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# Female Fantasy: Identity, Politics, & Society in Tamora Pierce's Tortall Universe

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a close examination of Tamora Pierce's Young Adult Fantasy literature books set within the world of Tortall and Other Lands. It analyzes how U.S. politics, society, and culture in distinct periods of time are reflected and challenged through Pierce's Revisionist Feminist work, examining the unique struggles against inequality that her protagonists highlight through their experiences in each succeeding series. Through close readings and thematic analysis, this research explores how Pierce's evolving treatment of gender, sexuality, race, class, and power constructs a cumulative feminist vision that both reflects and critiques dominant cultural narratives within the American YA literary landscape and society more generally.

The introduction outlines the ideological framework I use to analyze Pierce's Tortall Universe, situating it within a feminist tradition focused on community, revision, and explicit engagement with women's and young girls' issues. Drawing on scholarship on YA literature, I argue that Pierce's work is intentionally instructive, using narrative to explore diverse political and social structures. Additionally, I examine her Neomedieval Fantasy worldbuilding by relating it to historical shifts in American culture, politics, and society. Chapter 1 deals with romance, gender performativity, and heroism in *The Song of the Lioness* series, considering Alanna of Trebond. Chapter 2 is focused on posthumanism and ecofeminism in Pierce's second series, *The Immortals*, exploring the experiences of its protagonist Daine. Chapter 3 re-engages with depictions of female heroism and covers bullying, allyship, and community in *The Protector of the Small* series, examining its central character, Kel. Chapter 4 shifts to focus on the intersectionality of race, class, and feminism in two short stories set in Tortall, Pierce's duology *Tricksters* and the *Provost's Dog* trilogy. Finally, the conclusion introduces further avenues of possible research and traces Pierce's legacy, exploring what this suggests about wider trends in Female Fantasy, especially in books written for and about young adults.

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I am so grateful and I love you all so much

## PERSONAL STATEMENT

As a speculative fiction academic, I am privileged in some ways at being able to recognize my own passion for the subject, or at least to be more honest about the relationship between the fan and the critic in myself. Academics research topics they want to spend years—if not the rest of their lives—studying. I have been a fan of Tamora Pierce since I was a young girl. As this thesis evidences, my life has been significantly impacted by her work. So, too, have I grown up and become more critical and knowledgeable about themes and political connections my younger brain did not grasp completely. The fan brought me here; the scholar does the work.

I speak from personal experience when I say that beyond being a fan, if Pierce is your first real fantasy love, her work shapes everything you think about fantasy. It was normal for me to read fantasy with female protagonists, transformative fantasy, fantasy written by women (don't all knights get their periods? Duh, horses have horse sense like Cloud). So, when that little Grace grew up and read more fantasy and, more importantly, kept talking to other people about fantasy, I found myself struggling at first to get on the same page as “their fantasy”. I went from Pierce to Rowling to Meyer (both Marissa and Stephanie) to McKillip to Le Guin, while it seemed everyone else started with Tolkien, Lewis, and Martin. I read *Lord of the Rings* and loved it, but I also coveted *Arrows of the Queen*. I tried to talk to animals like Daine (still do); I understood Kel's relationship to the Yamanis in my own childhood in Thailand; I lost my temper (and was called Rhoda) when told what to do, like Alanna. This work is one small piece of proof that Pierce's fantasy is fundamentally transformative, both to the individual reader and the larger cultural landscape of the United States. Even if as an academic, I accept that I may not represent the majority in thinking about fantasy this way, I am also not alone. To me, fantasy has always been—and will always be—uncentered from the “male”, about diverse stories, about our very

place in the world, and what it means to be young and what happens when you grow up. And that started with my sister giving me a book about a girl who loved animals that I just had to read called *Wild Magic*.

## TERMS AND KEY TEXTS

Tamora Pierce's Tortall Universe spans twenty-one novels organized mostly into several series, although there are two standalone addendum texts and an ongoing series with unpublished books. Pierce has been publishing Young Adult (YA) Fantasy stories for over forty years, and with multiple individual protagonists in the same fantasy universe.<sup>1</sup> I alternately refer to these series by their titles and as "protagonist's" series. For example, I use "Daine's series" to emphasize the character's development, and "The Immortals" when referring to the series as a published set of texts. Pierce's work is highly character-based, and this distinction highlights the structural, thematic, and editorial choices that extend beyond the protagonist's arc and situates each series within its broader in-world and cultural context. For summaries of all Tortall Universe texts referenced in this thesis, please see the Appendix. In this thesis, the following title abbreviations are used for in-text references for longer titles. All texts authored by Tamora Pierce appear italicized by title (or abbreviated title) in the in-text MLA reference. I have added paragraph numbers to texts accessed digitally without consistent page numbers. Summaries of Pierce's main Tortall Universe texts are found in the Appendix. This is consistent for article titles on Pierce's official website and archived interviews hosted there.

- Tortall Universe— all literary works within Tamora Pierce fantasy world of Tortall and Other Lands.

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<sup>1</sup> I avoid the use of YAL rather than YA as shorthand as, YA includes the possibility of other media beyond literature. Pierce's last two publications have been graphic novel retellings of *Test* and *Adventure*.

- America/U.S.— for the purposes of this work, “America” refers to the United States of America.<sup>2</sup>
- Revisionist Feminism— revising previous worlds, particularly secondary fantasy worlds, by addition rather than erasure with the explicit intention of working towards greater inclusivity and critical, especially self-critical, feminist aims.
- Female Fantasy— A tradition, particularly prominent in YA Fantasy, of texts written by women about women.
- The Song of the Lioness (The Song)— Elsewhere known as *Lioness Rampant*, Alanna’s series including *Alanna the First Adventure (Adventure)* (1983), *In the Hand of the Goddess (Hand)* (1984), *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man (Rides)* (1986), and *Lioness Rampant (Rampant)* (1988).<sup>3</sup>
- The Immortals— Daine’s series including *Wild Magic (Wild)* (1992), *Wolf-Speaker* (May 1994), *Emperor Mage (Emperor)* (November 1994), and *The Realms of the Gods (Realms)* (1996).
- The Protector of the Small (The Protector)— Kel’s series including *First Test (Test)* (1999), *Page* (2000), *Squire* (2001), and *Lady Knight (Lady)* (2002).
- Tricksters— Aly’s duology including *Trickster’s Choice (Choice)* (2003) and *Trickster’s Queen (Queen)* (2004).
- Provost’s Dog— Elsewhere known as *Beka Cooper: A Tortall Legend*, Beka’s trilogy including *Terrier* (2006), *Bloodhound* (2009), and *Mastiff* (2011).

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<sup>2</sup> There are important conversations and concerns over a global propensity to lump all of the Americas under the United States. However, this work focuses solely on the United States of America and Americans who live there and therefore I will use “America”, for the sake of brevity and simplicity within this thesis.

<sup>3</sup> Per the latest version of Pierce’s website, the series names include “the” as part of the official title , such as in *The Song* rather than *Song*.

- *Tortall and Other Lands: A Collection of Tales (Lands)* (collected 2010).
- *A Spy's Guide to Tortall: From the Desk of George Cooper (Spy's)* (2017).

## AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Signed: Grace A.T. Worm

Date: 26-05-25

## NOTE ON NORMS

This thesis uses American spelling and grammar conventions unless directly referencing another author's language, in which case I preserve the spelling and grammar of the original text. In the one aspect of conventions around punctuation and quotation marks, I adhere to British grammar conventions rather than American conventions (punctuation added by myself go outside quotation marks). I believe American conventions obfuscate authorial intent and unnecessarily confuse the grammatical structure of sentences. All references use MLA 9<sup>th</sup> edition formatting, and all websites were accessed December 2024 unless otherwise specified. Texts accessed online without page numbers have an in-text citation including the paragraph number, (par. #), instead for additional specificity.

This thesis utilizes texts and sources from a variety of platforms and authors, including University papers, dissertations, social media posts, and personal blogs. I have only drawn from publicly available social media posts, not from any private or secure online groups. Each text has been treated on an individual basis as to tone, credibility, and relevance to this project and has been contextualized as to type of source within the thesis. I have chosen to utilize sources that other academics may not because I have prioritized secondary texts where people are having relevant, thought-provoking, and *specific* conversations about Pierce and the Tortall Universe, as these conversations are not taking place anywhere else (such as in more formal, scholarly spaces). As I explore in this thesis, Pierce has been an active participant in online fan spaces for many decades and has shown a remarkable and consistent willingness to engage with fans over critical topics in her books and fantasy worlds. In part because of this, and in part because of the content of her books, online fan communities organized around Pierce tend to be particularly active spaces for literary discussion and political critiques. As I argue in this thesis, a key

function of Revisionist Feminism is its ability to self-reflect and engage in critical and overtly political discussions, therefore, these online spaces are crucial in examining the Tortall Universe as a whole.

# Introduction

This thesis analyzes elements of implied or explicit authorial intent, women's identity, American culture and politics, and young adult themes in Tamora Pierce's fantasy universe of Tortall and Other Lands (Tortall Universe), examining how her treatment of alternative magic, the human-environment relationship, mythology, feminist community, allyship, learned sexism, bullying, honor, violence against women, race, slavery, and class contributes to her compelling and enduring influence on readers and the genres of fantasy and young adult fiction.

Additionally, this thesis analyzes how Pierce characterizes the politics of being female and the representation of marginalized identities in YA Fantasy literature more generally. As Jane Sunderland notes, YA as a genre has historically been written by women and about girls (11). Though a part of this trend, Pierce's work is exceptional in its dedication to character development and complex world building, making her distinct from other texts within trends of YA Fantasy literature, especially those written and primarily about girls' and women's issues. She focuses each series on specific issues, though each protagonist struggles with being a girl in Tortall.

My deep appreciation and love of Tamora Pierce's writing may never have become the foundation of this research project if I had not found a parallel trend of Female Fantasy readership in fantasy academics and scholarship. During my Master's, a group discussion about fantasy revealed that nearly every woman cited Tamora Pierce as their formative fantasy author, while not a single man had read her—a moment that crystallized the gendered divide in how readers discover fantasy. I realized not only that my foundational personal experience with Tamora Pierce's literature was reflected in other fans of the genre, but also that this shared

cultural experience was clearly separated along gendered identities. The girls, like me who first discovered Pierce as children, are growing up and critically and retrospectively examining the ways in which her work influenced how we understand and interact with the world, our reading interests, our definition of fantasy, and the types of women we became.

Pierce's work has had profound impact on several generations of women reading fantasy, and her Tortall Universe holds a unique place among a collective readership. As Whitney May writes, "Witnessing forty years of feminist history, Pierce's fantasy not only records and refines real-world conversations [...] but also strives to make these dialogues accessible to her young readers" (51). Fantasy is the mix of past and present, and often, by mixing the two, invites the reader to recognize the effect that history has on how we understand the world. Fantasy, by altering the fabric of reality within a literary world, can compel us to re-examine the fabric of our own reality, to question if it too is constructed rather than natural. Stories shape the narratives we tell about ourselves. Ultimately, my thesis is rooted in the idea that engaging with literature—especially a long-running, evolving universe like Tortall—means holding multiple modes of reading at once. There is the critical reader, aware of politics, history, and ideology, and there is the immersive reader, who responds emotionally, imaginatively, and sometimes contradictorily. In the case of Pierce, it's not only possible but also necessary to hold these readings simultaneously. Her work encourages us to recognize that stories—and people—can be contradictory, complementary, complex, and still deeply meaningful. Like the feminist revisions she enacts across her work, my argument champions multiplicity over simplicity: to read fully is to read with nuance. This work is necessary in part because of the continued popularity of Pierce's novels. Because Young Adult as a marketing genre is crucially concerned with the relative "popularity" of a series, text, or world.

Tamora Pierce is a #1 New York Times bestseller and recipient of the 2013 Margaret A. Edwards Award for significant and lasting contributions to YA literature, among many others (“Tamora”). Pierce regularly receives praise from other popular authors in YA Fantasy. Pierce’s website and book jackets include endorsements from popular—commercially and culturally—YA authors, such as Leigh Bardugo, Holly Black, Sarah J. Maas, and Katherine Arden who all highly praise Pierce, cite her work as inspiring and influential and as foundational to the subgenre (“Tamora”). The most recent statistics on global books sales for Tamora Pierce from 2017 estimate she has sold over 4 million copies worldwide (Whitehead 131). Googling “strong female protagonists” or “strong YA Fantasy girls” yields a multitude of sources praising Pierce. For example, Goodreads, the world’s largest site for book recommendations will suggest several lists of similar titles. For example, under “Strong Female Protagonists – Juvenile and YA Fantasy”, there are 5 of Pierce’s books in the top 20 (“Strong Female”). A Penguin Random House article written in 2019 titled “So You Want to Read Young Adult Fantasy: Here’s Where to Start” includes Pierce’s work. Farah Mendlesohn and James Edwards note Pierce’s contributions to the genre, “Quest fantasies continued to be highly popular” from the late 2000s onwards, and “Tamora Pierce remains widely read amongst younger teenage girls” (*A Short History* 209). The only published biography of Pierce, by Bonnie Kunzel and Susan Fichtelberg, notes that “Pierce’s work inhabits the realm of YA fantasy and has successfully carved a place for itself within the body of YA literature as well as in the fantasy genre” (9). Though each piece could be analyzed through multiple frameworks and contexts, I have organized them by the most relevant analytical perspective for my purposes. Scholarship on Tamora Pierce remains limited, with much of it emerging only in the past decade, often in the form of Master’s dissertations.

Most critical attention has centered on *The Song* and the character of Alanna as I briefly explore in Chapter 1.

Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* and its revisionist tendencies are keenly relevant to examining similar practices in Pierce's work. This thesis is the first to analyze Pierce's Tortall Universe through a specific lens of Revisionist Feminism, outlined in the section of the same name in this Introduction chapter and can serve as a foundation for fuller comparisons between the two authors. While Pierce employs feminist strategies comparable to those in *Earthsea*, her work has received significantly less critical attention. In 2018, the definitive version of Le Guin's *The Books of Earthsea* was released, containing afterwords to each book in the series dated to 2012. Each explicitly tackles her evolving ideas about her own work and the world of *Earthsea* as she saw it when it was first published in the 1960s (Le Guin, *The Books* 1). In 2014, Pierce similarly released new editions of her books with new forewords and afterwords reflecting on her evolving relationship with her works and characters in the Tortall Universe (Pierce, *Adventure* 251). Both authors have a history of revisiting and expanding their fantasy worlds. Both Le Guin and Pierce have a history as long as their first publications of engaging with their work in these ways, but these editions in close succession to one another draw a distinct parallel between both authors in their relationship to their respective fantasy worlds. I often draw on both authors' reflections in their respective afterwords in this thesis as crucial public engagement with their works along overlapping timelines.

