of their actions. Magic is the other side of the coin, a healing force that can be used to put things back into balance. In this case, magic's unnatural aspect arises out of cultural conceptions, and becomes natural again when it is acknowledged as a fundamental part of Alanna's character.

Some types of magic are not only unnatural in terms of cultural viewpoints, but unnatural in terms of fundamental nature of the magic as well. Most commonly, unnatural magic is the purview of the villain characters, while the heroes embrace magic as a part of natural order. This association certainly seems to hold for Pierce's portrayal of necromantic magic. Necromancy is very evidently a disruption of natural order in that it trespasses against the divide between life and death. In Pierce's books, it plays a central part of the plot in three instances. First, the villain of the *Lioness* series, Roger, is brought back to life after he is slain by Alanna in *In the Hand of the Goddess*. The man on the street's opinion on this rising is made clear: "Ain't *natural* for a man t'live twice" (*Lioness Rampant* 208, emphasis mine). The man responsible for the resurrection, Alanna's brother Thom, accidentally binds his own life-force to Roger, who proceeds to drain it from him. Thom's hubris in believing that possessing the power to raise the dead gives him the right to do so leads directly to his own demise. In *Emperor Mage*, Daine gains a new ability, to resurrect long dead animals in the form of prehistoric dinosaur bones and tiger-skin rugs. While this ability is not the first strange magic Daine exhibits in the series, it is the first time she claims she should not have the ability at all: "I can't be going about waking up dead creatures. I'm no god!" (*Emperor Mage* 259). Daine's statement that raising the dead is a divine power goes a step further in delineating the characteristics of magic in Pierce's *Tortall* series. Whether magic is natural or not

depends in part on the application and the person applying it. Within certain boundaries, magic is natural, but once it is outside of those boundaries, it is natural only if wielded by the sanctioned individual—the power to overrule death belongs in the hands of the gods<sup>7</sup>. This argument has clear parallels to the real world debates in some of the more controversial applications of science that include the oft-repeated maxim that man was not meant to play God.

The third instance of necromancy comes into full play in *Lady Knight*, but it is set up in the earlier novel *Squire*. In that book, Kel is introduced to a new monster in great detail:

The long, black, curved shape that served as a head swivelled back and forth on the dull metal body without exposing a neck. The eyes were set deep in the metal, if those dark pits were eyes. The limbs seemed formed of large metal-coated bones—giants' bones?—and fine metal chains and rods that acted like muscles. Pulleys served as joints. There were three joints in each limb between the splays of knife-tipped digits on its feet and hands and the limb's connection to the body. That gave the thing two extra elbows and two extra knees. Its slender tail coiled and whipped, snakelike; it was tipped with a ball of spikes.  
(354)

The creature here eventually becomes known as a “killing device,” a name wrought with significance. First, the term “killing” marks a deliberate departure from the usual fantasy euphemisms; it is not a “life-stealer” or a “soul taker,” it is a killing device. Second, calling it a device implies that it has no control of its own, and that someone else controls it from afar. We see Kel's hesitation in believing what she sees through her question—giants' bones?—and her qualifying statement, *if* those dark pits were eyes. The scene forms a contrast with Daine's first interaction with the Stormwings, both of which are intrusions, but unlike the Stormwings, the intrusion is not one fantasy world into another, but the real world intruding on a fantasy. The killing device is presented with a mixture of organic and mechanical descriptions just as the Stormwings, but the animal imagery is overwhelmed by the technological descriptions of metal chains and pulleys. Though the devices seem to be mechanical, they are powered by a form of necromancy that uses the

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<sup>7</sup> While Pierce's books present only a negative view on resurrection magic, other fantasy works do not. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, for example, the lion Aslan is resurrected. In most cases, this type of necromantic magic is justified as an analogy to the resurrection of Christ. And since the resurrection was brought about by fantasy-equivalent of the power of God, it is again in the realm of acceptable magic.

souls of young children as fuel. The killing devices are by far the most unambiguously evil element in Pierce's works, prompting the generating terror required for the ecosublime. On the surface, this may not seem to be the case, since this encounter is more technological than ecological. However, Kel's frequent encounters with killing machines fulfill other ecosublime qualifications: it inspires terror, it links human and nonhuman, and, most importantly for Pierce, it prompts responsible engagement with the world outside the self. That the greatest instance of unnatural magic corresponds to the intrusion of our industrialized world into Pierce's fantasy demands a re-evaluation on our own technological efforts, especially in creating our own killing devices.

While the killing devices cement a fairly clear cut association between this unnatural magic and evil, the link between the magic practiced by good characters and natural magic is more tenuous. Ecologically speaking, one of the most interesting forms of magic is the type utilized by King Jonathan, the ruler of Tortall. Jonathan draws his magic directly from his realm, in part from a device known as the Dominion Jewel. The strength of the land is reflected directly in Jonathan, and vice versa. That the king's health should tie directly to the health of the kingdom is hardly a new concept, but fantasies allow the luxury of exploring the connection literally, which opens new venues in an ecological sense. On the one hand, the relationship emphasizes the interconnectedness between man and nature. On the other hand, it could be argued that the view inflates man's role, and still assigns man a role of dominance—after all, the controlling artefact is called the *Dominion Jewel*. Upon closer examination, magic that appears natural can actually be moving against a harmonious relationship with the natural environment.

Similar incongruities arise in Pierce's later works, especially in *Lady Knight*. As in the *Immortals* series, Daine and Numair perform various acts of magic, but now the magic is viewed through Kel's narrative lens. In the defence of the refugee stronghold Haven, Numair magically manipulates the physical environment around him. He makes the land "[rise] up, like an inchworm crawls" (84) to give the people of Haven more space to build and he makes boulders follow him "like chicks" (144) to help with the fortifications. Rather than admiring him, the people of Haven fear him almost more than the enemy. Kel tries to placate them, pointing out that Numair is acting in their interests,

but she is met with the response that mages “save their scariest tricks for when they want to help” (142). In a similar vein, Daine uses her abilities to raise the intelligence of all the animals in Haven so they can scout and guard the fort. In this instance, even Kel fears the process:

Not a feather rustled, not a cat scratched, not a dog yawned. There was something taking place that made the hair stand on the back of Kel’s neck ... She beat a fast retreat. Scanrans and killing devices she could face, but this was something different, something she didn’t understand. (151)

Unlike Alanna, Kel never entirely embraces the notion of magic as natural. In part, this difference reflects the difference in narrative focus; in Alanna’s case, coming to terms with her magic was part of coming to terms with her sexuality. For Kel, the unnatural aspect of magic needs to be heightened in order to emphasize her own quest to become a protector, by defeating the unnatural magic of Blayce, creator of the killing devices. But in viewing the difference in terms of ecocritical awareness rather than narrative purpose, a different picture is presented. Divorcing the issue temporarily from the associations with good and evil, magic is unnatural to those who do not understand it, and accepted as part of a natural cycle by those who do. Taking magic as a metaphor for the aspects of the environment, Pierce is promoting an approach to the environment that emphasizes understanding and awareness to combat the idea that it is separate, or an ‘unnatural’ part of human experience. However, since Kel herself never completely accepts this view, and given the association of unnatural magic with evil, the final ecological interpretation of magic in the *Protector* series is left ambiguous.

In the *Circle of Magic* series, Pierce presents more complicated versions of magic, in that we are now facing three different, yet overlapping, views: magic as a natural force that derives from the natural environment, magic as learned knowledge, and magic as a trade profession. Natural magic is presented in the series as an inborn affinity with some aspect of magic. Briar’s affinity is with plants, Tris’ with the weather, Daja’s with metals, and Sandry’s with weaving. Significantly, out of the four, only Sandry has a talent that does not interface directly with nature—although a connection is made, with nature often being compared to a weave in the way separate strands come together to

form a greater whole<sup>8</sup>. Additionally, their magic is often presented not only in terms of control, but as a form of communication and personification. Sandry dismisses wool when she no longer wants it (*Sandry's Book* 128). Daja's mentor Frostpine finds gold to be "an agreeable metal, but it takes suggestions a bit too well" (*Daja's Book* 29). Briar not only talks to his plants, but they talk back and possess their own opinions and knowledge; when his *shakkan* tree shows new leaves, Briar's mentor, Rosethorn chides it rather than him: "You know better... you know very well you can't keep most of those" (160). The relationship between the humans and the environment is presented as a negotiation; natural magic is a partnership with magical forces to shape the natural world in ways that are beneficial to all.

Learned magic is put into opposition to natural magic, as something not exactly negative, but something that is comparatively lacking. There are two main products of learned magic in the series, the work of Yurren Firetamer and the greenhouse of Dedicate Crane. Taught to emphasize immediate results over all else, Yurren represses every fire that erupts in Gold Ridge. As a result, natural fires never occur, and the pressure builds until he dies trying to smother a blaze beyond his control—a blaze that is then partially restrained by the efforts of the natural-inclined mages. Crane constructs a magical greenhouse where he forces plants to grow out of season, resulting in poor quality, sickly plants, all because he puts more energy into the theory of raising plants than into the actual practice. A critique of modern teaching as much as anything else, the learned magic Pierce describes speaks to an apprehension about modern environmental approaches that are based heavily on science yet are still too short-sighted to take into consideration long-term effects.