## STRUCTURE

This Introduction will first explore the philosophies of humanity that serve as the foundation for all other approaches to textual and cultural analysis within this thesis. The following sections build upon these philosophies by focusing on each of the four main critical approaches I use to analyze Pierce's Tortall Universe: Revisionist Feminism, Female Fantasy, Neomedievalism and American culture, and finally YA literature. These four sections cover scholarship that is often interwoven and overlapping, however, each section focuses and builds upon these critical perspectives. It's crucial first to understand how literature can affect humanity and then to understand what it means to write and revise an imaginary world from a feminist perspective in order to understand why it's significant from a fantasy, American cultural, and YA perspective. The final section of this chapter concludes by examining Pierce's Revisionist Feminism through queer reading practices.

Following this Introduction, the first three chapters of this thesis will examine Pierce's first three series, *The Song*, *The Immortals*, and *The Protector* through the principal issues highlighted in each protagonist's heroic journey. In the chapters that follow, I analyze Pierce's Tortall Universe using the framework outlined in this Introduction, approaching each text through the lenses of Revisionist Feminism, neomedieval worldbuilding, and its positioning within young adult literature.

Chapter 1 examines Alanna's character, the introduction to the Tortall Universe and its historical contexts, gender and sex categorizations, and an exploration of Alanna's heroism. In Chapter 2, I explore wild magic, Daine's identity as hybrid being, and posthuman readings of *The Immortals*. In Chapter 3, I analyze the representations of masculinity in *The Protector*,

bullying, and Kel's role as a hero and leader. Chapter 4 examines intersectional concerns in Pierce's Tortall Universe more broadly to include the Tricksters duology and the Provost's Dog trilogy. Finally, in the conclusion I attempt to look both forwards and backwards at Pierce's legacy as a Revisionist Feminist YA Fantasy author.

## PHILOSOPHY

The main body of this thesis engages with close readings of narrative elements, structure, characterization, and historical contexts of Pierce's work. In this section, I outline the framework used in this thesis to analyze the relationship between humans and stories, reader and text, author and text, time and text, fantasy world and real world, and female author and politics. This section explains why these examinations are significant in a larger literary and human framework and builds the foundation for explaining why Pierce's work has meaning beyond commercial success or individual political concerns.

In her interviews with Katherine McKittrick in *On Being Human as Praxis*, Sylvia Wynter traces and destabilizes humanity's shared myth of humans as being biological rather than cultural beings—a homogenizing method of thinking that evolved from Medieval European science absolutisms. Wynter first argues that humans have distinguished themselves from other non-human animals through one crucial aspect, “the emergent faculties of language, storytelling” (qtd in McKittrick 25). Wynter critiques the modern secular Western conception of what it means to be human, arguing that it is grounded in a universalized figure of “Man 1” who is presumed to represent the entire species (qtd in McKittrick 24). Drawing on historical depictions of race and gender that extend from American society back to the European Middle Ages and

through the legacies of Christian theology and scientific thought—from Copernicus to Darwin—Wynter explains that “the West, over the last five hundred years, has brought the *whole* human species into its *hegemonic*, now purely secular [...] model of being *human*” (qtd in McKittrick 21). The homogenization of the current globalization is not neutral or natural, rather, the ideological underpinnings of globalism can be traced back to Western colonialism and Christian theology.

This is crucial to Wynter’s persuasive argument that humans are “*storytellers who now storytellingly invent themselves as being purely biological*. With this, particular (presently biocentric) macro- origin stories are overrepresented as the singular narrative through which the stakes of human freedom are articulated and marked” (qtd in McKittrick 11). Wynter’s work is crucial to understanding the role of storytelling for humans, not only in its influence on culture, but on the way humans “storytellingly” examine ourselves as a species, using supposedly biological justifications for what we construct as quintessentially human, or female, or characteristic of a certain race, and so on. Wynter argues that it is only by recognizing that human society is predicated on storytelling that people throughout history have begun to dismantle systematic oppressions, limited binaries, and hierarchies. Fantasy, and especially literature for young adults, is more disposed to explicitly question the foundations of “reality” than other forms of literature. As I explore further in the Young Adult section of this Introduction Chapter, YA Fantasy is particularly suited to these questions due to its intended readership, and relative safety in relation to real adolescents especially from a political U.S. cultural perspective.

Mikhail Bakhtin contends in his collection of essays *The Dialogic Imagination* that “language itself (in authentic metaphors, as well as in myth)” is “double-voiced”, as

simultaneously conveying the meaning of the words and the meanings behind and in-between the words (366). Reading Pierce's work as "double-voiced", as simultaneously a piece of literature and "the refracted intent of the author", gives me the ability to analyze the text as a separate, static element from author as well as implicitly conveying the author's perspectives (Bakhtin 368). Language as metaphor means engaging with "language as a social phenomenon that is becoming in history, socially stratified and weathered in this process of becoming" (Bakhtin 368). This social stratification and weathering suggest that every interaction with language or text is shaped by the myth that to be human is to be defined by inescapable realities—whether those realities are rooted in cultural tradition or in what is claimed to be objective scientific fact. Fantasy and belief, then, are not the only forms of myth-making in which humans engage. This is not to argue that Western literature is "representing reality" holistically. It rather acknowledges, particularly from an American perspective, the significant influence these ideas have had on the formation of culture, society, government, literature, and humanity. Pierce's Tortall Universe, when understood as reflective and engaging in explicit and implicit "double-voiced" texts, both reflect and reinterpret the real and imaginary world surrounding the text. Both Wynter and Bakhtin emphasize literature's crucial role in shaping, sustaining, and challenging the myths that emerge from our collective imagination and social experience.

Reading Pierce's Tortall Universe in this Bakhtin tradition is a matter concerned with examining how all these readings and meanings function within the space of narrative and worldbuilding. Marie-Laure Ryan argues that engaging with imaginary worlds concerns the relationship between elements within the imaginary world itself and not only the relationship between worlds, but also, as Ryan says, "contemplating the textual world is an end in itself, while in the other, the textual world must be evaluated in terms of its accuracy with respect to an

external reference world known to the reader through other channels of information” (*Narrative* 64). This dual frame of reading—one inward and one outward—parallels Bakhtin’s concept of dialogized heteroglossia. For Bakhtin, language is never static or unified, but shaped by contradiction, tension, and competing voices across time. Bakhtin writes that:

It is possible to give a concrete and detailed analysis of any utterance, once having exposed it as a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language. The authentic environment of an utterance, the environment in which it lives and takes shape, is dialogized heteroglossia, anonymous and social as language, but simultaneously concrete, filled with specific content and accented as an individual utterance. (311)

The Tortall Universe exists within this kind of dialogic space—not simply as a fantasy separate from the world, but as a site of layered meanings, social tensions, and evolving cultural references and intertextual relationships.

Pierce’s Tortall Universe and the texts that compose it can be analyzed both within the historical context of their publication and through the lens of contemporary interpretation. For instance, the character of Alanna may be understood simultaneously as a transgressive hero and as constrained by certain narrative or cultural limitations. Drawing on Bakhtin’s theory of language as inherently dialogic and marked by contradiction, this thesis acknowledges the coexistence of multiple, tension-filled readings that are both based in text and formed by reader identity. Fantasy narratives, like the languages they are written in, operate with what Bakhtin calls “internally dialogic potential”, which can never be “exhausted thematically [...] just as the metaphoric energy of language can never be exhausted thematically” (368). In this sense, the Tortall Universe is not just a product of Pierce’s imagination, but an ongoing dialogic process

between myth, realism, and the reader's own cultural framework. The Tortall Universe is rich and multilayered precisely because Pierce continues to return to it—not simply to extend individual narratives, but to deepen the complexity of the world itself. Rather than viewing each book or series in isolation, her work invites readers to consider Tortall as an evolving, interconnected universe shaped by time, perspective, and narrative revision.

Other scholars analyzing Pierce have used various terms in an attempt to define the type of fantasy she writes. Leah Phillips uses “mythopoetic” (*Female* 23), whereas Whitney May (51) and Katheryn Day use “adolescent feminist fantasy” (2). All these terms have their uses in attempting to explain Pierce's relationship with her contemporaries and the confluence of gender, genre, and fantasy and myth. The terms I utilize, Revisionist Feminism and Female Fantasy which are further defined in their respective sections of this Introduction Chapter, are an effort to examine Pierce's text through a specific focus of study, but I do not claim that they are the only forms that can be taken to engage with Pierce's work. Vying for the perfect term to encapsulate Pierce's place within these movements and the influence of the Tortall Universe is less important to me than exploring why the terms I have chosen are particularly fruitful to this work's engagement with Pierce's work. Scholars studying Pierce are attempting to name fantasy YA as a trend of mythopoetic, commercially successful fantasy aimed at adolescent readers featuring adolescent protagonists who are girls.

“Female Fantasy”, beyond focusing on those with female bodies, is a pattern of recognizing works that are fundamentally destabilizing and explicitly tackle issues of injustice that, as Bernice Murphy writes, “demonstrate popular fiction's capacity for telling stories about marginalized individuals even within mass culture itself” (109). Pierce's Female Fantasy is not wholly inspired by tradition or myth but mixes recognizable and new fantastical elements to

create a world wherein new forms of equality are possible. Pierce centers stories about and for girls and women, placing her work within political discourse by treating the female body as a politically contested site; as Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope write of Pierce's work:

Whether explicitly feminist or not [...] works with female heroes challenge patriarchal assumptions. In addition, both traditional and contemporary works with a female hero typically depict her primary problems as outgrowths of the culture's attitudes about women and of women's economic and social powerlessness. (12)

Pierce's choices to foreground girls and women's stories in the Tortall Universe make her works inescapably political, even beyond the intentional themes covered across the various series.

However, as this thesis will demonstrate, Pierce's work is not limited to exploring the marginalization of people based on gender, but on discrimination more broadly.

Maria Tatar and Lori Campbell both attempt in their respective books to chart out a distinctly female model of heroism. They both respond to and challenge Joseph Campbell's hero model as distinctly male and try to sketch a version of heroism distinct rather than in response to male heroism. Campbell names Pierce as fantasy that "recast[s] the typical male hero of the quest story with female heroes" (*Quest* 5). Campbell also defends her use of the language "female" and "hero", arguing that "'female hero' is a *positive* term in its ability to highlight and celebrate her femaleness in tandem with her heroism—and with heroism more broadly" (*Quest* 7). While this definition of female hero is useful in considering Pierce's characters, Campbell does not focus on Pierce in any chapter of *A Quest of Her Own* and her use of "recast" in defining female heroism places female heroism always in relation to male heroism, rather than, as Tatar describes, a distinct part of a history of female heroism that has historically been silenced (xiv). Tatar defines many qualities of female heroism but ultimately argues that empathy and compassion distinguish

female heroes. She writes that, “our new attentiveness to the value of empathy has been fueled by the heroism of women from times past, women who had themselves been marginalized and disenfranchised but still cared deeply about those who had been crushed and enslaved, beaten down, and brought to heel” (Tatar xx). Pierce’s stories belong to this lineage of transformative storytelling. Her protagonists do not simply step into the roles once held by male heroes, rather, as I explore throughout this thesis but particularly in Chapters 1 and 3, these women redefine heroism itself.

Building on this redefinition of heroism, it is essential to consider how performative gender and queer studies intersects with feminist discourse to further deconstruct and challenge traditional cultural binaries: a practice of reading I engage with several times throughout this thesis. As Judith Butler’s pivotal *Gender Trouble* demonstrates, queer representations and reading practices have long been intertwined with feminist efforts to challenge and dismantle cultural assumptions, constructions, and binaries. In this context, Tess Grogan’s observation that Pierce “move[s] away from a binary paradigm to a continuum of gendered behavior” (17), though made in reference to Alanna’s journey, underscores how Pierce’s narratives destabilize binaries more broadly. I extend this reading of continuum beyond gender, applying it to the Tortall Universe as a whole to explore how Pierce challenges fixed categories of identity across multiple avenues. As I continued to explore the intersection of Revisionist Feminism, Pierce’s explicit engagement with her Tortall Universe, young adult concerns, neomedievalism in relation to contemporary America, and the representation of female heroism, it became increasingly clear that recognizing queer characters in the Tortall Universe is a part of a larger analysis of Pierce’s Tortall Universe as queer.

Understanding Pierce through queer reading theories is essential because her work consistently challenges normative binaries and constructs, particularly around gender, power, and identity. Her protagonists defy traditional roles, embodying fluid and evolving selves that align with queer theory's emphasis on the constructedness of identity. In the context of YA literature, where identity formation is a central concern, Pierce's revisionist Female Fantasy creates space for readers to question what Wynter calls "biological absolutism" or constructed cultural norms as the basis for human hierarchies and inequality.

Lewis Seifert's definition of queer reading provides a valuable framework for analyzing the complexities of identity and representation in Pierce's work. He argues that the term queer is "multivalent", purposefully so in order to keep "its meanings open" but attempts to describe queer readings "in the broadest sense" as involved with "questioning of dominant forms of social and political relationships while deliberately resisting any prescription of what those relationships should look like" (16). Seifert also notes the importance of queer readings as aligned with Butler's feminism and Wynter's understanding of human, as he writes that queer, "designates the practices and concepts showings that gender and sexuality do *not* derive in any straight-forward way from a 'natural essence' but necessarily involve social and cultural factors, which in turn create normative constructions" (16). As I explore in Chapters 1 and 3, Pierce's Tortall Universe has one explicitly queer tertiary character in *Bloodhound*, but Pierce has stated in interviews that Alanna is genderfluid, Kel is aromantic and asexual, and several children of Pierce's characters (including Alanna, Daine, and Jonathan) identify as queer. In a queer YA literary reading, Eve Sedgwick notes the importance of not excluding characters in YA that have not "come out" as queer during the space of the text. She writes that in fact, this is a commonality of YA queer literature as a whole:

It seems to me that an often quiet, but very palpable presiding image here—a kind of *genius loci* for queer reading—is the interpretive absorption of the child or adolescent whose sense of personal queerness may or may not (*yet?*) have resolved into a sexual specificity of proscribed object choice, aim, site, or identification. (Sedgwick 2)

This ambiguity complicates the identification of queer YA texts, yet it places Alanna and Kel within a tradition of queer young adult fiction in which protagonists lack the language or fully formed identity to self-identify as queer by the series' end. Although both characters conclude their narratives as relatively young women, their evolving relationships to their bodies, desires, cultural expectations, and identities remain deeply generative through a queer analytical lens.

## REVISIONIST FEMINISM

Revisionist Feminism as used throughout this thesis, is in itself a revision of the previous use of the term. This section covers some of the historic applications of the term and their limitations by first briefly defining the “Feminism” portion of the term and then turning to a more in-depth exploration of how “Revisionist” is understood and applied.

Feminism is a term that scholars feel is both implicitly understood yet still requiring a definition. For this work, I define feminism as the fight and belief in equality of humanity regardless of gender, sex, sexuality, race, and class, and a greater empathy and equality between humanity and non-human. Some people who identify as feminists disagree with this definition beyond the first “or”, but the world and current failures of feminism’s aims has only further proved the necessity of inclusive rather than exclusive forms of feminism. A scholar on the

intersection of gender and race explains why resisting reductions to feminism is central to its ideologies:

Advocating the mere tolerance of difference between women is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic [...] Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate.