Pierce makes it clear that the similarity between magic and trade skills in the *Circle of Magic* series is deliberate. She speaks on the subject in the Afterword to *Sandry's Book*, explaining how an artist jeweller broadened her horizons. Pierce then put her insight to good use: "Offered the chance to ... create a new magical universe, I decided to get serious about crafts and their power, both real and imagined" (253). As

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<sup>8</sup> Additionally, it should be noted that animals such as insects and birds also engage in weaving; though Pierce never makes a direct comparison between "natural" weaving and the weaving magic Sandry practices, the connection between the natural world and craft is still present.

such, Pierce introduces the notion that magic is not just a bond with the natural environment, but a commodity and product of art that can be manufactured. Arguably, this interpretation could be said to divorce magic from any consideration of the environment at all, and subvert it entirely into a form of crass commercialization—thus eliminating both the connection to the environment and the connection to the sublime, reducing the fantasy aspect to something mundane and common. However, the parallel between commerce and the environment is demonstrated when one character explains why the duke cannot save the region of Gold Ridge by throwing money at the problem—any loan he gives them will take away from the support he is planning to give other regions, and with failing crops (caused in part by Yarrun’s smothering of fires) and depleted mines, the people of the region would not be able to repay the loan anyway (*Daja’s Book*, 87). Their mismanagement of natural resources has led to their current economic failure. Ultimately, the problems are solved by a recalculation of values and a strengthening of natural connections: the end of Yarrun’s misuse of magic, Briar and Rosethorn’s reinforcement of the crops, and Daja’s discovery of untapped mineral deposits. The problem arises, as Pierce presents it, not when magic and the environment are treated as commodities, but when they are undervalued and mismanaged. Again, the message is that humanity’s role with the environment around it can be beneficial to both if proper understanding is applied.

That fantasy is so intimately connected to ecocriticism is perhaps less surprising than the sheer number of different alternatives available to address the issue. Pierce takes typical fantasy fodder, such as closer relationships with animals, mythical races, and magic, and applies them to a wide variety of environmental issues, from animal rights to nuclear proliferation to commercial exploitation. In examining these issues in such a manner, Pierce is not doing anything particularly revolutionary in the area of fantasy; rather than trying to cram environmentalism into fantasy, Pierce is working with the traditions and conventions well established in the genre. In the next chapter, we will see how Pierce approaches feminism, and whether her concerted effort in this case to go beyond the typical fantasy fare has produced untypical results.

### Chapter Three: Feminism and Fantasy

Like fantasy and ecocriticism, feminism and the fantasy epic are another set of terms that seem to go poorly together. In the case of ecocriticism, it was because fantasy often explicitly divorces itself from the modern environment. However, as far as feminist concerns go, there is nothing in fantasy itself that precludes these issues. Rather, the problem is with the commonly-assigned roots that the fantasy epic often draws on. The typical fantasy epic is steeped in the trappings of the pseudo-medieval, and the medieval is generally regarded as an era oppressive to women. However, many authors working in this area use the oppressive setting to their narrative advantage. While medieval gender roles may be common in the fantasy epic, another common element is the strong female figure, battling (often literally) for her equal rights. The fantasy epic writer thus uses a misogynist setting to champion feminist viewpoints.

But this portrayal is not without its own controversies. In his 1987 book *Wizardry and Wild Romance*, fantasy writer and scholar Michael Moorcock criticizes the worst excesses he sees in some female fantasy writers: “There’s still a disappointing amount of simple role reversal, of strong paternal background figures ‘helping’ the heroine in her adventures, of leggy teenagers getting enthusiastic about being able to ride a lot of horses” (94). Moorcock’s comments are, in part, exaggerations borne of his own frustration with the female-based fantasy writers flooding the market, and marking a departure from his own writing preferences. Furthermore, there is nothing inherent in horse-back riding, male mentors, or role reversal that precludes their presence in “serious” fantasy literature. However, Moorcock does present a legitimate complaint in the case where the female-oriented fantasy epic, as he describes it, amounts to little more than the old male version, with some token changes for the gender of its lead. Rather than examine gender roles, such works use their female characters almost as a gimmick.

As a result, the best message such versions of femininity can hope for is that women are capable of imitating the roles of men.

More recently, Jane Tolmie published an article examining the feminist/fantasis't dependence on the original misogynist system. In particular, she comments on the transition from silent female characters in the actual medieval stories to the outspoken modern equivalent:

This transition does not, however, result in a radical new approach to the delineation of the female hero in contemporary fantasy fiction. The emphasis remains on the individual woman rising above a system that keeps her down – triumphing over it, reversing expectations – rather than in cultural revolution or innovation, and oppressive structures continue to provide the basis for representation. The expectations must still be there in order to be reversed (“Medievalism and the Fantasy Heroine” 147).

Tolmie develops this idea further, stating that these expectations are exactly what readers are looking for. Rather than turning to fantasy for a new approach or understanding of feminism, readers prefer to vicariously experience the triumph of the individual character, over and over again. The publishing industry behind fantasy literature perpetuates this system, as do the author and reader by participating in it. Though this interpretation of the fantasy publishing industry warrants serious investigation, it is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, I will limit my investigation to Tolmie's comments regarding the repetitive cycle she sees in feminist-directed fantasy literature, and whether Pierce is guilty of perpetuating such a cycle.

While Moorcock's complaints are more about originality in female writers than the state of feminism in the fantasy epic, in my opinion, Tolmie is concerned with something more fundamental. Even if the fantasy writers avoid making heroines that are just gender-swapped males, they still fail to engage the revolutionary sort of feminism that Tolmie is looking for in fantasy. Instead, in order to confront misogynist viewpoints, those viewpoints must first be established and enforced. Additionally, if the emphasis is on individual change over revolution, these works are sending a rather negative message to their young adult audience: you can change inequality in your own life, but large-scale change against an unequal system is impossible. The outspoken fantasy heroine bent on changing an unfair system is really intractably dependent on the very system she is allegedly fighting against.

In this context, Pierce's place in the issues surrounding fantasy and feminism is problematic. Certainly, Pierce's works are most often viewed as feminist reading, sometimes to the point where this interpretation overshadows any other kind of analysis. But if Pierce does indeed fail to transcend the criticisms Tolmie and Moorcock direct at female fantasy writers, then that failure would come in her earliest work, the *Song of the Lioness* series. In terms of originality, the series succumbs to most of Moorcock's perceived errors. Alanna is guided by a series of older male mentors, from her manservant Coram to her adopted father, Sir Myles. The prevalence of male mentors combined with an exclusion of female mentors in an allegedly feminist work becomes troubling because it suggests a layer of patriarchy that the characters seem unaware of. To address Moorcock's other complaints, Alanna does quite a lot of riding on horses, starting with her pony Chubby and moving up to her eventual warhorse Moonlight and given that the original impetus of the series is a girl taking her brother's place in training for a knight, the role-reversal aspect is also at the forefront. From the surface level of evidence, *Song of the Lioness* is less a feminist work than a work that has taken on the trappings of the works written before it—at least, it is by Moorcock's somewhat questionable standards.

The first measure of how an author wishes his or her work to be interpreted comes from the choice in title. In this case, even the series' title suggests an act of role-reversal. For *Song of the Lioness*, Pierce's choice of the word "song" suggests an epic story in the sense of a ballad, placing it next to the oral tradition of the epic, which typically features male protagonists performing extreme acts of heroism. At the same time, "lioness" brings forth associations with female strength. The titles of the individual books follow in a similar manner. *Alanna: the First Adventure* associates the female lead with an epic encounter—and implies more adventures to come. *In the Hand of the Goddess* creates, with the word "goddess," further implications of female power, as does the fourth book in the series, *Lioness Rampant*. In the third book, the role reversal is at its most prominent: *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man* is a title both for the book and for Alanna, given to her by a community of nomadic desert people. The archaic-sounding title harks back to the epic tradition while still defying it by placing a woman in the traditionally male role. But while Pierce's choice in titles clearly reflects her stance in the tradition she is

working in, they do not significantly go beyond what Moorcock contemptuously refers to as “simple role reversal.”

However, other details in the tetralogy ensure that it provides an innovative approach to its genre. First, Pierce focuses on aspects of the female experience that go beyond mere role reversal. The chapter entitled “Womanhood” begins immediately with Alanna experiencing her first menstruation:

It was the fifth of May. Alanna awoke at dawn, ready for another session with Coram’s big sword. She got out of bed—and gasped in horror to find her things and sheets smeared with blood. She washed herself in a panic and bundled the sheets down the privy. What was going on? She was bleeding, and she *had* to see a healer, but who? She couldn’t trust the palace healers. They were men and the bleeding came from a secret place between her legs. Hunting frantically, she found some bandage and used it to stop the red flow. Her hands shook. Her whole body was icy with fear. The servants would be coming to wake the pages soon. She had to do something in a hurry! (*Alanna: The First Adventure* 168)

Menstruation is rarely an area for discussion in the young adult fantasy, even in works that focus on teenagers. Pierce’s willingness to explore this issue distinguishes her as a writer interested in more than “leggy teenagers getting enthusiastic about being able to ride a lot of horses.” The passage, and the rest of the chapter, are worth analyzing at length to fully investigate Pierce’s approach to gender issues. It begins with a very specific reference to the date, indicating that an event worthy of note is about to take place. The chapter’s other emphasis on time is Alanna’s age; her first menstruation has come at the age of twelve. While a young age for menstruation may be unusual for the medieval times the novel is set in, it is potentially more concurrent with Pierce’s female readership, making Alanna more relatable to her audience.