(Lorde 265)

The transformative power of feminism comes not from erasing distinctions or minimizing disagreement, but from engaging with diverse strengths and perspectives to generate creativity, courage, and meaningful social change.

The history of patriarchy influences, but does not wholly dictate, what a woman is or what a woman can be. As Simone De Beauvoir writes, the “Lack of women in history does not bely our inferiority, but rather reinforces the devastating effect that the patriarchy has had on women’s opportunities and lives” and builds on this claim to argue that the increase of women in history who are heroic or influential prove “that it is not the inferiority of women that cause their historical insignificance: it is rather their historical insignificance that has doomed them to inferiority” (132). Indeed this lack of women in history, as Nadya Aisenberg writes, has only served to further perpetuate that women *cannot* be an influential part of society rather than revealing that women were inhibited from being so, “Women’s traditional place as passive, supportive, and awaiting a romantic destiny, is reinforced by the fact that women’s contribution is omitted from the long record of historical achievement handed down by men” (13). Pierce’s Tortall Universe exemplifies these feminist concerns and challenges the historical oppression of

women by expanding the scope of feminist issues she addresses, exploring their intersection with personal identity, and portraying characters who disrupt the cultural assumption embedded in patriarchy that women are inherently less capable rather than less free.

Existing scholarship often analyzes Pierce's work through the lens of feminist waves. This approach, while useful for situating her books within broader American feminist movements and understanding how she responds to them, tends to isolate her feminism within the confines of individual texts. In this thesis, I acknowledge the historical context of these movements but consider them collectively across the connected Tortall Universe. Rather than placing her feminism squarely in the past, Pierce's work exemplifies a Revisionist Feminism that respects historical roots while expanding and evolving its meanings. At times, I refer to specific waves when analyzing particular elements or building on existing scholarship, but I do not argue that the Tortall Universe fits neatly within any single wave. Instead, I trace Pierce's ongoing effort to develop each protagonist's feminist journey in dialogue with previous ones and in pursuit of a broader vision of feminism and social justice.

Linda Nicholson notes that the concept of feminist waves was largely codified in the early 1990s, as a way of tracking large-scale gender movements in public life. Scholars have typically divided feminism in the U.S. into waves: the First Wave in the 1970s addressed substantive equality; the Second Wave in the 1980s focused on reproductive rights and critiques of family and marriage; and the Third Wave, beginning in the 1990s, expanded into intersectionality, individualism, and ecofeminism. Some identify a Fourth Wave beginning in the 2010s, defined by online feminism, rape culture, and inclusion, while others use the term "Postfeminism", a less coherent framework tied to autonomy and victimization (Sternadori 32-33).

Rome (et al., 252), Butler (*Gender* xxxii), and Bracewell note that Revisionist Feminism must contend with questions of “how we might avoid the pitfalls of identity politics to foster systematic change, not for white feminists, black feminists, male feminists or transsexual women, but for humanity on a macro level” (Bracewell, *Why We* 267). Pierce’s work gestures toward that kind of macro-vision. It is not always successful in application, but it remains aspirational in its attempt to expand what feminism can be. The issue is not ideological progression; feminism has no final destination. Rather, our relationship with the past is always present in how we tell stories, in what we value, and in how we imagine justice. Pierce explores this complexity by reframing her world through new perspectives. She does not revise her earlier books by rewriting them. Alanna’s story still exists as it is. But she complicates that story by giving us new characters who have different relationships to Alanna’s legacy. In doing so, she shows that feminism is not a fixed ideology or a perfect arc, but a constantly shifting conversation between history, identity, and power. Revisionist Feminism, then, is less about correcting the past than critically engaging with it—allowing us to hold contradictory, complementary, and complex readings at once.

In my view, Pierce’s Tortall Universe is an example of “Revisionist Feminism”: a feminism that remains in conversation with the past but does not seek to overwrite or erase it. Instead, Revisionist Feminism holds space for the historical context in which narratives were produced, even as it interrogates them through evolving perspectives. In Pierce’s work, this means acknowledging how each protagonist reflects both the time of the book’s publication and a continuing feminist project. Her texts work to recognize the complexities of identity politics and intersectional perspectives, while also seeking moments of connection across different

characters and generations. Each book is both an individual literary work and part of a larger, interconnected feminist world.

By setting different series in varying time periods and focusing on different protagonists, Pierce adds new layers of social, political, and emotional meaning that reframe earlier texts without replacing them. As Michael Saler writes, “imaginary worlds [...] have trained their inhabitants to question essential interpretations of the world” encouraging readers to interrogate what is assumed to be fixed or real in both fiction and life (21). In this way, Pierce’s expanding body of work reflects a broader revisionist impulse: to re-engage the past with contemporary questions and understandings. Tortall’s narrative structure mirrors what Mark J.P. Wolf describes as a hallmark of long-form worldbuilding: “series of sequels advance the overarching story of a world, but quite often this story grows into both the future and the past as more and more backstories and stories of origins are developed” (*Building* 207). This ongoing re-visioning does not fragment the world but strengthens it, creating a dynamic interplay between history and narrative that expands the boundaries of Tortall beyond any one book or timeline, “Worlds extend beyond the stories that occur in them”, Wolf reminds us; “inviting speculation and exploration through imaginative means [...] can make us more aware of the circumstances and conditions of the actual world we inhabit” (*Building* 17). In revisiting Tortall, Pierce also revisits her own authorial positions—maturing and refining her engagements with gender, power, and justice. As Wolf notes, “as a world grows over time, so does an author’s conception of it”, leading to a rethinking and redesigning of the world as earlier works begin to feel less nuanced or socially engaged (*Building* 212-213). This re-engagement is what allows Tortall to feel so alive: it is not static or finished but in a constant state of becoming, shaped by changing times,

deeper questions, and Pierce's commitment to interrogating the world—imagined and real—through fiction.

I am not the first to use the term “Revisionist Feminism”, and there have been critiques of its limitations, such as its “monistic focus on the sexual needs, experiences, and desires of white women”, narrowing its supposed inclusivity (Bracewell and Garcia 178). But this critique doesn't fully capture the potential of the Revisionist Feminism in Pierce's work, where stories evolve over time not just in response to white, liberal feminism, but in dialogue with expanding questions of race, class, religion, and power. Alicia Ostriker, a fundamental thinker in defining and arguing for Revisionist Feminist practices, explains that “Revisionist poems do not necessarily confine themselves to defiance and reversal strategies. A more central set of preoccupations concerns female-female relationships and the relation of the female to suppressed dimensions of her own identity” (74). Pierce's work reflects these themes. Her protagonists are often shaped by the legacies of other women—sometimes admired, sometimes questioned—and the books themselves reflect a dynamic interplay between continuity and growth. Pierce practices an inclusive, aspirational feminism, even if not always perfectly realized. Turning critical attention to the past, not in an attempt to rewrite it, but to reimagine it anew. Pierce does not rewrite Alanna, she returns to the world in Daine's story in *The Immortals*, adding magical creatures and a new type of magic to examine new ecological and class intersectional feminist issues, and revises the depiction of female knights through the characters of Kel in *The Protector* and later Sabine in *Provost's Dog* in order to expand diverse and intersectional feminist aims.

Feminist Revisionism as it has been primarily used in critical theory has been about “revising” male-dominated stories/legends/myths/history/characters/art. However, the main distinction in the use of the term within this thesis is that it is not “revisionist” as in recovering or

revising history directly, not a retelling or retconning, but a revision as in addition. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar highlight the importance of revisioning in women's ability to interrogate and reshape the definitions of gender "women inherited from male literature" (76). This demonstrates that Feminist Revision allows women to challenge inherited narratives that dictate who they are, creating space to assert their own identities and reshape cultural expectations. Gilbert and Gubar go on to explore the historical use of revisionist practices in feminism that reimagine previous literature by men with feminist aims (192). While they emphasize that the method of revision has been crucial to women's relationship to literature, their definition of revision remains directly connected to the history of men's literature and does not, as Pierce's work does, reimagine worlds in which women have always been the focus.

This historical use of Feminist Revision has also been utilized to examine feminist retellings and reworkings of fairy tales. Cristina Bacchilega highlights how these revisions engage with the historical context of fairy tales while also allowing contemporary retellings to reshape the stories to reflect our own cultural and social contexts, "In its multiple retellings, the fairy tale is that variable and 'in-between' image where folklore and literature, community and individual, consensus and enterprise, children and adults, Woman and women, face and reflect (on) each other" (10). Bacchilega's use of revisioning from a feminist perspective aligns with Martha Johnson-Olin's examination of fairy tales, which, "advocates the study of feminist fairy tale revisions because" of how these "versions reclaim space for women and encourage an expansion of the genre itself" (81). Interacting with fairy tales through a focus on revising them through a feminist lens, while useful for these critics to examine women's excavations into history, do not also consider revision in its ability to imagine something wholly new and therefore wholly female.

Angela Carter's famous metaphor that "most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode" (qtd in Gamble 4) is actually an echo of Ostriker's wine metaphor (71). A. Carter's update to the wine bottle metaphor is interesting but lacks the ability to address the complexities of the Tortall Universe through a Revisionist Feminist reading. Where this metaphor would struggle to capture the full potential of Pierce's Tortall Universe and its Feminist Revisionist practices is that when everything is mixed in the bottle it loses a sense of time. With analysis it might be possible to discover the age of all the wines mixed in the bottle, but it wouldn't be clear, for instance, what order they were mixed in. In one sense, the bottle exploding is the only true way to see inside, but it destroys the bottle in the process, and the bottle as well as the wine(s) throughout time is part of understanding the wine in the bottle. In contrast to the wine bottle, Anderson argues that "a more useful way of thinking about these changes as well as other changes in activism over time can be suggested by the metaphor of a kaleidoscope" due to the fact that "at any given moment in time, the view in a kaleidoscope is complex, showing distinct colors and patterns" (Nicholson 5). However, the issue in using the kaleidoscope metaphor to study Pierce is that time is important to interacting with the Tortall Universe. Time in her work is not an ideological progression which infers a final destination or continual progress towards a goal, but a literal one as I explore through Mark Wolf's exploration of the relationship between time, readership, and seriality in Chapter 4. Our relationship with the past is always present in our conversations about now and in how we tell stories about the past. A kaleidoscope presents one viewpoint, even if the rotation causes different connections between colors to become distinct, it always assumes viewing a text through one homogenous lens.

Mikkonen's work on female revisions as "metamorphosis" moves feminist revisions from retellings of history towards a reimagined future. She envisions revisionism not only as retelling or retconning, but as something able to create something wholly new, a transformative revision rather than a retrospective one writing, "Moreover, metamorphosis might have this [transformative] function in texts that are not straightforward revisions of earlier texts (texts that share the same title, the same set of [...] characters)" Mikkonen 329. Building upon this idea of revision as feminist metamorphosis, are Kathryn Hume and Aisenberg's definitions of Revisionist Feminism that does more than reflect but reimagines and newly imagines. Hume writes that the "*literature of revision* [...]" lays out plans for revising reality, for shaping futures" (56 emphasis in original). This consideration of the future thus shifts revisionism as wholly reflective to one predicated on the expectation of change and future revisions and is contrasted to previous, more placid and less disruptive modes of retellings as "literature of vision". Hume writes that the "Literature of vision, instead of offering retreat, challenges us with the new, but still offers us this experience as a pleasure for our consideration, whereas literature of revision wants a stronger commitment from us" (57). In addition to Hume's definition of feminist revisions as continuation, Aisenberg argues that the creation of new structures of feminism is also necessary to this revisionist practice:

Revisionist work by feminists is now under way in many disciplines [...] the new literary genres which women are creating illuminate the strong connection between gender and genre, and the consequent necessity for women to create new forms, new structures, to express their experience and their different sense of the self and its best relation to society. (38)

This historical evolution and revision, in which women revisit and reimagine feminism as simultaneously past and present, new and revised, both shapes how I use the term throughout this thesis and exposes the limitations of much existing scholarship that employs the term, which treats the practice of revision as purely reflective rather than reflective, challenged, and reimagined as Pierce demonstrates in her creation of the Tortall Universe.

Phillips uses the language of “networks of relation” to emphasize that multiple texts within the Tortall Universe should not only be examined through the lens of YA seriality nor can Pierce’s work be understood without a holistic view of work, but also as “they each exist independently but also interdependently. The category of progressive series cannot, in its focus on a single developmental line, take this multiplicity into account” (*Female* 49). Phillips uses the term “network of relation” to contextualize Pierce’s influence and connection to contemporary YA Fantasy authors, “Tamora Pierce’s influence on the sub-genre and the ‘network of relation’ formed by contemporary authors citing, especially, her older work [...] is one such way this fantasy works within contemporary culture” (*Female* 51). While the Conclusion Chapter of this thesis highlights the significant influence Pierce has had and continues to have on female-focused Fantasy, this thesis primarily examines the “network of relations” within Pierce’s Universe rather than across multiple authors’ works. Furthermore, I argue that “network of relations” is too neutral a term to describe Pierce’s contributions, which align more closely with Revisionist Feminism because it reflects Pierce’s sustained and deliberate focus on these interconnected texts and narratives from a female perspective.

In Pierce’s work, revision becomes a narrative and political tool—honoring the past while actively reinterpreting it to reflect new ethical and cultural understandings. Wolf continues, writing that on one hand, “audiences typically would prefer that authors accept the creative

challenge of working around the limitations imposed by earlier works rather than merely going back and changing them” (*Building* 215). He goes on to write that from some perspectives, when authors publish a book, they enter a kind “social contract” wherein the audience gains some ownership of the text as it exists and that authors returning to their imaginary worlds “can make a work unstable” (*Building* 213). Though M. Wolf is referring to retconning, a specific practice of overwriting or altering past art, Pierce’s returns to the world both in later fiction and through interviews and her online engagement have similar trends. The world within *The Immortals* series, for example, may be stable, but it’s undoubtable that the ongoing Numair series will affect how future readers engage with his character within *The Immortals*. In my opinion, texts are never stable as each reader brings their own reading to a text and each reading, as this thesis demonstrates, can be affected by shifts in context both cultural and specific.

An infamous example of this altered relationship to text can be seen in shifting fan perceptions of *The Harry Potter* series in reaction to J.K. Rowling’s bigoted personal politics (Schaefer 1). Amerigo Quatrini argues that the impact of Rowling’s hate speech stems not from her celebrity, but from her self-identification as a “feminist and LGTB [sic] ally”, while her actions contradict this identification (97). Her role as a children’s author further amplifies this harm, given her influence on young readers and cultural narratives. Jennifer Duggan’s 2021 article “Transformative Readings: Harry Potter Fan Fiction, Trans/Queer Reader Response, and J.K. Rowling” explores the recent increase in “participatory” relationships between authors and text, calling the relationship between Rowling and her fans “a political battlefield”, and argues that “readers [...] are insisting on the primacy of their own interpretations” of the *content* of the text as inclusive in direct opposition to Rowling, the author’s, opinions and interpretations of the text (147). In the digital age, Rowling’s status as a living author allows her views to spread

instantly online. Her celebrity, built on literature that promoted tolerance and acceptance, has contributed to growing criticism of children's and YA Fantasy as a reductive genre. Her actions are also part of a broader trend that, as Jordan Tudisco writes, illustrates “the failure of cis feminism”, particularly within academia. As I discuss later in this Introduction, Rowling is not the only fantasy author whose work has sparked divisive fan reactions and debates about conservative politics.

Both Pierce (*Hand* 246) and Le Guin (*The Books XI*) have reflected in their respective afterwards on the politics of writing fantasy as women, especially when writing female-centered narratives for young adults. Le Guin's *Earthsea* trilogy began in 1968 with the release of *The Wizard of Earthsea* and featured a male protagonist and hero, Ged. Though Le Guin shifted the narrative in 1971's *The Tombs of Atuan* to a woman's perspective, Ged remains a central figure of The *Earthsea* series. Pierce's universe, beginning over ten years later in 1983, is explicitly centered on female stories. Le Guin herself later admitted the limitations of her early work: “I had reimagined the man's role, but not the woman's. I had not yet thought what a female hero might be. No wonder; where are all the women in *Earthsea*? Two of the books of the trilogy have no major female characters [...] and in all three books the fundamental power, magic, belongs to men” (*Earthsea Revisioned* 9). She also critiques how literary standards have historically positioned male-coded writing as the universal norm: “the only way to have one's writing perceived as above politics, as universally human, was to gender one's writing male” (*Earthsea Revisioned* 6-7). Pierce, by contrast, from her first book onward, insisted on writing girls into the center of heroic journeys—on their own terms, and without the need to masculinize or homogenize their stories to make them “universal”. The Song comes even before Judith Butler's landmark 1990 *Gender Trouble*, where Butler famously wrote that within a Western tradition,

“gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be” (34). This feminist framework echoes Sylvia Wynter’s argument that human identity itself is historically constructed through mutable cultural stories and not fixed biological truths.

The destabilization of biologically determined notions of humanity often relies on a critical examination of the relationship between sex and gender. This dynamic is especially evident in texts that challenge dominant American constructions of the human from marginalized or gendered perspectives, as seen, albeit in different ways, in the work of Pierce, Le Guin, and Wynter.<sup>4</sup> To revise, then, is not to erase or overwrite, but to engage critically with the past through the lens of the present. This process honors both historical context and contemporary insight without dismissing either. As Le Guin reflects, “When the world turns over, you can’t go on thinking upside down. What was innocence is now irresponsibility. Visions must be revised” (*Earthsea Revisioned* 12). Le Guin and Pierce see the return to their respective fantasy worlds, *Earthsea* and *Tortall*, as necessary feminist practice to critically confront limitations or mistakes of the past. Wolf writes that “as a world grows over time, so does an author’s conception of it”, and that early works can appear “outdated or less sophisticated”, prompting authors “to rethink and redesign” their worlds (*Building* 212-213). This is certainly true of Pierce, whose later works demonstrate a more nuanced engagement with race, class, gender, and power than her earlier books. M. Wolf further illustrates the complications of authors returning to their work in the context of the more controversial “retcon” which includes rewriting elements of the previous story. While Pierce does correct a few early inaccuracies in timelines in later publications

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<sup>4</sup> These trends exist across multiple cultures and places in time, but each of these women’s ideas engages with these constructed identities from a uniquely American viewpoint.

(“Tortall Universe”), her later publications in the Tortall Universe do not engage with directly contradicting narrative events or world elements in earlier works.

As an expansive, sprawling genre, fantasy is particularly suited to revision—but without the kind of politically conscious lens Pierce brings, these revisions don’t always reflect activist aims. Wolf further argues that returning to an imaginary world can present an ideological approach to the text that “does not consider sequence elements as individual works standing on their own, but rather parts of a greater whole, an imaginary world which is still a work in progress, changing as it grows” (*Building* 215). This echoes Andrew Friedenthal’s portrayals of retconning as having “a positive impact on society, fostering a sense of history itself as a constructed narrative and thus engendering an acceptance of how historical narratives can and should be recast to allow for a broader field of stories to be told in the present” (3). The middle ground I propose is what Pierce embodies: she doesn’t attempt to erase or ignore her previous work. Instead, as the world of Tortall expands—it grows more complex. Characters with new ideologies enter the world, and the evolving social and political climate of Tortall reflects a deeper commitment to intersectionality, justice, and critique. The past remains intact, but the present—and the lens through which we read it—continues to shift. From *The Protector* onwards, it is possible to trace a pattern, both across individual series and her works as a whole, of Pierce’s main feminist tenets. As Pierce argues, “In fantasy, those normally perceived as unimportant are vital players [...] Fantasy creates hope and optimism in readers” (Pierce, “Fantasy” 50-51). The feminism Pierce returns to throughout her works in the Tortall Universe is **revisionist, critical, and optimistic. It is concerned with women’s issues, expanding the intersectionality of women’s issues, actionable change, the effect of technology,**

**marginalized identities, community, and equality in all aspects of life—social, cultural, and legal.**

## FEMALE FANTASY

This section focuses on this work’s critical examination of Tamora Pierce’s Tortall Universe as a coherent fantasy world and a body of inherently political texts that reflect American society in extensive, diverse, and evolving ways across the past several decades. It builds on previous critical work on Pierce, but, crucially, offers the first inter-connected critical analysis of all of Pierce’s Tortall texts, utilizing unexamined critical approaches to these texts. As I have already demonstrated and as I cover further in the Scholarship section of Chapter 1, the existing scholarship on Pierce has not dealt with the multitude of texts that contribute to the Tortall Universe as a whole. As discussed in the previous section, the critical approach used by L. Phillips in examining Pierce closely aligns with the approach taken in this thesis. Phillips introduces the term “networks of relation” to situate Pierce within the broader trend of “mythopoetic” YA Fantasy. However, her analysis is limited, focusing only on *The Song* and *The Immortals*, which restricts her ability to explore the “networks of relation” within Pierce’s broader Tortall Universe, rather than across the genre as a whole. While I touch on aspects of Pierce’s revisionist approach to myths in the Religion section of Chapter 1, this thesis primarily focuses on how Pierce’s imaginary world functions within the context of young adult experience, gendered identity, and the balance between realistic and magical elements in the author’s choices. Other scholarship specifically on Pierce, as discussed in the Scholarship section of Chapter 1 and referenced throughout this thesis, has primarily focused only on one or two of

Pierce's series and particularly on *The Song*. However, these texts adopt an approach more aligned with situating the Tortall Universe within the broader context of Female Fantasy.

While the application of Revisionist Feminism is particularly fruitful to explore within the genre of fantasy, it is not limited to an application of fantasy literature and can be applied to media and creators across critical disciplines. To apply Revisionist Feminism specifically to the study of Pierce requires the introduction of the term Female Fantasy. The creation of the Tortall Universe is not only uniquely feminist and revisionist but also fundamentally a work of Fantasy. The use of "Female" in this context should not be conflated with "Feminist" in Revisionist Feminism; instead, it refers to a broader trend within fantasy Literature, particularly in YA Fantasy, where women authors write stories centered on female protagonists. While Female Fantasy is defined by its focus on female characters, it does not imply that all texts within this category are inherently feminist in the same explicit and enduring way that Pierce's works are within the tradition of Revisionist Feminism.

Examining all texts across the Tortall Universe as politically-conscious and as part of an ever-evolving universe is reminiscent of Le Guin's similar practice of Revisionist Feminism. This is reflected in Le Guin's reflections on her fantasy world-building in relation to gender in 1992:

A world in which men are seen as independently real and women are seen only as non-men is not a fantasy kingdom. It is every army. It's Washington D.C. and the Tokyo Stock Exchange. It's the corporate boardroom and the executive suite and the board of regents. It's the canon of English Literature. It's our politics. It's the world I lived in when I wrote the first three books of *Earthsea*. (*Earthsea Revised* 16-17)

Like Le Guin and Tolkien, Pierce uses fantasy not to escape reality but to confront and reshape it, embedding critiques of systemic inequality within imagined worlds that remain deeply connected to the real one. This language is also reminiscent of critical perspectives on female heroism, which I examine in greater depth in the following section on Neomedievalism and America, as well as in the respective sections on Heroism in Chapter 1 and Chapter 3. These sections explore both the work of resurrecting (or “revising”, as previous Revisionist Feminists focusing on myth and fairy tales would define it) female heroes from a male-dominated past, and the necessity of imagining alternate worlds in order to explore societies beyond the limitations of patriarchal systems.

In this thesis, I use the term Female Fantasy to describe not only Tamora Pierce’s literature, but what I point to as a broader trend in the subgenre of YA Fantasy. I define Female Fantasy as fantasy media with strong female characters, a young adult (often but not always female) protagonist, and which are deeply concerned with exploring issues of individual identity, morality, diversity, legality, and equality. This is not an exclusionary term; I use female in this context similarly to Phillips when she writes about the “female” hero:

The ‘female’ of female-hero performs a similar function to being-hero: it represents the dynamic occupation of a gendered identity, which is then, of course, coupled with hero. Importantly, this female, of female-hero, is not tied to biology in an essentialist way, even as biology, particularly the body’s fleshy materiality, is a part of that being. (*Female* 20-21)

Pierce’s work is concerned with female biology, but it is not exclusionary, as she is not interested in defining women solely in relation to their biological sex. This work uses “Female Fantasy” to

mean fantasy concerned not just with girls and young women, but fantasy concerned with marginalized identities and which critiques prejudice and oppression.

Female Fantasy is not a biologically or trans-exclusionary term. Reading Alanna's journey through genderfluid, transgender, or cis woman critical frameworks are equally valid. These conversations looked different in the 1980s than they do now, and they'll certainly continue to shift in the future. Alanna and Kel both narrate their experiences with menstruation; it is important to acknowledge, however, that not all women menstruate—just as not all women fight in wars, engage in sexual relationships, or suffer tragic losses. Nonetheless, some do. Young readers are capable of forming emotional connections across multiple narrative levels, drawing meaning from characters' experiences even when those experiences differ from their own. As girls grow, they undergo physical changes, navigate relationships, and encounter conflict and loss. This is what defines Female Fantasy: it reflects a range of experiences common to many women, while never presuming a universal or homogeneous response to those experiences. This thesis and Pierce's Tortall Universe do not emphasize "female" in order to be exclusionary. My use of female is in a social, not scientific, context. As I will prove in this thesis, Pierce's Tortall Universe as a whole clearly demonstrates that when she returns to write in Tortall, it is always with the *intent* to expand what it means to be a woman, rather than to restrict the definition of "Female" or "Woman". The last and most practical justification for the use of "Female" in Female Fantasy is that there is no other word in the English language for this group of people that does not imply age as "girl" and "woman" do. Pierce's explorations of what it means to be female are not limited to *only* experiences of the biological realities for people born with vulvas; I do not presume to limit myself either with the use of the word female to this exclusionary way of thinking.

All discussions of gender in this thesis are grounded in two fundamental assumptions about our relationship to the “Female”, sex and gender. The first is that the examination of the female in literature is neither exclusionary nor solely focused on the materiality of the body; however, it is also not entirely detached from the embodied experience of the female. This study of gender is, as Trites argues, one of considering multiple aspects of the female, “we must also examine how the materiality of gender representation allows for ways of being empowered (and disempowered) within the complex interactions that exist among individuals, their environments, their discursive and social constructs, and their material constructs” (*Twenty-First* XXV). Examining the embodiment of gender is not exclusionary when it considers how the materiality of gender representation can empower or disempower individuals, but rather, in the Revisionist Feminism approach, expansive, and enmeshed in multiplicity. Secondly, female in this feminist application is grounded in the belief that any biological differences between sexes is 1) Generally cultural and learned rather than biological in origin, 2) Any biological differences that do exist are less significant than the similarities shared between all of humanity, and 3) Feminine traits, such as passivity, are real in the sense of existing as belief in American and patriarchal societies but not real as in natural, fixed, or universal. Or in more straightforward terms:

No set of qualities is innately or exclusively “female” or “male.” Men can be compassionate, loving and kind, as women can be tough, brave, or callous. But patriarchy assigns the qualities associated with aggression and competition to men, and relegates to women the devalued roles of nurturing and service. (Starhawk 245)

The use of the word female throughout this work relies on the preceding uses of the word rather than any that suggest exclusivity, wholly materiality, reductionism of biology, disrespect, or diminution.

The remainder of this section focuses on defining the fantasy in Female Fantasy. Crucially, Tamora Pierce, her publisher, her fans, and librarians all agree that her literature is fantasy for young adults, especially young girls.<sup>5</sup> As Mendlesohn and James write in the introduction to *A Short History of Fantasy* when reviewing Pierce's books, "we know they are fantasy" even without applying critical methods of defining the genre (2). Kim Wilkins echoes a similar description of both fantasy and YA literature as "we know it when we see it" (4). Fantasy literature is influential beyond its market capabilities in interrogating "realities" of humanity by questioning the boundaries between the fictional or fantastical and the real. Brian Attebery writes, "Fantasy provides new contexts, and thus inevitably new meanings, for myth. Fantasy spins stories about the stories" (*Stories* 3). These "stories" that are spun in fantasy literature represent not only narrative journeys, but speak to how humans view ourselves in society and culture and interrogates the supposedly biological facts aligned with Wynter's worldview, that create and perpetuate institutions of society. Attebery elaborates when he explains the power of fantasy to shape fundamental reality:

The most powerful and provocative fantasies recontextualize myths, placing them back into history and reminding us of their social and political power. By telling stories about, around, and upon mythic stories, we put ourselves onto the same stage with the gods and heroes and monsters and thus are forced to confront our godlike, heroic, and monstrous selves. (Attebery, *Stories* 4)

In this work, I explore the myths found in Pierce's writing, including by her use of traditional creatures and figures, such as Harpies, ogres, dragons, giants, or chivalric knights, and, more

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<sup>5</sup> As I explore briefly later in this chapter, people do argue who is actually reading YA or what being "young adult" means but Pierce's style of writing does not alter significantly within a series or between each text in a series, but as each protagonist ages, she therefore faces more "adult" or "young adult" challenges later in the series.

crucially, the cultural myths surrounding gender, sexuality, history, justice, race, class, capitalism, and the American Dream. This perspective on the American Dream aligns with Bakhtin's concept of cultural myths, as discussed in my section on Philosophy, which frames elements of human society as stories or myths we tell about ourselves.