At this point in the story, Alanna has become immersed in the culture and habits of a young page, and as such, has completely entrusted herself into the hands of her older male teachers. This chapter emphasizes the limitations of the patriarchal viewpoint, as, under their care, Alanna lacks sufficient knowledge to understand what is happening to her and instead reacts with “horror,” “panic,” and “fear” to the natural development of her own body. The negative reactions continue when Alanna brings her “problem” to a retired female healer, and finds herself “red with embarrassment” and “too ashamed to speak” (173). At the same time, the healer who explains the menstrual cycles to Alanna emphasizes how natural it is, leaving the reader with little doubt that the problem is not

the menstruation but Alanna's reaction to it. While her involvement with the patriarchy of the pseudo-medieval society has given her access to certain areas not available to women, Alanna has also cut herself off from other sources of knowledge. At the same time, by going to a female healer in this instance, Alanna has taken the first step in recognizing the limitations of patriarchal knowledge.

Alanna's reluctance to visit a male healer raises another issue of gender especially significant in the *Song of the Lioness* series: the association between magic and femininity. Much of the early books in the series revolve around Alanna's distaste for what she perceives as "girly" in herself. When she complains about the difficulty in her training, Coram manipulates uses this view to manipulate her. He agrees that they can leave but mentions off-handedly that he "didn't think [he] was bringin' up another soft noble lady" and deliberately refers to her as his "Mistress" (*Alanna* 55)—which is, of course, enough to drive Alanna back to work. Viewing masculinity and femininity as opposites, she is often more concerned about her womanly traits than those around her.

Alanna exhibits a similar attitude towards her magic. Though magic is often associated with nature in Pierce's work, in *Song of the Lioness*, magic—especially healing magic—is also represented as a source of female power. In her initial refusal to accept the life in the convent her father sets out for her, Alanna is at the same time refusing to receive magical training. During a plague, the male healers fail to help those infected, whereas Alanna is able to directly channel the goddess and heal her friend. Early in *Alanna*, Maude states that Alanna's healing magic allows her to create a balance with those she will kill as a knight. Similarly, when Alanna comes to accept her own female side, it creates a balance with the masculine roles she emulates.

The other innovative aspect in *Song of the Lioness* is its frank depiction of sexual relationships, another topic rarely addressed in young adult fantasy, especially in the 1980s when the books were first published (although it is more common in young adult literature at large). The first reference to this issue comes on the heels of Alanna's visit to the female healer, who gives her a charm to prevent her from becoming pregnant. Again, Pierce is arguably creating an anachronism in her pseudo-medieval world by introducing contraceptives as an element that is common-place in this society, in order to

make ties with her modern audience<sup>9</sup>. At the very least, she is creating an unrealistic view of the reliability of such contraceptives, since the charm is always effective without any chance of failure. Its use in the novels is slightly ambiguous in terms of the gender issues it puts forth. Approached in a positive light, it gives women control over their own bodies, and allows them to choose whether or not they wish to conceive, obviously a very important principle in modern feminism. At the same time, by presenting the charm as a gift from one woman to another in the wake of an important moment in female development, Pierce removes the charm from the masculine realm entirely. Inadvertently, she is handing all sexual responsibility over to the female. Equally important, by equating contraceptives with magical charms, Pierce is putting forth a potentially unrealistic view of modern contraceptives.

Fortunately, the depiction of sexual relations in the series is less ambiguous for a modern audience. Throughout the course of the series, Alanna takes three sexual partners: Jonathan, crown prince of Tortall; George, the King of the Thieves; and Liam, the Shang Dragon. In each relationship, Pierce uses the pseudo-medieval, patriarchal nature of her fantasy setting to her advantage. Jonathan, as crown prince, is deeply entrenched in the norms of his society; Alanna's relationship with him becomes strained when he pressures her into marrying him and falls apart entirely when he declares "they [the typical women in the palace] know how to *act* like women!" (*The Woman Who Rides Like a Man* 203). George, as a person who lives on the fringes of that society, also makes no attempt to hide his desire to marry Alanna, but refuses to press her on the issue. Liam comes from a different society entirely where women are treated equally—as long as they act the same as the men. On one occasion, he comments at length on Alanna's dress: "I suppose you'll want earbobs next, and bracelets, and other frippery. What comes next, then? A noble-born husband and court intrigues?" (*Lioness Rampant* 135). The stress in their relationship comes not from Alanna's desire to pursue goals perceived as masculine

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<sup>9</sup> I say it *arguably* creating an anachronism because some researchers believe that oral contraceptives were common in the medieval period; see John M. Riddle's "Contraception and Early Abortion in the Middle Ages" for such a discussion. In particular, his statement that knowledge of contraception would have been a "woman's secret" (261) matches the way Pierce portrays it. At any rate, the charm Pierce introduces is a device that is worn rather than anything ingested, which suggests a connection to more modern contraceptives like the diaphragm.

but in her attempts to assert her femininity. Through the three different suitors, Pierce shows different masculine concepts of the female and division within patriarchy.

However, the uniqueness comes not from the diversity of Alanna's suitors, but from the variety of sexual partners that the heroine has no intention of marrying. By granting her main character these relationships without any negative consequences, Pierce puts forth the message that it is perfectly acceptable and even desirable for a young woman to engage in premarital sex, as long as it is done in response to mutual desire and respect, and entered responsibly. This message is hardly revolutionary for the original publishing of the series in the 1980s, but it is fairly unique to the young adult fantasy genre, which generally sweeps the entire issue of sexual activity off to one side.

At the end of *In the Hand of the Goddess*, Alanna's disguise is revealed when the series' villain Duke Roger slices open her shirt during a duel. The duel stops long enough for Thom to explain the situation and the king to demand that those who knew about the deception step forward:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Without warning he lunged at her, his sword raised. (258)

Tolmie analyses the scene at length, pointing out that, significantly, Alanna refuses to recant her actions and that the only voice of outright complaint is Roger, representing both the source of evil and the patriarchal response to her declaration. These observations lead directly to Tolmie's main point, that while Alanna herself expresses defiance, the overall society remains largely unchanged: "Strategies of reversal and adaptation seem to remain trapped in a feedback loop: all the by-now familiar elements of the maiden-warrior plot, however critiqued, are nevertheless present and each one is

worked through in its turn” (Tolmie 154). While Tolmie’s overall point should be kept in mind, the situation is actually worse than that, as Alanna is not really confronting anything in this case; her confrontation with patriarchy comes only because someone else has pressed it. Alanna did not choose to be revealed at this point, but was forced to as a result of Roger’s actions. And the king’s first reaction to Alanna’s revelation is not to question her, but to question the general court—he wants to find out what *man* was behind the deception that had been played upon him, and more specifically, what member of his own court and patriarchal system. If the duel is a moment in which the reader can feel vicarious pleasure over the confrontation with the patriarchal system, this pleasure must be tampered with the awareness that the patriarchy does not recognize Alanna’s confrontation and Alanna herself would prefer that there had been no confrontation at all. This ending for the series’ second book is not so much a moment of truth as a moment when ambiguity becomes more evident.

This passage is also at least the fourth time Alanna’s secret has been revealed. Moving backwards, Alanna revealed her secret to her friend Gary in order to have the prerequisite two knights stand over while she bathed during her initiation. Like the king, Gary’s first question is who else knows, and Alanna’s response is a different list: “Jonathan. George and Mistress Cooper. Coram, my brother Thom. The healing woman at Trebond. Faithful” (*In the Hand of the Goddess* 216). Alanna’s list here is the list of those who are important to her, whereas the list the king later receives consists exclusively of those who are allegedly part of the system Alanna is undermining. Gary’s reaction to the news is to burst out laughing, and Alanna comments that she was “puzzled by his amusement. Jonathan had *said* Gary would react this way, but it hadn’t seemed possible to her” (217). Again, Alanna seems more preoccupied with the difference of her gender than many of those around her.

Still moving backwards, the next revelation comes at the end of *Alanna*, when a vampire (the opposite of the life-giving women healers) reveals Alanna as a girl before Jonathan. As in the scene with Roger, Alanna has been exposed—in this case, literally stripped naked—by a negative force and laid bare before the patriarchal authority, represented by Jonathan. Afterwards, she assumes she will be punished, but Jonathan states that she not only earned her right to try for knighthood, but that he will keep her

secret as long as she wants him to (*Alanna*, 266-7). Finally, in the earlier chapter “Womanhood”, in order to find a woman healer in the city, Alanna entrusts her secret to George. While he initially reacts with shock—largely because he had just been awoken from sleeping naked at the time of the revelation—he quickly accepts her, and dismisses her fears that her other friends would reject her if they knew (177). In each case then, Alanna was forced into the revelation by circumstances out of her control, and each time the consequences turn out to be much less horrible than she imagined. Viewed in this context, Alanna’s confrontation with the patriarchal system, while important, is a smaller part of the larger picture: Alanna gradually coming to terms with her own femininity.

In Pierce’s next series, *The Immortals*, the issue of gender shifts from the driving force of the plot to a lesser element. Its chief protagonist, Daine, is more concerned about the magical intrusions into her life than challenging the existing patriarchal system. But the issue does not disappear entirely, by any means, and a close examination of a few choice passages will demonstrate how Pierce keeps up the reader’s awareness concerning gender without keeping it in the forefront. In the course of a single page, Pierce sets up two gender-defined moments. First, Numair tells Daine that “Boys worry just as much about their looks as girls do” and Onua and Daine spend their time “practicing hand-to-hand combat, something Onua said a woman alone should know” while Numair mends his shirt (*Wild Magic* 82). In a later book, Daine visits a group of people known as the Carthakis who “think an unveiled woman is no better than she ought to be” (*Emperor Mage* 140). In *The Realms of the Gods*, Pierce goes through a pantheon of Tortall gods which were created by “Father Universe” and “Mother Flame,” creating an interesting contrast to the Christian creation story that would be known to the majority of Pierce’s readers. Without making it into an overt issue, Pierce continually brings the reader’s attention to issues of gender as they can be explored in a fantasy setting.

My investigation of the *Song of the Lioness* series shows that Pierce is doing more with feminism and gender issues in her novels than the mere lip service that Moorcock describes. However, Tolmie’s observation, that the fantasy feminist writer often needs the patriarchal system while at the same time denouncing it, is harder to contradict. After her climactic revelation at the end of *In the Hand of the Goddess*, Alanna departs from Tortall entirely to visit the Bazhir, a desert people. This group is clearly patterned on

Middle Eastern societies, with characters sporting names such as Akhnan Ibn Nazzir and Halef Seif. Alanna becomes a shaman for a Bazhir tribe, and convinces them to reconsider many of their own ideas of gender bias as well. The one area she does not make “progress” in is convincing the Bazhir women to walk about unveiled. One tribesman bluntly tells her “A woman without a veil is a woman of bad repute among the tribes. Good women may not speak to her, and good men may not know her” (*The Woman Who Rides Like a Man* 139). Alanna keeps to her own opinion; during her apprentices’ initiation into full shamans, she thinks, “*They’ll be good for the tribe ... even if they do want to keep their face veils*” (179).

John Stephens and Robyn McCallum are highly critical of Pierce’s approach to the Bazhir, viewing it as an intrusion of Western ideals into a Middle Eastern context. They state: “it seems to us all the more a missed opportunity that no attempt is made to develop a connection between the veil as a sign and Alanna’s more personal clothing as a gender marker” (*Retelling Stories, Framing Culture* 249-250). Stephens and McCallum have a valid point regarding how the trappings of Middle Eastern elements are often used in Western fantasies without proper consideration of the motivations behind them. However, in this case, their criticism is slightly disingenuous given their earlier comments praising Alanna’s confrontation of the Tortall version of patriarchy as an example of the positive aspect of feminist fantasy:

It can thus offer an intense combination of material and spiritual aspiration, within a teleological structure which affirms female power both materially and transcendentally. Along the way, it accesses and deals with a multiplicity of ethical and moral questions which arise in everyday human relationships, and such questions can be resolved precisely because they arise within a framework of defined social and religious paradigms (148).

To praise Pierce’s work when it challenges the perceived traditional western European concepts of patriarchy but condemn it when it does the same to the Middle Eastern model is in itself a form of cultural bias.

However, if we are arguing that Pierce is doing the same thing to pseudo-oriental and pseudo-medieval societies, we have lent credence to Tolmie’s statement that the same ground is being trod over and over again in an artificial manner for the reader’s gratification, that a “defining characteristic of feminist disapproval within fantasy novels is the encouragement of a form of reader satisfaction that denies complicity in oppressive

structures while still relying on such structures to provide meaning” (156). Tolmie dismisses Kel and the *Protector of the Small* series as more of the same: “same plot: another girl training to be a knight, but not cross-dressed this time” (150). Is this a fair dismissal of the series?

The first book of the *Protector* series, *First Test*, immediately reveals its connection to the *Lioness* series. It begins from the perspective not of Kel, but of Alanna, receiving news that after ten years, the first female applicant for knighthood has come forward. And if there was any doubt that Pierce was continuing her emphasis on feminism, Lord Wyldon, the royal training master, dispels all doubt with his own early opinion of women knights: “Girls are fragile, more emotional, easier to frighten. They are not as strong in their arms and shoulders as men. They tire easily. This girl would get any warriors who serve with her killed on some dark night” (4). While it may be a far cry from Roger declaring Alanna a demon, Wyldon’s prejudices mark familiar ground for Pierce and her readers.

However, Wyldon also represents one of the biggest alterations between the two series. His view of Kel, and by extension, females, undergoes multiple transformations. In *First Test*, Wyldon leads a pointed prayer that “the god [Mithros]’s light show us a path back to the virtues of our fathers and an end to uncertain times” (42). Wyldon’s preference for Mithros, the male Tortall deity, over the Mother Goddess who champions Alanna, and his association of the virtue of the past with deceased male figures firmly places him as the representative of patriarchy. By the end of the novel, his position has changed enough that he is willing to let Kel stay, but he still states that he hopes she will stay home, “Now that you’ve made your point” (225). By the end of *Page*, he is willing to admit that “I think I will no longer try to predict what will or will not happen to you, Squire Keladry. So far, you have proved me wrong on every count. Even I can learn when to quit” (251-252). The phrasing is significant; the emphasis is not that Wyldon has been proven wrong, but that Kel has proven him wrong, placing the credit for his change on her actions. Lest it be thought that Wyldon has completely reformed by this point, this declaration is pages after this earlier exclamation, following Kel’s refusal to allow the rules to be bent in her favor: “ ‘Gods, Mindelan,’ he said, ‘I would you had been born a boy’ ” (246). But by *Lady Knight*, Wyldon fully accepts Kel, and appreciates

that she brings her own unique talents when he puts her in charge of a refugee camp over her fellow knights: “The truth is, you are the only one I can trust to do this job properly ... Anyone else will order them about, create resentment, and turn the place into a shambles—or pursue his own amusements and leave them to get into trouble” (71). This change in attitude shows a critical difference between the *Lioness* series and the *Protector* series in terms of the main character’s interaction with the patriarchal system. While Alanna challenges the system, Kel is the one who actually must work within it. After Alanna is revealed to the court, she runs away from it rather than facing the potential criticism of her fellow nobles, and even after some feel that her successes were the result of magical interference rather than actual prowess (thus furthering the association within the patriarchy that female strength and magic are somehow untrustworthy and otherworldly). In other words, in the eyes of the conservative nobles, Alanna was an exception rather than the rule, and Tolmie’s point concerning the repetition of patriarchy has become a plot point for the *Protector* series.

In Wyldon, Pierce portrays a character who is firmly entrenched in the patriarchal system, but slowly comes to appreciate Kel’s worth. First, he appreciates her as someone who is capable of conforming to the existing system, as shown in her desire to follow its rules, then for the perspective she brings as an outsider to that system, when he recognizes the value of her differing views on the lower classes. At the same time, Pierce leaves enough room for the reader to view Wyldon’s transformation as incomplete. Moving from *Page* to *Lady Knight*, Wyldon has gone from paying Kel a backhanded compliment concerning her ability to conform to a stoic standard of masculine behavior to assigning her the task of looking after the peasants as an appeal to her maternal instincts—note that while explaining his choice, Wyldon’s default pronoun for “anyone else” is still “he.” That both interpretations of Wyldon can simultaneously coexist shows a new level of sophistication in Pierce’s work; she is allowing more complex representations of patriarchy than the evil warlock Roger can provide.

The feminism in *Protector of the Small* is a secondary—or perhaps complementary—issue; the greater theme is presented in the series title: the role of the protector. In each of Pierce’s Tortall series, she begins with a staple of the fantasy genre, a small heroic feat that firmly establishes the series’ protagonist. In the *Lioness* series,

Alanna takes control of Coram's horse, narrowly saving Coram from falling and breaking his neck. Coram's response defines Alanna's conflict:

He was imagining what Thom would have done in similar circumstances: Her twin would have left Coram to fend for himself. Coram knew the kind of courage it took to calm a large, bucking horse. It was the kind of courage a knight need in plenty. Even so, Alanna was a girl... (*Alanna* 20)

Coram immediately compares Alanna to her twin brother Thom, her male equivalent, and defines her courage in terms of that comparison and her upcoming gender disguise.

Daine's moment comes in saving Numair (in hawk form) from a flock of Stormwings, establishing both Daine's connection with animals and the intrusion the Stormwings will come to represent. In *Protector*, Kel's first heroic act is actually a mixed failure; she attempts to save a sack of kittens, first from a group of local boys, then from a spidren, a giant half-man, half-spider. Kel's immediate reaction to the spidren is to follow the orders she was given if she came across any immortal creatures, which is to summon the nearest knight to help. After the spidren devours one of the kittens, she abandons this attempt and tries to drive off the spidren directly, which saves the remaining kittens, but places her, an unarmed girl, in further danger, until the belated appearance of her brother, the knight. Realizing she would have been helpless without him, the experience drives Kel into accepting Wyldon's harsh terms for becoming a page (*First Test* 13-18). The passage establishes Kel's bravery, but also establishes other themes of the series: Kel's self-appointed role as a protector and the notion that you cannot always rely on the help of others.

Many of the gender conflicts of the series revolve around this notion in one form or another. In *Page*, Kel takes on a maid, Lalasa, whose uncle seeks Kel out specifically for her female status: "She's country-bred, not like these bold city girls ... When city girls act shy, well, men hereabouts think they want to be chased. Lalasa's been... frightened" (9). With the added details of Lalasa's constant comparison to frightened animals, and her manner of dress (wearing long-sleeved, buttoned clothes on hot days), the subtext is clearly that she had been raped. Taking Lalasa into her employ, Kel is again fulfilling her role as protector. However, Kel is not content to merely have Lalasa work for her. She insists Lalasa develop her skill as a weaver to the point where she can

become self-sufficient. She also attempts to train Lalasa in self-defense techniques, to which the servant is extremely resistant:

“This isn’t the end of it,” she told Lalasa firmly. “We’re going to practice together till I know you can use any of those things.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of, miss,” Lalasa said. (67)

Lalasa’s reluctance comes from her own fear to act outside of her cultural framework, even when it is to her personal advantage.