Fantasy scholarship notes that fantasy literature can use fantastical elements to address political issues and convey complex arguments while still entertaining its audience. This, as Matthew Sangster notes, is a strength of fantasy literature in being able to alter the fabric of the world to imagine problems in a new way while providing narrative elements that are full of wonder and magic:

Many fantasies make their most powerful interventions by approaching problems subtly or obliquely. People's tolerance for being lectured is sharply limited when compared with the enjoyment of seeing a world anew and being asked to play a role in its imaginative creation and interpretation. (27)

In an interview, Tamora Pierce notes that placing her writing in the genre fantasy allowed her to more openly address issues of morality, which other modes of literature did not. She states, "It's our moral literature. Only in fantasy are people allowed to speak openly of courage, honor, duty, and obligation, without being laughed at [...] These ideas, and idealism itself, are taken seriously in fantasy, and by fantasy readers. They are *needed* by fantasy readers" (qtd in Kunzel and Fichtelberg 265). Rather than placing this work as "escapism", I see Pierce's Tortall Universe as functioning as a removed, and therefore, more safe place to imagine alternate female stories that attempt to seriously engage with young adult concerns. Pierce feels that she would be derided or "laughed at" for engaging explicitly in these philosophical discussions within the political and cultural landscape of America, which views itself as rooted in realism rather than idealism (Lyon

1). Fantasy provides a space where Pierce can think and speak differently, allowing her to engage complex philosophical and political questions in a way that resonates with audiences who might otherwise be unreceptive in more realist contexts.

J.R.R. Tolkien and George R.R. Martin, two male fantasy authors frequently referenced in discussions of neomedievalism, present contrasting views on the relationship between fantasy, escapism, realism, and medievalism. In *On Fairy Stories*, Tolkien rejects the idea that escapism is inherently frivolous, framing it instead as “a re-gaining of a clear view” through “recovery” (qtd in Fliieger and Anderson 67). Martin, by contrast, has been credited with “changing” the direction of contemporary fantasy; Lev Grossman even dubbed him “the American Tolkien” (Grossman, par. 1). Martin and his supporters frame his work as more “realistic” than Tolkien’s, emphasizing violence, moral ambiguity, and historical grit. Shiloh Carroll notes Martin’s critique of fantasy as “‘cliched’ and ‘Disneyland,’” he argues that readers deserve greater realism (4). Yet as Shiloh Carroll, KellyAnn Fitzpatrick, and Elizabeth Emery, for example, argue, Martin’s realism is often a way to sidestep accountability for how violence and inequality are portrayed. Carroll reminds us that fantasy is not a neutral mirror of the past: “the layers of interpretation between the contemporary reader or author and the medieval past make it nearly impossible to recreate a truly ‘realistic’ Middle Ages” (*Enchanting* 13). The claim to realism can obscure the author’s responsibility to imagine ethical alternatives. As Carroll writes, this insistence on historical accuracy risks validating harmful portrayals of “women, people of color, and those with non-normative sexualities” (*Enchanting* 19). Emery similarly argues that “what one chooses to say about these 1000 years often reveals much more about the person evoking the ‘medieval’ than about the historical period itself” (79). What fantasy includes as real or imagined is always a political choice.

As Ebony Thomas argues in her study of fantasy, fantasy can be both imagined and real, “When we dream inside the stories worlds [...] do those worlds offer all kinds of people escape from the world as we know it? Could they offer catharsis for some of our most pressing human problems? Might they help us collectively imagine our world anew?” (*The Dark 2*). Catharsis is not escapism, it is the experience of positive possibility and safety of narrative genre, particularly YA Fantasy, or “recovery” that enables the reader to both enjoy the experience the magic of a fantasy world while simultaneously recognizing what its creation expresses about our own world. Pierce herself argues for this relationship with fantasy and her own imaginary worlds, arguing:

“Fantasy[...] is a literature of possibilities. It opens the door to the realm of ‘What If,’ challenging readers to see beyond the concrete universe and to envision other ways of living and alternative mindsets. Everything in speculative universes, and by association the real world, is mutable. Intelligent readers will come to relate the questions raised in these books to their own lives. (Pierce, “Fantasy” 51)

Pierce crucially acknowledges that in fantasy "everything is mutable", and that by engaging with fantasy in this way, readers are positioned to question the underlying foundations of both fictional worlds and our own reality. The encouragement for readers to ask critical questions is a key aspect of Revisionist Feminism, where ongoing engagement and examination are essential to prevent feminist ideology and action from stagnating.

Pierce’s neomedievalism exists between these theories. She blends escapist elements—magic, wonder, romance—with realistic depictions of trauma, violence, and injustice. As this thesis will show, what matters is not whether her work is escapist or realist, but how and when she employs each mode. Her narratives critique existing structures while offering idealism and

possibility. In this way, Pierce avoids the binary between gritty realism and nostalgic fantasy. Her moral vision is integral to her storytelling. While both Tolkien and Martin's fandoms have become politically divided with fans and scholars often debating whether their works support equality or reinforce bigotry, Pierce's readership is notably more cohesive. Online spaces, such as Facebook, Reddit, Tumblr, X, and the fan forum Sheroes Central, reflect a relatively unified community, which I argue stems from Pierce's explicit feminist and inclusive politics. Furthermore, Pierce has been an active participant in conversations with fans in these spaces for decades. Though not organized around activism, her fans respond to her clear ideological commitments. Her revisionist neomedievalism invites expansive, justice-focused readings of fantasy. In Pierce's work, the genre becomes a space to examine systems of power and morality without abandoning wonder or complexity.

As Pierce argues, fantasy provides a unique space to revisit and reshape cultural myths, explore collective fears and desires, and imagine alternative futures "at a remove" that feel emotionally and socially safer for both writer and reader (qtd in Kunzel and Fichtelberg 265). Pierce also connects fantasy literature with the ability to reexamine the foundations of our own world:

Through [fantasy] we can explore our myths and legends, re-introducing ourselves to them or updating them for modern times. We can feed our passions through fantasy, our idealism, our secret needs. We can explore our fears and desires at a remove that gives us a chance to recognize them and examine them without fear of public knowledge or censure. Fantasy is perceived as harmless, when it's our life's blood. (qtd in Kunzel and Fichtelberg 265)

Fantasy is not a limitation in perceiving reality or affecting it, but rather a crucial framework for understanding entrenched systems in a society and, in Pierce's Tortall Universe, reimagining them in a more equitable way. These definitions question the categorization of fantasy literature as purely escapism because while Pierce admits she imagines idealized versions of morality, she maintains that the substance of these fantasy elements is still meaningful and applicable to real life. Pierce's Tortall Universe is escapism in the sense that if you're bored in school or annoyed at home, a young girl could escape by imagining herself shape-shifting into animals and saving the world through these texts. But Tamora Pierce's fantasy work is fundamentally not escapist in the sense of traveling into a fantasy text in order to ignore our world and its problems. Pierce's work is rife with hard work, not easy magical solutions.

Moreover, the foundation of Pierce's writing is the belief that literature—especially fantasy literature, and even fantasy literature for young girls—can be transformative. These works can reshape the ways the readers think and interact within the world. If fantasy literature and literature written for young adults were merely escapism without substance, then they would not closely and critically engage with difficult and complex topics. Additionally, the very elements of realism that draw young adult (and adult) audiences into meaningful literary engagement—sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, loss, family, poverty, violence—are often divisive and intrinsically tied to political issues. Therefore, thinking in terms of commitment to exploring social and political issues is significant, rather than a nostalgic or romantic evocation of the past.

Phillips notes that Pierce's longevity within fantasy literature is due in part to the ways in which her fantasy world allows her to explore complex social issues:

The impact [...] of Tamora Pierce's Tortall Universe is down to, at least in part, the sense that this world is, or could be, real, a feat achieved both by the strength of world-building occurring in individual texts but also, and crucially, between texts. The networks of relation, grounded in the imaginary worlds, are vital [to the genre]. (*Female* 24)

My work is intimately concerned with examining Pierce's works as a reflection of reality, though not wholly, in the ways it reflects real social politics and in the fantasy elements. Pierce utilizes these methods to interrogate and destabilize the stories humans tell ourselves about our objective reality, seeking to explore how we might tell better, more inclusive and representative stories. Just as people do not argue that Pierce is YA Fantasy, scholars may argue about the type of feminism presented in her Tortall Universe, but there is no doubt that Pierce's works *are* feminist. Or as Grogan writes, "Pierce's feminism is frank and deliberate" (9).<sup>6</sup> Fantasy literature and literature for young adults fundamentally question what is real and what can be learned from fiction. Pierce argues that these qualities are particularly appealing to this subgenre, YA Fantasy, which is a literature thoroughly concerned with questioning "the way things are."

Pierce often explicitly and critically engages with her Tortall texts through interviews, such as when she explains in 1993 that fantasy stories "appear to have little to do with reality, but they do provide readers with the impetus to challenge the way things are, something YAs respond to wholeheartedly" (qtd in Sahn 168). As Sarah Sahn argues of Pierce's readers and fantasy more generally, "fantasy readers seem to know that what happens in books can be carried over, that the idea of change is universal, and that willpower and work are formidable forces, wherever they are applied" (ibid.). The texts in the Tortall Universe simultaneously occupy space

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<sup>6</sup> Grogan's text is an honors undergraduate writing project, but it is likewise an in-depth and thoughtful exploration of the Pierce's female knights. This thesis is attempting to collect together all written work to date on Pierce's Tortall Universe.

within the boundaries of reality and literature. Placing Pierce within this critical approach to neomedieval imaginary worlds, where history and fiction, reality and fantasy intertwine, is essential for examining female existence. This approach requires queering or revising history to uncover the roles of women while also disregarding history in to create new worlds where women not only exist but are central to the narrative. As Gilbert and Gubar argue, the female author's battle for a shared past is a revisionist one, "...the female writer's battle for self-creation involves her in a revisionary process. Her battle, however, is not against her (male) precursor's reading of the world but against his reading of *her*" Gubar 50). The female writer's struggle for self-creation is inherently revisionary, a process that doesn't simply rewrite history but directly confronts how women have been defined and constrained by male-dominated narratives. This is crucial in understanding Pierce's Tortall Universe, as she doesn't just include women, or as Anna Altmann writes, Pierce does not create heroes "only nominally women" (144). Rather, in Pierce's fantasy worlds she actively redefines and reimagines them, offering a counter-narrative that challenges both historical and literary representations of women.

## NEOMEDIEVALISM AND AMERICA

As this section outlines, the setting of the Tortall Universe draws heavily from cultural ideas and histories of the European Middle Ages, yet it ultimately reflects a neomedieval world rather than a historical one. As Kunzel and Fichtelberg describe, "Tortall is a medieval-style realm. It is pre-industrial, with no machinery, no mass production, and no weapons filled with gun powder" (Kunzel and Fichtelberg 17). However, as I explore further in the Feminist Magic section of Chapter 1 with birth control, there are magics that directly replicate modern

technologies not available in the historical European Middle Ages. Kunzel and Fichtelberg do not include “blaze balm”, which is a kind of flammable petroleum jelly activated by magic that does function similarly to gun powder or nitroglycerin gelignite. The Metal Killing Devices that Kel faces in *The Protector* most closely resemble giant robotic metal bugs, though again technology is translated in Pierce’s world through magic, which animates the devices rather than electricity (Pierce, *Spy’s* 142). When Daine pushes her magic too far in *Wild* and accidentally kills herself, Numair and Alanna bring her back to life by shocking her heart with large jolts of magic in a close resemblance of a medical defibrillator (Pierce, *Wild* 139). These examples demonstrate that while Pierce has performed extensive historical research, which *is* often reflected in aspects of the Tortall Universe, she is also utilizing magic and fantastical elements to alter her imaginary world in deliberately Revisionist Feminist ways. Due to these elements, this thesis places Pierce’s Tortall Universe within the framework of neomedievalism rather than medievalism, as it is clear Pierce does not intend for the Tortall Universe to be a direct Medieval European world, but instead a fantasy-inspired Medieval world. Furthermore, as I illustrated in my examination of Tolkien and Martin and their differing ideas on the relationship between the real world and a fantasy world in the Introduction, these points where Pierce uses magic to replicate a modern technology exposes a deliberate authorial choice in world creation. By examining these choices, it is possible to interrogate how the Tortall Universe is particularly focused on Female Fantasy and Feminist Revisions.

Fitzpatrick notes the resurgence of Medieval discourse in American politics surrounding the “War on Terror” (*Neomedievalism* xvi), but also traces the influence of European Medieval society, culture, legality, and justice over the history of the U.S. (110-112). This thesis uses Fitzpatrick’s definition of neomedievalism “*as the products of an ongoing process of re-*

*evaluating what can be done with the Middle Ages in an ever-moving present*” (*Neomedievalism* 28). Neomedievalism incorporates recognizable elements of medieval Europe, especially the late Middle Ages, alongside fictional, fantastical, and historically inaccurate features. As Sangster explains, “Fantasy narratives are commonly set in a historical past or in a world that resembles a historical past in many respects (although crucially not all) [...] Fantasies enjoy plots that echo and loop, but they are also often keen to show that while the present is shaped by the past, it is not wholly in thrall to it” (20). Pierce’s use of time across her works illustrates this recursive relationship with the past. She moves across different historical periods within the same imaginary world, not only to highlight prophecy or mystery, but also to explore how time affects social change and justice. As Bakhtin writes, “Every age re-accentuates in its own way the works of its most immediate past. The historical life of classic works is in fact the uninterrupted process of their social and ideological re-accentuation” (465). In this sense, the Tortall Universe functions not only as a fantasy setting, but as a literary project that re-accentuates its own history with each new series.

Pierce’s aim is not strict historical accuracy, although her forewords and afterwords often describe the depth of her research. As Pierce explains in an interview discussing her process in writing *Provost’s Dog*:

I read up on all sorts of elements to Beka’s world: medieval law enforcement, the makeup of the sap, medieval foods and beverages [...], magical charms, and basic investigative procedure [...]. The biggest single item for these books was the slang. [...] Some I adapted, and I had to sneak in a few from later times, but most are genuine, and the product of a lot of digging. (qtd in Kunzel and Fichtelberg 259)

Dan Hassler-Forest reminds us that “World-building is inextricable from questions of politics” (305), and that every fantasy world “articulates a complex and contradictory structure of feeling that reflects the social and economic context from which it emerges” (312). Even without explicit authorial confirmation, many of Tortall’s lands and peoples draw recognizable parallels to real-world cultures. American fantasy scholarship has often pointed to Tolkien’s influence on contemporary western fantasy media in creating a strong tradition of fantasy works that draw on medieval history, the Tortall Universe does not have many of the elements often associated with Tolkien’s Middle-earth and those works inspired by it.