Unable to strike at Kel herself, the conservative faction of boys trying to force her out of training go after Lalasa. One of them makes sexual advances on Lalasa, who forces him off with the benefit of Kel’s training. Kel approaches and confronts him on two fronts, first in a legal manner: “Vinson was in the wrong in every way. By palace law the maids were to be left alone: violators were brought before the chamberlain. In chivalry, servants were under a master’s protection and could not be interfered with,” and then on grounds of the knight’s moral code: “You knew you could frighten her—that’s why you picked her. What kind of knight preys on serving girls? Where is your honor?” (185). Kel holds off pressing charges against Vinson only on the argument that Lalasa will still have to face him after Kel leaves the castle to be a squire, emphasizing again the importance of Lalasa learning to take care of herself. The passage is also important because of the way it portrays gender and class issues in Tortall. By honor and law, Vinson’s actions should have been prohibited and because they were not, it casts new light on the difference between Alanna and Kel. Alanna was demanding her equal gender rights in order to become a knight, and so put herself against the system of patriarchy. By contrast, Kel challenges the system not so much to assert her own rights, but because the system as it currently stands fails to give protection to those who need it, whether it is a female servant or a sackful of kittens. While feminism is closely connected to this issue, it is a part of a larger focus on cultural values and civil rights.

Ultimately, the argument over whether Pierce truly presents a new issue worth investigating in the *Protector* series or just rehashes her stance in *Alanna* may come down to a matter of opinion. Even the *Immortals* series can be framed from the perspective that the system is challenged but not changed, as Daine’s unique abilities make it quite clear that her elevated rank is a matter of exception rather than the rule—if for no other reason that there are not many other semi-divine young girls to test the rule

on. But Pierce's other series, *Circle of Magic*, offers a fresh stance on gender issues in modern fantasy. In her article, Tolmie catalogues a number of different approaches to attacking patriarchy in fantasy:

the development of magic/mind powers as a female escape from oppression (magic as the new cross-dressing); the thematization of female-to-female bonding and love-affairs as legitimate and desirable alternatives to compulsory heterosexuality; the frequent erasure of the hero as a necessary aspect of the representation of the heroine; and overtly anti-Christian commentaries (151-152).

None of these options succeed in breaking out of the cycle Tolmie is discussing. In the *Circle of Magic* series, Pierce creates something that bypasses the patriarchal perpetuation. She eschews all of the options Tolmie lists and exchanges them for a true fantasy; *Circle of Magic* depicts a fantasy world in which men and women are equal.

Of course, such a statement must be tempered by a discussion on what gender equality actually means and with evidence that it actually applies. In the first few pages of *Sandra's Story*, Pierce presents the reader with the following statement: "Lady Sandrilene fa Toren was good only to be waited on and to marry" (3), which seems to suggest a society in which females are to be kept only for their role as wife. However, taken in its larger context, the statement reflects Sandry's own frustration with her situation. Whereas her nurse Pirisi, a servant and Trader, has access to magic that allows her to be an active force in her life, Sandry does not—or rather, believes she does not—have access to the same choices. What appears to be a split in gender actually turns out to be an observation on the role of magic in society and the worth of an elaborate class system, both of which go on to be central issues in the *Circle* series.

The clearest example of the *Circle* series' approach to gender comes from the various positions characters are granted. There is some small amount of role reversal present: Briar, the male of the group, is the one whose magic is associated with plants, whereas the female Daja is apprenticed to the (male) blacksmith. But for the most part, roles are held equally by males and females. The lord of the land, Duke Vedris IV, has no compunction in naming Sandry his heir, and Winding Circle temple itself is led by the female Moonstream. Town guards and magistrates are of both genders, and Pierce does not draw any attention to this fact beyond the use of pronouns.

The problem with Pierce not making an issue out of the gender equality in the *Circle* is that feminism, then, is not an issue at all. Whereas the *Lioness* series has been repeatedly examined for its portrayals of gender inequalities in fantasy literature, portrayals of gender equality seem to be of lesser interest. Part of the reason, then, that authors continually return to the convention of the female heroine speaking out against the patriarchal system, and by extension, perpetuate that system, is that this return is what the readers want. Ultimately, Tolmie reaches the same conclusion, and laments what she sees as fantasy's inability to do anything more: "Given the ongoing interlacing of pleasure and disapproval in many contemporary fantasy novels that depict the disenfranchisement of women, given my own complicit pleasure in these depictions, it seems the fantasy heroine must be content, for a while yet, to have patriarchy itself as her adventure" (157). In *Circle of Magic*, there are fantasy heroines embarking on adventures beyond patriarchy, but they are no longer recognized as "feminist". Fantasy and feminism seem to have a controversial existence; the only way to bring attention to feminism in fantasy is to put it against a patriarchal system and watch it fight.

At this point, we have looked at fantasy with regards specifically to the social issues of feminism and environmentalism. The mild ambivalence present in Pierce's treatment of environmentalism becomes full-blown in the feminist arena. Both of these problems are part of a larger question of how epic fantasy can be used to teach, and what lessons are actually being taught. By casting my nets a littler wider, I can explore how Pierce uses fantasy as an educational tool to engage young adults to think about these and other issues in their contemporary world.

## Chapter Four: The Didactic Fantastic

While it is useful in identifying moments of environmental awareness, Lee Rozelle's definition of the ecosublime—and by extension, of ecological literary issues—is also problematic. As it stands, the ecosublime is “the awe and terror that occurs when *literary figures* experience the infinite complexity and contingency of place” (emphasis added). If we allow a moment of the ecosublime to be defined by the perception and experience of a literary figure, we are at least nominally endorsing the validity of a viewpoint that may run contrary to the author's intention. In a case like Daine and the Stormwings, no problem arises. While the reader may come to the conclusion that the Stormwings are more than monsters before Daine, the character and the reader eventually end with the same level of awareness. But what about Kel and her fear of “unnatural” magic? Kel never directly comes to terms with her ambivalence towards Daine and Numair's magic; instead, she just accepts the benefits it provides her. If there is anyone left to recall the “crucial links between human subject and nonhuman world,” the recollection that Rozelle suggests the ecosublime should prompt, it is the reader, not Kel herself.

Approaching the matter from a feminist angle, Pierce's characters again seem to respond to and become aware of gender issues at a slower pace than the actual reader. The most obvious issue—that females should be allowed the same opportunities as males—remains static in each protagonist's mind throughout the various series. But within that framework, a general evolution occurs. Alanna presents the clearest case, moving from imitation of everything male to a gradual acceptance of femininity. She goes from being upset over the physical developments of femininity such as getting her period to displaying defiance in her right to adopt whatever gender role she chooses. As she tells Liam, “Why can't I wear a dress without you deciding I want to give up everything I am?” (*Lioness Rampant* 135). Though less pronounced, other protagonists

such as Kel and Daine go through similar changes in self-image as they grow from girls into women.

At the same time, Pierce lets the readers see that her narrators are sometimes overly sensitive or unaware of issues regarding their own gender. Alanna constantly questions what her suitors see in her, given her self-perceived lack of womanly traits: “[Liam] could have any woman—why pick one who’s not even very feminine?” (*Lioness Rampant* 50). When first addressing the people of Haven, Kel stops herself from straightening her hair because “It would not do for men whom she was to command to see her do something so feminine” (*Lady Knight* 92). Though the contexts hint that Alanna is wrong in thinking herself not woman enough and Kel is overly worried about appearing too womanly, Pierce leaves the reader to reach the conclusions that her narrators never quite realise. In both environmentalism and feminism, Pierce is making sure her audience learns a lesson, regardless of whether her protagonists follow suit.

Assuming that authorial intention justifies a didactic reading of Pierce’s works is a risky proposition, but there is substantial evidence in favour of such a reading, for both young adult fantasy at large, and Pierce in particular. Young adult fantasy writer Grace Chetwin flatly states, “a fantasy tale must always have a moral” (“Creating Ethical Heroes” 177). *Redwall* series writer Brian Jacques claims that “as an author I have a moral obligation to young readers,” an obligation which includes providing young animal heroes that are “creatures of strong moral fiber and good character, whom their peers can look up to and trust as true friends” (“Describing the Fantasy of My Life” 217). Both authors feel that their stories require a moral component, but by necessity, this moral intent drags the issue of reader response into the arena of authorial intention, and leaves the critic with an inescapable question: is the moral the young readers are learning the same as the moral the authors wanted to teach?

In *Émile*, his book on child education, Jean-Jacques Rousseau expresses extreme scepticism about using any sort of fantastic story to teach children: “Fables can instruct men, but naked truth has to be told to children ... one buys delight at the expense of clarity” (112-113). He then goes on to dissect the fable of the Crow and the Fox. In the story, a crow sits on a branch, holding a piece of cheese in its beak. A fox comes along, and praises the crow for its fine voice. The crow opens its mouth, dropping the cheese,

and the fox runs off with it. Rousseau identifies the lesson the child takes from the story: “children make fun of the crow, but they all take a fancy to the fox” (115). Rousseau believes that a lesson designed to ward off vanity becomes a vehicle for praising manipulative prowess. The desired moral the author wished to impart has been displaced by a secondary meaning.

By embracing certain conventions of the fantasy genre, Pierce is adding elements to her stories that fantasy readers would immediately recognize, but such familiarity brings with it an implied set of messages that may work contrary to her other points. One such convention is the prevalence of violence in fantasy stories. On the subject of violence in children’s literature, Carl Tomlinson states that it is justified in certain cases. Violence in a traditional folk tale is justified because it amplifies the moral in amplifying the punishment; children are more likely to be wary of strangers if they know that no helpful woodcutter ever came to rescue Little Red Riding Hood (“Justifying Violence in Children’s Literature” 41). Violence in contemporary literature is acceptable if it is realistic and opens the children to real world problems (48). Violence in historical fiction is justified because it helps “to give young readers a deeper, more complete understanding of the story of the past and its relevance to the present” (47). While Tomlinson is speaking primarily of children’s literature, he has young adult literature in mind as well—he specifically refers to young adult horror series *Fear Street* as an example of a series that uses gratuitous violence. This all begs the question: is the violence of Pierce’s novels justified, or does it fall into the gratuity that Tomlinson denounces?

Tomlinson’s first justification of violence, to amplify the lesson (in other words, to serve a didactic purpose), is somewhat at work here. All of the greater acts of violence in Pierce’s novels—rape and child molestation—are firmly villainous acts, and the villains are almost always the aggressors in situations where violence is used, implying that those who resort to such action are in the wrong. At the same time, the heroes are hardly the first to seek diplomatic solutions. Two of Pierce’s main protagonists, Alanna and Kel, embrace a way of life dedicated to violence, although in Kel’s case at least it is chosen to prevent violence from being inflicted on others. Even the less-warlike Daine is quick to respond to a threat with her bow, and on more than one occasion must be talked

down from attempting to kill a Stormwing for insulting her. Though this extreme action is in part to demonstrate how Daine's understanding of the Stormwings evolves, having the protagonist engage in such actions at all could be interpreted as a tacit endorsement of violence. The *Circle* series is largely free of violence—if for no other reason than the nature of the crises precludes a violent solution—with the exception of the pirates, who slaughter the temple's defenders and in turn are slaughtered by the four protagonists.

However, violence is not a fantasy convention that Pierce adopted blindly. On her website, Pierce responds to complaints about the presence of sex and violence in her books. Pierce's defence is strikingly similar to Tomlinson's justification of violence in historical fiction; she states that “my treatment of these topics is, for the most part, drawn from the historical world” and goes on to further cement her position:

I believe that sanitizing this aspect of the modern and ancient world is at the root of our troubles as a culture now. We're bred to be smug about how peaceful we are, so we can watch television and feel safely distant from violence, when it is part of our makeup. That smugness means we don't feel we have to do anything about the violence we see, because it's obviously committed by people who aren't as educated or civilized as we are. By holding ourselves aloof from global and historical violence, we allow it to continue. If we are ever to survive as a species, we need to admit we are violent and find ways to ease the plight of the victims of violence worldwide ... We must face who we are and what creates violence: helplessness, envy, rage, even the drive to grab the good things of the world that are flaunted in the faces of the poor. We must take responsibility and protect each other from violence.

Pierce justifies her use of violence under all three of the justifications Tomlinson lists. It is derived from history, it reflects contemporary issues that the Western world ignores, and it supplies a lesson that violence and its roots must be faced.

Models of non-violence in fantasy run into the same sort of problems met by models of feminism. In order for the hero to take down a repressive, violent regime and restore peace to the land, the violent, repressive regime needs to exist in the first place. And just as the *Circle* series is ignored for its gender equality while the *Lioness* series is praised for its defiant struggle against patriarchy, a lack of struggle in a fantasy novel usually translates into a lack of interest from the reader. Conflict creates interest, and conflict is often violent. Presumably, Pierce grouped her answers concerning sex and violence together because they represent the two biggest issues of controversy in her work. In the *Circle* series, Pierce shows she can still write fantasy without the

“controversy” of gender issues, so perhaps she could write a series devoid of controversial violence as well. However, as she states above, in her opinion, it is not embracing violence that perpetuates it, but a refusal to acknowledge its presence. By including violence in her stories, Pierce is attempting to draw the readers’ attention to a violent world in the hopes of creating a meaningful solution.

Not all violence has to be slaughter and flashy battles; much of it, especially in the early books of the *Lioness* and *Protector* series, revolves around an issue more immediately accessible to Pierce’s audience: schoolyard bullying, and issues of schooling in general. With the overwhelming popularity of the *Harry Potter* series, a large spotlight has been placed on representations of schools in fantasy, especially the children and young adult fantasy in which the schools are most likely to appear. These school-based fantasies present readers with a more direct analogue for didactic lesson; the characters they read encounter the fantastic while at the same time living lives directly comparable to their own. Given that three of the four Pierce series studied—the *Lioness* series, the *Protector* series, and the *Circle* series—all involve protagonists going to school, it is worth investigating the methods of learning that these books present.

Even though she is writing within a fantasy universe, Pierce’s interest in factual knowledge and research is prevalent throughout her works. Many of her works include a list of acknowledgements that recognizes those who aided her in her research; *Wolf-Speaker*, for example, begins with a thank-you to the experts on wolves she consulted. A similar interest is reflected in her characters. One of the first instances comes when Alanna asks a priest what algebra is, and receives the following response: “It is a building block ... Without it you cannot hope to construct a safe bridge, a successful war tower, or catapult, a windmill or an irrigation wheel. Its uses are infinite.” To Alanna, “The idea that mathematics could make things such as windmills and catapults work was amazing” (*Alanna* 43). Out of all of Pierce’s protagonists, Alanna is usually characterized as the most impetuous, the most head-strong, and the most impatient—in other words, the character least like the stereotypical ideal student. By portraying even Alanna as someone who is necessarily dedicated to her studies, Pierce is putting forth a model of learning. The abilities of her protagonists are not magically handed down to them; they must be learned through hard work and effort. And while she is proposing a model of

learning, Pierce is also putting forth a model of teaching. The priest who answers Alanna's questions dwells on the practical application of algebra as a way of showing its importance. In Pierce's fantasies, the most important learning is that which comes with an immediate, physical purpose.

The *Circle* series is the most overt in embracing this teaching style. In fact, Tris, Sandry, Briar, and Daja rarely see a classroom at all. Since they have natural talents that distinguish them from the rest of the students and fail to fit in with the others, they do not go through the same schoolhouse experience. Instead, most of their learning comes from following their mentors as they perform their regular duties<sup>10</sup>. Since magic is a metaphor for trade skill in the *Circle* series, placing the children under mentors rather than in the classroom can be seen as a criticism as to how creativity is nourished—or not nourished—in the modern North American school system. In addition to developing their magical skills, the four (and the reader as well) receive the lessons that have already been described: the ethical implications of using one's gifts for commercial gain, the importance in understanding the consequences of one's actions, and gaining control over abilities with the potential for destruction.

As any clichéd description of school learning would tell you, not all the learning happens inside the classroom. Part of the typical school experience is what occurs afterwards. At a recent conference, Kurt Poland presented a paper entitled “Magical Misdirection: An Ethical Analysis of Lying and Deception in the Harry Potter Films.” In the paper, Poland investigates the instances in which Harry deliberately lies, both while he is in school and when he is out of it. Poland found that when Harry lies while at school he sometimes is directly punished by school authorities and sometimes not, but when he is outside of school, the punishment comes not from authority figures, but as a direct consequence of his actions. The didactic implication is that lying in the real world is more serious than lying at school.

For Pierce, lying in school takes on a slightly different tint. First, there is Alanna lying about her gender. This lying is dealt with in a manner similar to Harry's outside-of-school lies: while she is never directly punished, she experiences great grief and stress as

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<sup>10</sup> Both Alanna and Kel go through similar mentorship phases as squires, which occur after their classroom learning is complete.

a result of having to lie. The other major case of lying in Pierce's works comes from both Kel's and Alanna's responses to bullying. Both characters lie to their respective authority figures about the bullying that is taking place. Sir Myles bluntly asks Alanna if an older boy is bullying her, and he is dismayed by her feigned incomprehension: "What are you trying to prove? ... I truly love our Code of Chivalry. We are taught that noblemen must take everything and say nothing. Noblemen must stand alone. Well, we're men, and men aren't born to stand alone." He then concludes with a small allowance, implicitly condoning her behavior: "If you have to hit—hit low" (*Alanna* 76). In both cases, the female protagonists solve their problem by grouping together with their friends against the bullies. And while this response is characteristic of Alanna's stubbornness and Kel's stoicism, it does present an anti-authority message to the reader, in that the characters cannot, and will not, go to their teachers for help against bullying. Once again, the reader is faced with an instance in which physical force is only challenged by a greater physical force.

Rousseau's example calls for an examination of Pierce's villains—and more specifically, an examination of what sort of moral values are being endorsed when the supposed villains get the better of the heroes. One of the most obvious examples comes from the *Lioness* series, in which Alanna's brother Thom attempts to impress Lady Delia with his power as a sorcerer. One character describes Delia's response: "She seemed to be taunting him, saying that if he were truly the most powerful wizard living, he could raise the dead" (*The Woman Who Rides Like a Man* 255). Delia tricks him into resurrecting Duke Roger, who then proceeds to slowly siphon off Thom's remaining life force. The scene is very reminiscent of the fox and the crow, with Thom's vanity regarding his magic replacing the crow's love of its own voice. While the reader may, as probably intended, feel exasperated with Thom, he or she is never for a moment left admiring Delia or Roger (as it was Roger who set up this plan before his own demise). Both characters have been previously portrayed as vain and arrogant, and even their success over Thom is downplayed—while it would be one thing to outsmart the heroes of the series, Thom has been consistently portrayed in a lesser light as reclusive and vain, and thus more easily manipulated than his heroic sibling Alanna.