Pierce’s characters exemplify what Maria Cecire describes as a literary method of engagement that begins with the individual’s journey, which eventually necessitates a reconciliation with the structures that caused the journey in the first place. Cecire discusses this method of Fantasy worldbuilding in relation to the medieval across several authors:

Such questioning is intensely personal but can also swiftly become political; as Jane Tolmie notes in her study of medievalist fantasy heroines, the majority of girl and women protagonists tend to take “patriarchy itself as her adventure.” Marion Zimmer Bradley, Robin McKinley, and Tamora Pierce’s fantasy realms replicate the presumed sexism of the medieval past. (44)

However, Cecire argues that Pierce is 1) attempting to “replicate” rather than critically engage with the medieval period, treating it from a contemporary American perspective that treats the Middle Ages as a factual, patriarchal past, rather than recognizing it as a romanticized or fantastical reimagining, and 2) using a neomedieval setting, which risks reinforcing rather than challenging the prejudices faced by marginalized identities within the female experience, as these settings often perpetuate rather than disrupt historical biases. As Jes Battis argues in

response to Cecire, America's fascination with the (neo)medieval predates Pierce and is rather an ongoing process of challenging these very assumptions (19). Additionally, the elements I analyze throughout this thesis regarding the neomedieval worldbuilding of the Tortall Universe show that Pierce is not attempting to replicate historical realism. Instead, she revises reality with the explicit intention of destabilizing systemic structures. While Alanna is arguably the most limited protagonist in terms of relative privilege and social awareness, with the focus primarily on gender and intersectional feminism, Cecire's analysis of Pierce ends with Alanna and, therefore misses the broader revolutionary and Revisionist Feminism potential of the Tortall Universe. This is not to suggest that Cecire's critique of Pierce's Anglocentric elements is unfounded, but rather that it overlooks the full scope of Pierce's work. Pierce's acknowledgment of her authorial responsibility in crafting the Tortall Universe, her use of fantastical elements to mirror modern technologies, and her expansion of the world beyond a strictly medieval framework are not merely reflective; they are, in fact, revisionist.

Neither is Pierce's version of neomedievalism in the Tortall Universe a direct and, therefore, mindless replication of previous neomedieval imaginary worlds. Pierce states that one of her main inspirations in writing Alanna was the disappointment she felt in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* generally, and specifically with the limitations of the character Éowyn (*Hand* 246). In a similar vein to my work's engagement with Pierce, a variety of scholars have similarly explored Tolkien's Middle-earth in relation to American culture specifically, examining popular definitions of medievalism and placing the work within a contemporary political context. A collection of essays edited by Dimitra Fimi and Thomas Honegger catalogs historic influences on Tolkien and his legacy on "subcreation", "world-building versus storytelling", and "mythology" (*Sub Creating Arda*). *Tolkien the Medievalist* edited by Jane

Chance and KellyAnn Fitzpatrick examines Tolkien's place in popular culture, critical scholarship, neomedieval studies, and genre including the chapter by Christine Chism "Middle-earth, the Middle Ages, and the Aryan nation: myth and history in World War II". Joseph Ripp analyzes Tolkien's work within a specific American context in "Middle America Meets Middle-Earth: American Discussion and Readership of J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, 1965-1969".

While Pierce herself admits to being inspired by Tolkien, I do not engage with her work through a legacy of Tolkien's fantasy, as I believe Pierce has created a separate specific trend of feminist YA Fantasy. There are dark and mysterious ancient magical forces and prophecies in *The Song*, but these elements are largely absent in the later series. Pierce expands the fantastical elements of the Tortall Universe in *The Immortals* with the introduction of immortals, such as dragons and basilisks. Magical elements continue to appear in each subsequent series, including the creation of metal killing machines in *The Protector*, Aly's spy magic in *Tricksters*, and Beka's wild magic that allows her to communicate with the dead in *Provost's Dog*. However, each setting after *The Song* feels less mysterious and unexplained. It is worth noting that Pierce wrote *Female Fantasy* in response to Tolkien's inability to accommodate girls' and women's heroic journeys. Nor was she the only female author purposefully to diverge from Tolkien's fantasy legacy in order to reinvent their own fantasy world that had space for female stories: "Patricia McKillip and Robin McKinley both also responded to the lack of strong female characters with literature of their own" (Kunzel and Fichtelberg 12).

In a guest post on a Tolkien blog, Helen Young explains that America's conception of neomedievalism remains strongly influenced by Tolkien by writing "In the realms of popular culture no shadow is longer than Tolkien's, even if his medievalist fantasy imaginings have been folded and re-folded into neomedievalist origami" ("Re-making The Real Middle Ages" par. 4).

While many authors, including Pierce, depart from Tolkien thematically, they still write within a genre architecture he helped define—one that remains rooted in idealized and exclusionary visions of the medieval. However, within the context of YA Fantasy literature with female main characters, Pierce defines a legacy of her own that feels only distantly related to Tolkien’s Middle-earth. Thus, I analyze Pierce’s fantasy world through the lens of neomedievalism, focusing on both the elements inspired by historically grounded aspects of the European Middle Ages and the deliberate departures from historical or narrative realism. These departures reflect her feminist reimagining of the genre and allow me to trace how fantasies of the Middle Ages have shaped American cultural imagination, while also highlighting the political choices authors make when they choose to engage with or reject elements of history.

As I explore in Chapters 2 and 4, neomedievalism examines media through our current interpretation of history and literary tropologies, and this thesis is specifically concerned with the relationship between contemporary American culture and the historic European Middle Ages. I do not argue that the Tortall Universe should be read as a direct allegory for America. Rather, I believe that comparing these two worlds allows for an examination of how contemporary social and political issues can be translated into a fantasy world for young adults, and how an author’s intention to write subversive stories for girls is actualized in text. I likewise do not argue that Pierce’s fantasy universe is fully grounded in realism. While there are numerous examples of realism in Pierce’s Tortall Universe, there are fantastical elements that have no real-world equivalent. However, such textual elements are profound when examined in the context of the many similarities between Tortall and a contemporary U.S. by imagining alternatives to ingrained cultural inequalities and providing an alternate space to engage with complex topics in

a story that is also fun, engaging, real, inspiring, history-blending, magical, romantic, educational, and critical.

In an archived interview with Tamora Pierce on “Shereos Central” in 2007, Pierce explains where the inspiration for countries in *Tortall and Other Words* originated and emphasizes the extensive research she did into medieval life before writing *Adventure*:

Tortall, Tusaine, Maren, and Galla are based pretty much on medieval Europe and England, without particular differentiation between countries. [...] Carthak is a mishmash that includes Egypt, but also Phoenecia, Assyria, and the Hittite Empire of the Middle East, caulked with Roman cuisine in places. The Yamani islands are definitely based on samurai. (Pierce, “Country Comparisons”)

Although Tamora Pierce draws on a variety of historical and global influences, her identity as an American author is central to how she constructs the deeper social and political structures in her world. Many of the issues, institutions, and systems of inequality in *Tortall* reflect American culture more closely than a European one, often mirroring U.S. laws, power dynamics, and social conflicts. For example, cultural relationship to environment, the 9/11 attacks echoed in *Lady*, depictions of the relationship between race and slavery, and culture of the American dream. Examining these texts offers a method for understanding how American sociopolitical dynamics, shaped by historical moments, manifest in fantasy that prompts readers to reflect on similar structures in the real world. Even if both understandings may be imperfect and limited, the crucial component, at least for my purposes, is the intentional engagement with these topics, which invites readers to reflect on their own assumptions.

The instructive and subversive nature of YA Female Fantasy reveals how the genre challenges traditional norms and encourages critical engagement with themes of identity, power, and society. Pierce's Tortall Universe embodies this subversive potential through its blend of historical realism, fantasy, and commentary on modern political and social concerns. This disruption takes place in what Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint call the “indeterminate imaginary spaces” of fantasy, which “implicitly comment on the taken-for-granted as an ideological construction” and reveal what is “typically marginalized [...] from consensual western bourgeois reality”, offering a glimpse into “non-alienated subjectivity” (103). In this sense, fantasy destabilizes what is presented as natural or inevitable within dominant social structures. Pierce’s series engages in a sustained feminist dialogue across decades. May notes that through its longevity and seriality, Pierce’s work has “developed a uniquely dialogical quality that offers forty years of attentive feminist historiography under the banner of fantasy for young adults”, while also positioning readers “to recognize the future potential of feminism” (52). The Tortall Universe shows how a single literary world can accommodate multiple, and sometimes conflicting, discourses—traditional fantasy tropes, feminist critique, and coming-of-age narratives—enabling a dialogic reading experience.

As Shelby Wolf argues, dialogic novels foster a dynamic exchange of voices and meanings:

Such “dialogic” novels create a living dialogue between a variety of voices, styles, and intertextual references and allusions that add to the richness of the reading experience by enabling readers to share in the making of meaning and encouraging them to situate themselves within the themes under consideration. (316)

Pierce’s works, with their strong and competent female characters, exemplify this multi-voiced interaction. They resonate with both young adult and adult readers by inviting shared

conversation about identity, gender, and power. Through this interplay of historical realism, fantasy, and feminist critique, Pierce's novels offer a rich, subversive space for reflection and engagement with possible futures. As this thesis will explore, Pierce's Tortall Universe creates a stimulating and complex fantasy world that is a mixture of historically accurate Middle Ages Europe, fantasy, and the realities of Pierce's political and social world. And, of course, her works highlight characters who are female and hero. Her popularity, especially in testimonials by women that recount reading Pierce as child, additionally prove that her ideas are impactful to both young adult and adult readers. This enduring impact, across decades, exemplifies the ways in which fantasy can subvert established norms, create space for dialogue, and invite readers to participate in meaning-making, all while offering an imaginative vision of feminist possibilities.

## YOUNG ADULT

When discussing YA literature, it is crucial to recognize Michael Cart's influence on the critical exploration of work within this genre. Almost every scholar on YA referenced in this thesis begins their work with the foundations Cart outlined and continues to outline with each revised edition of his critical book *Young Adult Literature* (the first edition was published in 1996 while the most recent edition was released in 2020). YA literature is defined by its focus on issues commonly faced by young adults. YA scholars, such as Mary Hilton and Maria Nikolajeva, note the importance of diverse and intersectional concerns in young adult literature, both because such focus on intersectionality is an accurate reflection of the multitude of young adult experiences and because the ideas behind such depictions speak to broader young adult modes of being as existing between multiplicities. As Hilton and Nikolajeva explain:

Through sympathetically portraying the alienated pains and pleasures of adolescence, through *enacting* adolescence with all its turmoil, writers bring young readers face to face with different forms of cultural alienation itself: the legacy of colonialism, political injustice, environmental desecration, sexual stereotyping, consumerism, madness, and death. (1)

It is arguably the case that children's literature is not merely one of the roots of Western literature and culture, but a foundation of shared intergenerational national and international culture, a barometer of beliefs and anxieties about children and childhood and a body of literature with its own genres (Maybin and Watson 1). This framework justifies a close analysis of YA Fantasy, such as Pierce's Tortall Universe, not only as genre fiction but also as worldbuilding that actively participates in larger political, cultural, and historical conversations.

Pierce was first categorized as YA literature by the fact that her publisher marketed and sold these books as *intended* for an audience of twelve to eighteen-year-olds (Gaffney and McCormick 14, Bach 1). Moreover, all the protagonists in the Tortall Universe books are young people within this age range. YA literature is a "broadly defined commercial publishing category that emerged in the U.S. in the late 1960s" (Murphy, *Key Concepts* 81). The specific trends of "cultural alienation" that Hilton and Nikolajeva outline all appear in various Tortall Universe texts. Pierce's young adult characters, like others in the genre, "offer young people situations, including extreme situations—political injustice, premature sexuality, drugs, suicide, self-harm", which recognize the harsh realities that people of any age may face (Hilton and Nikolajeva 15). By presenting these situations in a literary space, Pierce's work gives young adult readers who are struggling with similar issues a possible method for understanding and navigating them and exposes those young adults unfamiliar with these specific struggles to diverse issues.

Le Guin shifts after the first three *Earthsea* books and returns with Tehanu, an adult rather than YA novel. In her 2012 revisions, she looks back at her justification for switching: “Would writing for older kids be so different from just writing? Why? Despite what some adults seem to think, teenagers are fully human. And some of them read as intensely and keenly as if their life depended on it” (Le Guin, *The Books* 127). Le Guin and Pierce were both told by publishers to try writing in YA rather than Adult Fantasy, and both found critical success within this subgenre, but Pierce, unlike Le Guin, chose to remain within the YA subgenre and focus all texts in the Tortall Universe on young adult characters. Emily Corbett and Leah Phillips collect responses from various individuals to questions about trends in YA in “Ploughing the Field” 2022. In this collection, Autumn Allen argues that YA as a genre is inherently concerned with a “focus on identity, social justice, and activism, alongside the more timeless themes [...] like love, friendship, family, and finding your way in the way” (qtd in Corbett and Phillips 2). Pierce is not only a prominent example of this definition of YA literature, but also, as this thesis will demonstrate, her sustained engagement with issues of gender and social justice from a female perspective—beginning with her first Tortall Universe series and continuing throughout her subsequent works—helped shape the genre itself as being defined by this focus. By incorporating these elements into her narratives, Pierce influenced the development of YA literature, as explored further in the Conclusion of this thesis, inspiring a generation of authors to write YA Fantasy literature with female protagonists.

When Cart wrote the first edition of *Young Adult Fiction: From Romance to Realism* in 1996, he was frustrated by the lack of critical framework or attention to YA literature as a genre (vii). Cart’s work was crucial in defining the genre beyond solely marketing definitions, but in the 2021 fourth edition of the book, he wonders if his previous definition of YA as an intended

reader's range of age remains accurate: "Surely [YA] no longer embraces only twelve- to eighteen-year-olds (the audience YALSA continues to identify) but must now also include nineteen- to twenty-five-year-olds or even older, as the twelve- to thirty-four-year-old" (Cart 112-113). Cart suggests this "revision" of YA is not only due to scholarship reconsidering the actual readership of YA, but also due to an ongoing expansion of our scientific understanding of brain development: "Now scientists have demonstrated that the brain continues to grow until the early- or mid-twenties and that the last part to mature is the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for such adult behavior as impulse control, the regulation of emotions, and moral reasoning" (Cart 113). Evolving scientific and cultural definitions of adulthood have reshaped not only how we define young adults, but also how adults relate to YA media. Cart defines YA literature by its intended readership, though the protagonist's age is also a common marker of the genre. While Pierce's books are written for young adults, they are widely read by adults as well. YA literature has always been concerned with contradictions and issues of control over the "body," usually the marginalized not-yet-adult body and its inherent changes in puberty, according to Michael Levy and Mendlesohn (*Children's* 198). *The Song* was published right on the cusp of this commercial genre market, but by the time *The Immortals* was published, YA literature was a distinct marketing genre:

By the 1980s it was clear that there was a developing teen market; as we entered the 1990s the sense that there was a distinction between children's fantasy and fantasy for teens became stronger, with clear markers separating the teen market from the children's market. (Levy and Mendlesohn, *Children's* 161)

Marked by difference in marketing and intended audience, YA literature became more concerned with "real issues" that children faced rather than the less specific and political trends in

children's literature: "In the late 1980s and early 1990s children's fantasy appeared to be in decline, overtaken by the demand for social realism. This change in market was one of the contributing factors in the growing division between children and teen or Young Adult fiction" (Levy and Mendlesohn, *Children's* 161). Although marketed as YA Fantasy, Pierce's work does more than mirror the social and political climate of its time—it also questions and challenges the norms of American society.