The encounter between Thom and Delia is the only overt example of the villains in Pierce's novels directly outwitting the heroes. However, another sort of outwitting is often taking place, in which the villains are perpetrating some sort of complex scheme which the heroic characters know nothing about. Again, if one wished to take exception to Pierce's writing, the argument could be made that the novels could inadvertently be favouring the villains, or at least implying that intelligence is a villainous trait, as Pierce's heroes rarely display any similar ability in making plans long in advance. However, in nearly all such instances, the focus is not on the villains' plans, but on how the heroes discover and counter them, in a manner that almost always emphasizes the particular heroic characteristics of the hero. Daine, for example, discovers Ozorne's darkling spies and uses them against him, by treating them as sentient beings rather than slaves (*The Realms of the Gods*). When the mages-in-training of the *Circle* stumble onto plans of a pirate attack, they discover the plans through luck rather than skill, but the narrative dwells more on the work involved in the preparations for the temple's defence, continuing the series' emphasis on the responsible use of gifts and the value of hard work (*Tris's Book*). Even when the villainous plan is revealed by divine intervention—a literal *deus ex machina*—it is made explicit to the readers that this intervention occurs because of some virtue the hero has already shown. For example, the Chamber of Ordeals shows Roger's treachery to Alanna and the origin of the killing devices to Kel, but only after each character has proven her bravery through a series of tests. While it is still problematic that Pierce's villains seem to be better at planning ahead, the focus on heroic traits keeps the readers from attaching any sort of favour to the villains for their effort, or from seeing foresight as a "villainous" trait.

The villains are characterized by other traits as well. In a typical fantasy work, the villain's physical traits are often drawn out at length, often to the point of caricature. For Pierce, these descriptions usually fall into one of two categories. First, there is the monstrous, which consists of the generic creatures—such as the spidren, the stormwings, and other immortal species—as well as a few more important figures, such as Blayse, who is described as follows:

He was as pasty-skinned as she had dreamed, small, and unhealthy-looking, with nails bitten down to the quick of his fingers and strips of angry red flesh around

them where he'd picked away bits of skin. His robes were ratty and stained, his brown hair short and uncombed (*Lady Knight* 387). Blayse's negative physical characteristics, from his pale skin to his ratty robes, are all the direct result of his lack of personal hygiene and thus an accurate reflection of his personality. For the monsters, the sentient creatures such as the Stormwings are gradually revealed to be more than just villains, as Daine learns. While a first glance would suggest that Pierce is equating negative moral value with negative appearance, what is actually going on is a more complicated lesson in what can accurately be learned through physical appearance. A monstrous appearance corresponds to a monstrous person only if that appearance is a result of that person's (monstrous) actions.

The second category is composed of beautiful villains, who are found in abundance throughout Pierce's work. At their first meeting, Alanna admits that if there was anything at all to admire in Roger, it is "Roger's taste in clothes" (*Alanna* 144) and the vampires she meets in the Black City are "so beautiful that it hurt to look at them for very long" (250). Joren, the boy obsessed with driving Kel from knight training, is referred to as "beautiful" (*First Test* 60). Lady Yolane, who betrays Tortall to Ozorne, is "beautiful, with ivory-and-rose skin, large brown eyes, a tumble of reddish brown curls and a soft mouth" (*Wolf-speaker* 65) and her contact Tristan is "broad-shouldered and handsome" (67). These villains serve as a contrast to the heroes of Pierce's novel, who, as a rule, consider themselves plain and unattractive. Given Pierce's audience, these views on beauty also serve to make her readers more sympathetic to the heroic characters. Additionally, Pierce is also teaching a simple didactic lesson by making beautiful characters into villains: the importance of not making judgements based on appearance. At the same time, by making her villains *only* ugly or beautiful, Pierce creates an unrealistic image. While the heroic are allowed to be plain, villains are found only in aesthetic extremes.

But what lessons are implied by including villains in the first place? Villains are at least as much a fantasy staple as heroes. In fact, fantasy not only has villains, it often openly acknowledges the existence of evil in the abstract, an ultimate Evil that employs morally negative actions not just to achieve some selfish goal, but as an ends in itself. According to Jacques, this clear cut division of good and evil is part of his "moral obligation" that he puts in his writing: "[My] message is clear. There are no

schizophrenic goodies and sympathetic baddies; no matter how long it takes and how hard the struggle, good defeats evil!” (217). While this decisive stance makes didactic interpretation easier for the reader, it arguably performs a greater disservice. If the root of didactic intent is to supply the readers with knowledge that will help them in their lives, the unambiguous black and white that Jacques puts forth gives young adults a distorted view of a real world that contains shades of grey. The young adult writer must carefully balance setting moral examples and creating a realistic model.

While Pierce’s *Lioness* series follows closest to Jacques’ division between good and evil, there are some steps towards other perspectives as well. The villains, for their part, are clearly villains and act in villainous ways. The vampires feed on human souls. The shaman Ishak, Alanna’s rival among the Bazhir, is driven to theft by his jealousy over Alanna’s magic. And Roger embraces the duplicity of a villain by attacking through proxies, poisoning the royal family, and magically creating voodoo dolls, all of which involve an element of furtiveness that no hero would adopt. Pierce’s only concession to shades of grey is that Roger is never presented as an ultimate evil; he commits his crimes solely to acquire the throne of Tortall, a motive that is entirely based on human ambition.

Alanna and her friends are similarly clear-cut, with two exceptions. Alanna herself fulfills the typical role of the questing hero, and her friends, from the knight Sir Myles to the cat Faithful, are unquestioningly loyal to her. The first exception to the typical hero mould is a direct consequence of the plot. Trickery and deception, Roger’s primary weapons, are clearly nonheroic, yet Alanna must trick and deceive her friends in order to maintain her disguise as a boy. Pierce excuses this behaviour by demonstrating the emotional turmoil it puts Alanna in, whether it is hating herself for lying to Duke Gareth (*Alanna* 67) or fearing her friends’ reactions when they learn the truth (*In the Hands of the Goddess* 212). In fact, by the time Alanna’s sex is revealed to the court, the closest of her friends have already been told or are aware of the truth, implying that hiding the truth from an authority figure is less significant than hiding it from one’s friends.

The other exception to this rule occurs when two of Alanna’s friends temporarily show themselves to be less than loyal. In Alanna’s relationships with Jonathan and Liam, both male characters align themselves—admittedly, in a rather minor fashion—

against Alanna after their relationships fall apart. This departure from the typical, happily-ever-after fantasy romance allows Pierce to explore more realistic and practical approaches to young adult relationships. Since both relationships end because the males try to force their own notions of gender on Alanna, Alanna herself is shown to be largely blameless. While this fallout does present a positive model to staying true to one's own sense of self, it also portrays an Alanna who is always in the right, and supplies the reader with a justification for self-righteous behaviour. While the *Lioness* series takes some minor steps away from the stereotypical good versus evil story of the fantasy genre, its deviations come with their own set of problems.

Pierce's next series, *The Immortals*, does contain an ultimate evil, in the form of Uusoae, the Queen of Chaos. The focus, however, is on her real-world agent, the "servitor" (*The Realms of the Gods* 172) Ozorne. While Daine is by no means a "schizophrenic goodie," Ozorne is a clear step towards the sympathetic villain that Jacques so vehemently opposes. Ozorne is known for his kindness to birds, which, as stated earlier, is unusual for Pierce's villains. This sympathy leads him to seek out Daine to heal his ailing birds. The common interest in avians creates a rapport between Ozorne and Daine, and by extension, between Ozorne and the reader. However, Daine's first impression of Ozorne proves to be the most accurate. She comments that "[s]he'd heard of Carthak's health and power, but it was one matter to hear such things, another to see one man decked out like an idol in gold and gems" (*Emperor Mage* 41). Ozorne has turned himself into an idol, to the point where he instructs his people to allow their temples to fall into disrepair in order to pursue his own agenda. He also feels entitled to the possessions and powers of others, as he imprisons Numair for leaving him years ago and captures Daine as well to have access to her power. The subsequent destruction of Ozorne's kingship and his transformation into a Stormwing demonstrate the follies of hubris, a lesson that would have had much less impact if Pierce had not initially softened his character. Between Ozorne's descent to villain and the Stormwings' gradual rise to reluctant allies, *The Immortals* shows a more sophisticated interpretation of villainy than its predecessor.

In the final book of the *Protector* series, we see yet another grade of sophistication. In *Lady Knight*, the villains are hardly sympathetic, but Peirce still

manages to use them to make new didactic points. Blayse, with his pathetic form and paedophilic undertone, clearly represents pure evil, but it is an evil that is unlike the villainous Roger who represented an evil that looks appealing and acts repulsively. Blayse depicts a depravity that is more pathetic than powerful, which decreases the chance of any reader finding it worthy of imitation. Stennum, the man who supplies Blayse with new children to make into killing machines, is also noteworthy. As he tells Kel, he has only one motive for his actions: “[Blayse] pays me well” (*Lady Knight* 383). In Stennum, Pierce presents an extreme case against the pursuit of financial gain without any thought to the morality involved.

Perhaps more interesting than her depiction of villains in the *Protector* series is Pierce’s redefinition of a hero. Responding to her worries that no man would ever follow her into battle, Kel’s mentor Lord Raoul makes the following statement:

“At our level, there are four kinds of warrior,” he told Kel. . . . “Heroes, like Alanna the Lioness. Warriors who find dark places and fight in them alone. This is wonderful, but we live in the real world. There aren’t many places without any hope or light.”

He raised a second finger. “We have knights—plain, every day knights, like your brothers. They patrol the borders and protect their tenants, or they go into troubled areas at the king’s command and sort them out. They fight in battles, usually against other knights. A hero will work like an everyday knight for a time—it’s expected. And most knights must be clever enough to manage alone.