"Teenage" is itself a constructed designation, as humans moved from childhood into adulthood. Most crucially of all to my purposes is the trend that Levy and Mendlesohn note where YA Fantasy literature specifically became associated with women authors and female readerships: "In the 1990s onwards, the readers and protagonists of teen and YA Fantasy were increasingly posited as female" (*Children's* 196). YA Fantasy then is essentially concerned with telling female stories and appealing to female readers. As discussed in the previous section, Battis examines the relationship between the contemporary American construction of adolescence and its historical counterparts. Battis argues that the modern notion of adolescence as a relatively recent and expansive phase of life is, in fact, not new. Instead, it is part of an ongoing trend in which adolescence is continually redefined, revealing more similarities between historical and contemporary constructions of adolescence than differences. Battis writes, "We often discuss the "attenuated" teen period of the twenty-first century, with generic categories like new adult, as something new. [...] But medieval audiences were also prepared to view adolescence as a much longer stretch of time (6). Our cultural understanding of adolescence, whether medieval or modern, is not fixed but rather shaped by cultural and historical forces, and that the parameters of genres like YA are similarly adaptable to reflect these changing perceptions.

One of the defining patterns in YA literature is its exploration of difficult real-world issues alongside a belief in the world's potential for change. As Sahn writes, "The outsider status of children and their literature [...] represents an opportunity to argue a better world into being" (151). YA fiction often balances political realities with a sense of moral guidance. A notable feature of YA literature is its instructive quality (Cart 88). YA literature not only reflects young readers' capacity to confront difficult social and political realities but also channels their unique energy and idealism into imagining and working toward a better world. By combining moral instruction with a celebration of youthful passion and dreams, the genre empowers its audience to engage actively with the causes they care about. Furthermore, youth carries a sense of hope and political potential, as Pierce observes:

Young people have the time and emotional energy to devote to causes, unlike so many of us, losing our revolutionary (or evolutionary) drive as we spend ourselves on the details and chores that fill adult life. [...] We encourage them, and so we should: there is a tremendous need for those who feel passionately and are willing to work at what they care about. (Pierce, "Fantasy" 50)

Pierce's emphasis on young people's energy and idealism complements Sanna Lehtonen's argument that fantasy fiction provides a space to reimagine societal norms, suggesting that children's literature can channel youthful passion into critical reflection and the envisioning of social change. Lehtonen argues that even the most seemingly disconnected fantasy world is always in conversation with our own, regardless of the age of the intended audience; they write "Fantasy fiction offers writers a field where they can reimagine societal structures, norms and conventions related to gender [...] children's fantasy—as any type of literature—does not exist in a social vacuum; children's literature is an institutionally constrained form of socialization"

(9). Fantasy for young readers then is crucially and fundamentally in conversation with social structures and issues of our own world and exists within a context that takes such issues seriously and tackles them in hopeful, transformative, and revisionist ways.

While all fiction communicates ideas, instructive texts value factual accuracy, portray ethical behavior, and support learning. In the Tortall Universe, each protagonist is portrayed as striving to be empathetic, politically active, and committed to justice. Though they sometimes engage in violence, this is carefully framed as morally justified, as I explore in Chapter 3. I use the term “instructive” rather than “didactic” to emphasize Pierce’s attention to realistic detail, like the training sequences, without suggesting her goal is to explicitly teach. For instance, Pierce attempts to portray historically accurate knight-training practices, but it does not follow that she is directly teaching her readers to joust. A recurring theme in her work is the portrayal of young girls’ bodies as they change through puberty, physical training, sexuality, magical transformation, and divine possession. These depictions acknowledge that the female body has long been subject to political and social scrutiny.

Identity formation is also central to YA literature, and as Adam Gaffney and Danny McCormick note that YA literature often explores diverse identities with protagonists that generally remain optimistic about their ability to enact change on a societal level (17). Teenagers occupy the space between two binaries, the child and the adult, and are, therefore, fundamentally concerned with exploring boundaries and defining identities. As Phillips argues, “By merely existing, YA – books and beings – complicate binary logic; they are that which exists in-between (adult) literature/children’s literature and adulthood/childhood” (*Female* 25). YA Fantasy in particular engages deeply with the relationship between reality and imagination. Despite assumptions that young readers are limited in their understanding, adolescents frequently

recognize and respond to complex political and social concerns. Greta Thunberg’s global activism at age 15 demonstrates how young people are already in conversation with the world’s most pressing issues, even if they are generally excluded from the conversation (UN News). YA literature is thus a literature concerned with replicating the experience of discomfort and ill-defined spaces and questioning fundamental realities of existence as, “Teenagers occupy the stage of life when one moves from the comfortable familiarity of childhood friends and family to the unfamiliar differentness of the Other: other genders, races, religions, sexual orientations, abilities, and so on, as well as the expectations of society at large” (Hilton and Nikolajeva 77). YA literature operates within a fundamentally unequal power dynamic, shaped by the very structures it often critiques. While the genre is marked by issues of control and censorship, it is also largely defined by marketing and publishing categories—making it difficult to separate young readers’ responses from adult concerns.

As Chris Rhodes articulates, in “US-based YA literature [...] one of the difficulties in charting censorship is deciphering whether the trends we see are based on the reality of the market or whether they are just the books themselves, characters, or tropes making the news” (qtd in Corbett and L. Phillips 4). Examining which YA texts are censored and which are overlooked reveals that censorship is guided less by consistent standards of content and more by selective concern for works that are visible or perceived as threatening, reflecting a reactive rather than principled engagement with literature. This selective censorship reflects the broader power imbalance between adult authorities and young readers. As Trites notes:

[...] childhood and adolescence are one aspect of identity politics that involves subjects who have less political and economic power than the adults who define laws and social norms. Some of that powerlessness involves embodiment, too: children are typically

smaller than adults; adolescents typically undergo the embodied transformation of puberty. (Trites, *Twenty-First* 32)

Pierce's young protagonists exemplify this embodied negotiation of power, as their physical, social, and emotional experiences are inseparable from the identities they inhabit, making their challenges and agency inseparable from the societal hierarchies in which they exist. As I explore the various depictions of Pierce's young adult female characters throughout the following chapters of this work, there is always the underlying power implied both socially and physically between adult and non-adults.

YA literature is also essentially concerned with representations of the tension between power and control, which in turn causes YA literature itself to become a symbol of control between adult and child:

Teen reading, and YA literature are contentious issues precisely because they are tied to questions of identity, power, and representation. How we portray youth and the young matters, and that is why cultural arguments about YA are likely to persist into the future. (Gaffney and McCormick 19)

Content about the realities of life for young adults is often deemed inappropriate for young adults by adults, so that young adults constantly occupy a space of control-by-others. Stories for children and young adults are often treated with fear by adults, so that, as Katherine Rundell explains, adults self-censor, anticipating political backlash even before writing or publication (44). This control is not only related to explicit book banning practices popular in the U.S., but also to the genre as a whole as defined by adults controlling aspects of the genre for the intended audience. As Rundell explains:

Children's books are specifically written to be read by a section of society without political or economic power. People who have no money, no vote, no control over capital or labour or the institutions of state; who navigate the world in their knowledge of their vulnerability. (42-43)

Pierce must contend with the historical, cultural, marketing, and political context of each issue presented in her narratives in addition to balancing between attempting to please both the adult and young adult reader. In the afterword of her first book, Pierce explains how she first came to write YA fiction, quite accidentally, and what effect this had on the content of her books.

Trites further complicates the multiple and contradictory attitudes towards adolescents in literature for young adults. Even as these texts expose and challenge oppression and injustice within their worlds, the narratives also explore the tension of coming of age—the loss of the innocence that comes from being unaware of the world's harsh realities, “As teenagers learn more about themselves politically, they can often understand themselves better—and paradoxically, they express themselves less freely” (Trites, *Disturbing* xii). Pierce's Tortall Universe texts, as Trites' analysis suggests, portray adolescents as politically aware and morally capable, yet, as *The Protector* shows, their achievements and agency remain constrained by the structural and political limitations that Trites critiques. As I explore in the Chapter 3 section *Return to World*, Pierce's characters who first appear in the Tortall Universe as revolutionary agents of change grow up to find themselves enmeshed in the very systems they rebelled against.

When Pierce first sent Alanna's story to publishers, it was first a singular work, rather than four books in a series, and it was as an adult novel. Pierce's justification for believing that the book was adult was the content: “I chose adult publishing because my book covered adult themes: explicit sexual material, alcohol and drug use (I was living and writing in the 1970s), a

homosexual relationship, and explicit violence” (*Adventure* 254). Already, this establishes Pierce’s view that the difference between literature for adults and children/young adults was the “age-appropriateness” of the content. Pierce’s assumptions were proved true by both her publishers when editing the story for young adults, and the director of the teenage group home where Pierce first shared the story of Alanna. Pierce recounts that she had to censor Alanna’s story not due to the teens’ protests, but because of the watchful adult director of the program, who closely observed and decided what was appropriate for Pierce to share with her audience:

I edited my revisions as the director of the group home requested—well, mostly as the director had requested—as I told the story to the girls. I did not eliminate sex entirely, nor did I eliminate the facts of Alanna’s female physical development, a major issue for someone who was passing as a boy. My girls were too smart—and too versed in the real world—to have accepted a complete clean-up, and to tell the truth, I didn’t really want to do one. (*Adventure* 254)

This story reflects the broader struggle and politicization of YA literature: a genre often shaped more by adult anxieties than by young adult needs. As Caren Town writes:

Would-be censors challenge YA books today for much the same reasons they challenged them four decades ago: ‘adult’ themes/subjects (such as death, infidelity, and sexuality), language they consider to be inappropriate especially for middle grades (and sometimes even high school) students, and questioning of religion or authority figures (such as parents, teachers, or school administrators). (1)

The very honesty that defines powerful YA literature is often what renders it controversial. And yet, Shelby Boehm and Savannah Bean suggest, this is precisely where its strength lies: “YAL

can help readers to situate our current political and social climate in history as a teaching move towards imagining better futures” (316). This capacity to frame the present through a historical and imaginative lens, as Boehm and Bean describe, is not confined to the adolescent reader alone. Rather, it endures into adulthood, shaping how former young readers—myself included—continue to engage with literature and politics.

Tamora Pierce and her publishers have always understood the Tortall Universe as YA Fantasy, written specifically for young adult readers. Pierce describes writing with an imagined version of her younger self in mind: “My main goals in writing the book were to create something for the kid I was at twelve, first discovering fantasy and wanting a hero who was female and a warrior, to write medieval fantasy that was as real as possible” (*Adventure* 255). Pierce’s focus on realism is central to her approach to crafting stories for and about young adults. In an interview, she links the type of fantasy she writes to real-world issues, including those raised by the #MeToo movement:

I try very hard to include elements of reality in everything I do. I think the one thing fantasy does [...] is we give kids exposure to parts of the real world at a safe distance, so that they can read about it and think about it, and turn it over, close the book, go away, talk about it with people they trust, then come back and think about it again. (Simon par. 7)

Pierce’s literature provides a “safe” space for both young and adult readers to explore complex, often politicized topics. The literary fantasy world she builds allows readers to reflect on familiar realities while also imagining alternative possibilities. It is safety in the sense that Pierce writes morally upstanding protagonist and resolves her narratives, but her safety is not escapism, rather a safe place to confront serious issues. Despite this depth, Pierce’s work has never achieved the

same commercial visibility as other YA Fantasy franchises, such as J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*, Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight*, Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*, or the *Divergent* trilogy by Veronica Roth (Cart 95, 97). The absence of adaptations of Pierce's stories into television or film, particularly during her lifetime, represents a missed opportunity to further engage with her Revisionist Feminist practices. At the same time, this lack of adaptation, and the public attention such adaptations typically generate, may partially explain why Pierce's works have faced relatively little negative public scrutiny compared to other YA female fantasy works. As Wilkins observes, "the list of top-selling YA authors is dominated by those whose works had been adapted to other media", highlighting how adaptations significantly increase visibility and public engagement (48). The absence of adaptations of Pierce's stories, therefore, may indeed limit opportunities to explore her Revisionist Feminist practices in other mediums and larger recognition of Pierce's work in the Tortall Universe, but it also may have ultimately contributed to the comparatively low level of negative public attention from conservative American politics directed at her work.

Although there was once a deal to adapt her work for the screen, the studio folded and Pierce's health has since limited her participation in such projects (Yoor; *An Explanation*). This absence of a major media adaptation is a significant factor in the relatively limited popular and critical attention paid to her work, especially compared to more commercially successful authors. Still, this "relative" popularity may have worked in her favor in some ways. Pierce's books have largely avoided becoming targets in the politically divisive culture wars surrounding YA literature in America. Her books have only been censored once (Carter), despite including content often flagged for bans—violence, non-Christian religions, queer characters, and sex—all of which are among the most cited reasons for book challenges and censorship (Knox 197). As

Kunzel, Fichtelberg, and Alison Flood note, Pierce’s work has managed to “sneak” through many of the same gatekeeping structures that have blocked other authors (Kunzel and Fichtelberg 259; Flood, par. 21). Phillips argues that Pierce’s decision to write within YA Fantasy means that any activism included in the texts was worn “much more lightly” against other forms of feminist literature that are more explicit, and therefore, more likely to be banned:

YA fantasy at its origins did imagine the impossible when it created female-heroes.

However, YA fantasy used to wear that activism much more lightly. It’s why Judy

Blume’s books are always banned and challenged, but Tamora Pierce, whose books, like

Blume’s, include birth control and sex [...] haven’t been. (qtd in Corbett and L. Phillips

13)

However, L. Phillips does not take into account Pierce’s relative fame additionally providing a layer of safety against public notice beyond Female Fantasy readers does Phillips contrast these methods of depicting feminist “activism” as relatively more and less explicit in relation to reader’s perspectives rather than adults who are the group who decide which books are banned.

While her Tortall Universe has been commercially successful, it has not reached the blockbuster status of other YA Fantasy series. Yet Pierce’s influence exceeds her sales figures. Authors, such as Sarah J. Maas, Leigh Bardugo, and others have cited Pierce as a key influence on their work (*Lady* “Praise for Tamora Pierce”), making clear that her legacy is an essential, if under-recognized, force in the development of YA Fantasy—particularly YA Fantasy written by women as I cover further in the Conclusion.