Kel nodded.

“We have soldiers,” Raoul continued, raising a third finger. “Those are warriors, including knights, who can manage so long as they’re told what to do. These are more common, thank Mithros, and you’ll find them in charge of companies in the army, under the eyes of a general. Without people who can take orders, we’d be in real trouble.

“Commanders.” He raised his little finger. “Good ones, people with a knack for it... they’re as rare as heroes. Commanders have an eye not just for what they do, but for what those around them do. Commanders size up people’s strengths and weaknesses. They will know where someone will shine and where they will collapse. Other warriors will obey a true commander because they can tell that the commander knows what he—or she—is doing.” (*Squire* 120-121)

Raoul identifies four types of warriors: heroes, knights, soldiers, and commanders. Of these four, the knight is the most easily explained, as a sort of watered-down hero that does the same sort of work but on a lesser scale and with less emphasis on good and evil. And while Raoul (and Pierce) is clearly trying to portray them in a positive light, the soldiers are also lesser figures, amounting to little more than fodder, from a narrative

standpoint. More interesting is Pierce's distinction between a hero and a commander. Raoul's comment that the real world is rarely lacking hope creates a positive perspective while at the same time acknowledging that the independent, one-against-the-world hero model is not the only model there is. The commander model embodies a different set of skills, emphasizing clear thinking, working with others, and leadership. Raoul's lecture corresponds with the narrative themes of the series; unlike Alanna, Kel does not merely "protect the small," but actively pushes them to develop their own skills and abilities.

Unfortunately, the story ultimately does not bear out the commander model. The key issue of much of *Lady Knight* is that while Kel has been entrusted by the Chamber of Ordeals to find and kill Blayse, her assigned duty is to protect the people of Haven—to perform the role of the commander over the role of the hero. Torn between the conflicting duties, Kel's decision to choose one role or the other is made for her. While she is away, enemy forces capture Haven and carry its people off to serve as fuel for the killing machines—not-so-coincidentally bringing them straight to Blayse. Kel and her friends seem glad to put behind their responsibilities. As one comments, "Here we are on an adventure. It's glory, and fame, and all those people the Scanrans took. It's *not* counting troops or finding ways to bury the dead so they won't rot the drinking water" (303-4). While the character was speaking somewhat facetiously under the circumstances, the reader is left with the sense that on some level, he is speaking the truth—it is easier and preferable to cast off the ambiguities of leadership for a more clear-cut objective. Arguably, Pierce is trying to demonstrate that true leadership is more difficult and arduous than the work of a hero, but this message is deflated by the result of the plot. Kel the commander manages to do nothing but fight the enemy to a standstill till she is ultimately defeated; Kel the hero single-handedly turns the tide of the war. The climax of the series, a one-on-one battle between Kel and Blayse deep in enemy territory, is the typical ending for a fantasy hero, rather than a commander. While *Protector* tries to put forth a more realistic model than the fantasy hero, by ending the series with a single heroine in a dark place fighting alone, Pierce largely negates her own message, or at least makes it extremely questionable.

The *Circle* series presents another perspective on both heroes and villains. The human villains of the series appear in *Tris's Book* when the Winding Circle Temple, left

vulnerable after the earthquake in the first book, is attacked by pirates. The only two named villains are Enahar, leader of the pirates, and Aymery, Tris' cousin, sent to sabotage the temple. Both figures are characterized by a lust for wealth and possessions. Aymery is forced into helping the pirates after running up large debts to support his lavish lifestyle. Besides wanting to steal the wealth of the temple, Enahar refers to the four young mages as a “prize” and refers to the damage they do to him as a debt to be paid (239-240). By portraying villainy prompted by wealth, Pierce is reinforcing a main theme of the series, that power and desire must both be handled responsibly.

However, in the entire four book series, Enahar and Aymery are the *only* characters that could really be considered villains. And considering that they only appear in the second book of the series, the dearth of antagonists in the *Circle* series distinguishes it immediately from nearly all young adult fantasy. Instead of human opponents, the focus is on natural disasters. In the first book, the characters deal with an earthquake. In the third, they combat a forest fire. And in the fourth book, the “enemy” is a plague. While it may seem that Pierce has simply replaced the “evil” side of the typical fantasy formula with nature, nothing could be further from the truth. In *Sandry's Book*, the earthquake is exacerbated because a mage named Huath attempts to channel the quake into magical energy. The fire in *Daja's Book* is similarly escalated because of the suppression techniques of Yarrun Firetamer, and the plague of *Briar's Book* occurs because a bankrupt mage was experimenting dangerously with magic designed to help people lose weight. The “unsympathetic baddies” of typical fantasy epics have been replaced with ordinary people acting without full understanding of the consequences of their actions, creating a far more realistic didactic message for the readers.

Since each of the three disasters described above happens because of people involved in the magical equivalent of the sciences overestimating their control of the natural environment, Pierce runs the risk of sending a message that she—or at least the series—is against scientific research and meddling in the unknown. However, the entire series revolves around that notion that power must be handled responsibly, and that control is absolutely essential. For example, after Briar tricks her into being angry enough to shoot lightning, Tris unthinkingly points an accusing finger at him. Briar's response is immediate:

Don't you *ever* do that ... If your pointing is a weapon, then don't you point 'less you're ready to kill with it. You understand, you witless bleater? ... Niko's right... We've *got* to learn control, and *you* most of all." (*Tris's Book* 206)

Briar's fear, emphasized by his own lack of control in calling Tris a "bleater," marks the intensity of the moment, and reinforces Pierce's message concerning the consequences of thoughtless actions. Tris' magic cannot be simply left alone; natural or not, it is too dangerous to leave unmanaged. The treatment of plague, on the other hand, shows the dedication to proper procedure and method. The magical greenhouse used to investigate the plague is virtually indistinguishable from a modern research laboratory. Its chief operator, Dedicate Crane, demands complete attention, immaculate cleanliness, and methodical note-taking. By situating the "battle" to cure the plague in the greenhouse, Pierce creates a fantastic situation that requires a real world solution rather than a simple heroic battle. While there is more to real scientific research than "the ability to pay attention and steady hands" (*Briar's Book* 144), Pierce's presentation champions a model that readers can not only relate to, but imitate, and gives them a template for heroism that is more than sword-slinging and fighting evil incarnate.

While the lack of villains is most prominent in the *Circle* series, all of Pierce's books are marked by a de-emphasis on the villain. Both Ozorne and Blayse do not make their villainous debuts until at least the third book of their respective series, and even Roger is conspicuously absent for the third book in the *Lioness* series, as well as much of the fourth. The heroine's quest is rarely presented as a fight against good and evil, but as a gradual development of self-awareness. As a result, by the time the heroines face off against their respective villains, the villains are more physical manifestations of the heroine's inner struggle than anything else. Alanna's climatic fights with Roger symbolize her desire to prove herself as capable as a man; if she can beat Roger, she can take on the male-mantle of a hero. Kel's battle with Blayse, the man who preys on little children, cements her own role as protector. She has gone from the one who needed protecting from the spidren in *First Test* to being the one who protects others. Even Daine's final battle with Ozorne allows her to face her personal issues. Long concerned about the moral ambiguity of allowing her animal friends to fight and die for her, by facing Ozorne alone, she is able to prove to herself that she can protect them as well. As Pierce's characters admit, people do not ordinarily experience the same things as a

fantasy heroes; there “aren’t many places without any hope or light.” Very few of Pierce’s readers will solve their problems through a one-on-one fight with a representation of pure evil. But many of them will be able to relate to the concept of fighting to protect their friends like Daine and Kel or going through a process to better understanding themselves, like Alanna. By shifting the focus from a battle between good and evil to the protagonist’s personal battle, Pierce moves her works away from the typical, unrealistic fantasy model towards characters whose struggles better correspond to the struggles of her audience.

Inadvertently creating the wrong moral is the problem constantly facing didactic writing in any sort of literature. For every deliberate lesson taught, another is delivered by accident. The killing machines may imply a lesson about the true victims of war, but only at the cost of depicting extreme violence. Pierce can create a heroine who challenges gender roles, but then she needs gender roles for the heroine to challenge. Environmental and feminist issues may be engaged, but there seems to be no approach that is not fraught with ambiguity. At the very least, the original question of whether the fantasy epic can engage social issues such as environmentalism and feminism has been answered; by the nature of fantasy, it is constantly imparting social lessons. The question now is, *how* are the various authors approaching these issues? And in this area, Pierce distinguishes herself.

It is tempting to view Pierce’s work as a strict progression. The *Lioness* series presents a typical fantasy tale, with a gender twist that places it slightly above the ordinary. The *Immortals* and *Protector* series, with their “sympathetic baddies” and hero versus commander notions question the validity of *Alanna*’s clear-cut world and raise new issues of ambiguity in their failure to come to terms with “unnatural” forces and perpetuation of gender stereotypes. The *Circle* series is the answer to these problems, as its characters focus first and foremost on harmony with nature, gender equality is accepted as a given rule, and a denial of the existence of true evil is implied throughout. However, this view would be a distortion of Pierce’s works, if for no other reason that the *Protector* series was written *after* the *Circle* series, so the latter could hardly be a response to questions that have not yet been asked. Instead, it is important to view the four series and their content as different perspectives on similar issues, rather than a

movement towards a simple unified answer. In a genre marked by its depiction of black-and-white scenarios, Pierce's writing stands out as something that goes further. Rather than present a single set of conclusions, her fantasy epics put forth a wide variety of stances and opinions for readers to interpret. As such, they reflect on the versatility of fantasy, and its worth in the larger literary canon.

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