## CONCLUSION

As Maite Escudero-Alías writes, “Unless past feminist practices are studied and assimilated into our discourses and actions, the legacy of inequality will persist, for the same mistakes are liable to be made again” (361). Pierce’s collection of novels serves as an example of engagement with themes of equality translated through time, genre, characterization, and worldbuilding. By intricately weaving together elements of class-driven narratives with nuanced character development, Pierce’s novels expand justice consciousness through the dialectical exchanges of power among her characters, allowing readers to interrogate societal constructs and recognize how these dynamics are both enacted and resisted in their own lives. Pierce operates both within capitalist structures of publishing, marketing, social identity, and American politics, and attempts within her novels to resist these constructions. These modes are particularly significant for female readers who can emotionally connect to Pierce’s dynamic and complex characterizations in creating a long-lasting relationship between literature and critical social justice. Moreover, children and adolescent readers are able to make these connections, even if the complexity of experience is later complicated by adult readings of Pierce’s work. Nina Mikkelsen and Laurence Yep write that children engage with fantasy literature by using multiple forms of literacy—generative, personal/empathetic, sociocultural, literary, intertextual, narrative, and critical—at once (3). Through this, they create meaning across the divide between adult and child, navigate the complexities within the text, consider personal ethical choices, and reflexively critique their own understanding of these ideas (*ibid.*). YA literature is not just formative, but formidable: it enables readers to navigate ideological complexity, build ethical literacy, and critically engage with the world around them—making it both educational and empowering.

By portraying the coming-of-age journey in a broad and directional manner, fantasy effectively addresses the turmoil of adolescence, allowing readers to reflect on their own experiences and ethical choices within a supportive narrative framework. Pierce's dedication to realism in exploring concerns unique to young adults in a neomedieval world creates a "safe space" both for her readers and for her books as YA Fantasy literature. For her readers, they can engage with history and reality simultaneously within her fantasy world, allowing them a safe place to experiment with identity and to question our own understanding of "reality". As Pamela Gates et al. write, "because it is broadly directional, less threatening and unsettling, and less inclined to treat the turmoil and concerns of adolescence as 'mere' problems, fantasy is more effective than realistic fiction in portraying coming of age" (138).<sup>7</sup> Positioning herself with the subgenre of YA Fantasy literature has allowed Pierce to simultaneously write explicitly about social justice while also writing dynamic female characters, an engaging fantasy neomedieval world that inspires wonder in its magic while replicating contemporary technology, and issues of social justice that are pertinent to American culture and politics.

This idea of relative "safety" is one I return to throughout this thesis. It is the double safety of genre, both of YA in regards to the ability as Pierce has stated, to explore human issues more ingrained and less changeable in adults, and in the greater likelihood of narrative safety with ultimately positive narrative resolutions; and in terms of fantasy for being perceived as politically removed from reality and therefore not a threat to encouraging radical idealism in young adults. As Pierce responds in an interview for a biographical book, "Fantasy [...] talks openly about issues of honor and glory, duty and responsibility, both to those who lead you and to those who lead. Fantasy focuses on the heroism of one person or many and shows how they

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<sup>7</sup> Gates et al. is referring to Le Guin's portrayal of fantasy, but it works quite well when applied to Pierce.

can make a difference” (qtd in Dailey 17). It is a compatible idea to “sneaking” serious ideas through the medium as described by Kunzel, Fichtelberg, and Pierce, as quoted in Flood, discussed previously.

Pierce’s authorial choices reveal a persistent intersection of magic, wonder, realism, safety, ideology, narrative resolution, political activism, and pleasure. Susanne Abou Ghaida argues that newer trends in YA literature seem to separate the goals of “pleasure” and “activism”; she describes, “The dichotomy so many people seem to subscribe to between aesthetic pleasure and ideological content [...] Everything is ideological” (qtd in Corbett and Phillips 8). Contrary to Ghaida’s assertions about emerging trends in the subgenre, Pierce’s Tortall Universe demonstrates that it is possible to sustain both ideological depth and a commitment to political activism simultaneously. The reader’s delight is not a distraction from the message—it’s part of what makes the message effective. The activism demonstrated through Pierce’s characters in her Tortall Universe aligns with Autumn Allen’s definition of YA literature as promoting “slow activism” versus “more immediate activism”, since as a genre, YA literature believes in modeling progressive and revolutionary behaviors to a young audience hoping to influence their worldview so that when they go grow up, they will enact the changes they learned from these texts (qtd in Corbett and Phillips 13).

This view of change is similarly echoed in Tatar’s description of female heroes and the authors who write them, “The women writers who dared to speak and shape new ways of thinking about our world also created new tools, less for dismantling what we have than for building rich new alternatives” (Tatar xiv). Pierce’s female heroes may not be leading a revolution to overthrow society, but their modeling of change is still subversive, revolutionary, and actionable to young and adult readers. Pierce’s depictions of female heroism are not revisions meaning retellings or

uncoverings of existing stories or history, though her work does draw on history and her protagonists, especially Alanna, share qualities of the traditional hero archetypal. They are revisions *within* world and revisions *of* world that focus consistently and from the very beginning with *The Song* on female perspectives and feminist issues. Altman writes, “Good readers can become a hero of the other sex. Women, particularly, have had a great deal of practice at it. But it is easier to read in one's own language” (Altmann 154). While the tradition of Revisionist Feminism has often involved re-envisioning or extrapolating male characters as gender-neutral to make space for female perspectives, Altmann suggests that it is even more effective when stories are created as female from the outset.

# Chapter 1:

## World, Gendered Body, & Female Heroes in The Song of the Lioness

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on Tamora Pierce's first series, *The Song*, addressing connections relevant to my overarching framework that have not been otherwise explored in existing Pierce scholarship on the series. Following this introduction, I outline the existing critical scholarship on this quartet. The following sections—*Alanna's World*, *Feminist Magic*, and *Religion*—examine authorial choice in depicting Female Fantasy within Pierce's worldbuilding. A crucial authorial choice within the neomedieval world of Tortall Universe is Pierce's use of what I term as *Feminist Magic*, magic in fantasy texts that replicates an aspect of society crucial to the feminist ideal of equal opportunities for all sexes and gender identities through literacy as power and Pierce's inclusion of the pregnancy charm. These features are foundational to the Tortall Universe and engender subsequent queer readings and evolving constructions of the relationship between sex and gender. The second section shifts focus to Alanna's body, analyzing how the series both aligns with and disrupts popular YA romance narratives of 1980s America. I begin by examining Alanna's cross-dressing, which I revisit not as an instance of drag, but as a narrative device that foregrounds the performativity of gender and invites a genderfluid queer reading. This leads into an analysis of attraction and sexuality as both a part of and yet challenging 1980s popular romance trends. I conclude by examining the construction of Alanna's heroic identity through an alternative tradition of female heroism grounded in Alanna's individual

characteristics and her wider legacy of female community. This chapter also includes several close comparisons to elements in the Provost's Dog trilogy, as depicting the world before Alanna's story in a time where there were female knights in order to draw interesting parallels between gender identity and religion as depicted in Provost's Dog and The Song as part of Pierce's Revisionist Feminist tendencies.

As my brief review of existing scholarship and the references I draw on throughout this thesis will demonstrate, Alanna's cross-dressing as a boy in order to become a knight has already been examined by existing scholarship in the contexts of medieval romance, YA literature, drag performance, and gender binaries. Alanna's female body serves as the initial catalyst for the series and remains a central site of conflict and transformation throughout her personal journey—as a disguised girl passing as a boy, as someone negotiating her gender identity, as a sexual and romantic subject, a female warrior, a hero, and later after *The Song*, as a mother, grandmother, friend, and mentor. The series continues to stand as a compelling and politically-conscious narrative on female heroism, even when viewed through a more intersectional and expansive lens of feminism. Pierce has explicitly stated that her goal in writing Alanna, along with the subsequent female protagonists of the Tortall Universe, was to build a medieval fantasy world that reflected the real-life struggles, challenges, and triumphs of young women. Pierce has explained that she wanted “to create something for the kid [I] was at twelve, first discovering fantasy and wanting a hero who was female and a warrior” (Pierce, *Adventure* 255). These ideas would become central to Pierce as an author and are ultimately fundamental to her popularity and longevity in the genres of fantasy and YA literature. While Alanna comes first, each subsequent hero demonstrates Pierce's developing explicit engagement with political elements of Female Fantasy.

The Song is probably the most wondrous of Pierce's Tortall series—Alanna has a very strong magical “Gift”, as well as being an exceptionally talented swordswoman and warrior, and she is the chosen warrior and favorite of the Goddess. She also wields two ancient magic swords; has flaming red hair and purple eyes; brokers peace with the Bazhir, a racial and ethnic group of nomadic people who live in the desert bordering Tortall's south; is loved by Kings, warriors, and thieves; and is the first female knight in a century in Tortall and the first ever female King's Champion. However, as Michael Levy and Farah Mendlesohn argue, despite the fantastical elements and tropes, the series' lasting success is strongly rooted in Pierce's ability to authentically portray Alanna's journey from girlhood to womanhood throughout the books:

Rife with magic, the [...] series, which covers a decade in Alanna's life, also provides one of the most realistic portrayals, in all fantasy literature, of what a knight's training might really be like. Equally important, Alanna, although heroic, is also very much a young woman who has to deal with real women's issues such as the prejudiced gender essentialism that surrounds her, being weaker than most of her peers, hiding her menstruation, handling crushes, and eventually sexual intercourse. (Levy and Mendlesohn 143)

As they emphasize, The Song is not concerned with offering only a fantasy of daring adventures or a straightforward romance. Instead, Alanna's adventures as a knight and her experiences as a woman are treated with equal importance by the narrative, and Pierce writes about Alanna's menstruation and her sword-fighting with the same care and attention, filling a gap in the literature of the time and creating a new type of female hero who was truly the *embodiment* of female, and as they note, a realistic knight. Levy and Mendlesohn note the balance in Pierce's authorial choices when creating feminist stories in the Tortall Universe between the “realistic”

and the fantastic. In this example, Pierce chooses historic/realistic elements of Medieval European knight training, even when done with magical tools, such as a magic sword in Alanna's case. With regard to Alanna's bodily experience and her physical capabilities as a warrior, Pierce emphasizes realism, as Alanna does not, for example, magically increase her height or muscle mass, while the magical elements of her swordplay, particularly her use of the enchanted Lightning, signify her in-universe "right" to become a knight and hero. Lightning, an ancient sword brought to Alanna through portents, can only be claimed after she successfully completes a test (Pierce, *Adventure* 176–177). Similarly, she must overcome the evil of Roger's Crystal Sword by demonstrating particular strength of character (Pierce, *Rides* 39) and perseverance for good forces (Pierce, *Rides* 89-90). Pierce uses magic both to replicate realistic aspects of contemporary society, for example instant communication with "scrying", or to elucidate moral ambiguities faced by Alanna, such as in the case with her sword. The Song series introduces several key personal, social, and political issues that Tamora Pierce returns to throughout the entirety of the Tortallan Universe; but there are certain elements of Alanna's story that are uniquely reflective of 1980s American society and popular culture depictions of romance. Alanna's struggles with virginity, marriage, and bodily autonomy reflect both conformity to and resistance against dominant 1980s representations.

I have never strongly identified with Alanna, as her exceptionalism has always felt too distant for me as a role model. As a person considered by her teachers as average in everything she attempted, it has always been selfishly difficult for me to appreciate Alanna's divine and legendary heroism. I like helping people like Kel, and I have always loved and respected non-human animals, but Alanna's power over both life and death has never made me want to be Alanna or to see myself in her. Lastly, as I mentioned at the end of my personal statement, The

Immortals was the first Pierce Tortall Universe series I read, which means that *The Song* does not personally hold for me the nostalgic love of my first discovery of Pierce's world. Adults like myself tend to look back more fondly and with greater nostalgic forgiveness on their first childhood discovery of a rich fantasy world over any subsequent foray into that world. However, my experience seems very atypical among Pierce's readers and popular culture in YA Female Fantasy. And my experiences demonstrate that for many readers, *The Song*, by being their first discovery and interaction with Pierce, occupies a place of greater importance and magic than any other series. Alanna's popularity is enduring, as evidenced by the 2020 TIME magazine inclusion of *Adventure* on the 100 Best Fantasy Books of All Time ("The 100"). This popularity is not merely due to her being Pierce's first heroine, but rather to the powerful combination of character, plot, and heroic journey that define *The Song*. As this chapter explores, even decades after the publication of later series, scholarship and fan discourse continue to prefer Alanna.

When *The Song* was first released, Alanna's character was revolutionary. For many readers, she represented the first fully developed female hero whose ambition was not romance but heroism itself and who actively rejects marriage for most of the series. As Sara Day notes, Alanna was "one of the first well-rounded female heroes [young readers] had ever encountered" (16). The series charts a shifting political landscape in Tortall, culminating in a new King and Queen and a vision of greater gender equality. Alanna is instrumental to this shift, not through policy or systematic overhaul, but through her embodiment of heroism and the relationships she enables. Among Pierce's heroes, Alanna most closely follows a traditional fantasy hero's journey. Alanna's narrative relies more heavily on familiar tropes and lacks the systemic critiques found in later series. Alanna sets the stage for change, Daine experiences the changed Tortall, and Kel challenges the depths of Tortall's social justice. Yet even Alanna cannot remain

apolitical—her very existence within the system forces her into the realm of politics both in-universe and to the reader as practicing resistance against systematic injustice by radical personal action.

Pierce, too, became a political figure through her writing. As a woman authoring subversive fantasy in a genre often dismissed by critics, she took part in a broader feminist project. Rachel Carroll and Fiona Tolan argue that for women, writing itself is political, a way to reclaim voice and history. Literature by women, she contends, can confront injustices rooted in gender, sexuality, race, and class: "a vehicle through which to confront the injustice of gender prejudice, discrimination, and inequality, exposing and contesting sexual, economic, and racial forms of exploitation, oppression, and violence, whether in the home, the family, the workplace, or beyond" (Carroll and Tolan 1). To contextualize *The Song*, it is important to consider the America of the 1980s. For readers today, it may be difficult to imagine a world without internet, smartphones, or instant media access. Yet the concerns and politics of this period of time are not wholly dissimilar: nuclear war anxieties, contested civil rights, economic inequality, debates over reproductive and gender rights, Christian nationalism, and conservative political rhetoric (Keating par. 2). Nuclear war remained a looming threat; the Supreme Court debated landmark issues including affirmative action and equal pay (LaFeber et al. 374, 380); land rights disputes continued between white settlers and Native Americans (Echo-Hawk 240); and American involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts generated national controversy (Rossinow 66).

The era also revealed a clear gender divide in public opinion. Analysts identified the emerging "gender gap" in support for Ronald Reagan's presidency, as women's political views diverged more sharply from men's than other categorizations of identity, such as race or class (Shapiro and Mahajan 43–45; LaFeber et al. 380, 390). One of the most foundational moments of

Pierce's life is recounted in the afterword of *Rides*, where she writes to the FBI about her dream to become a female agent:

The person who replied to me explained that women were not allowed to be agents. If I was still interested when I was older, there were many secretarial positions available in the Bureau. I was told I couldn't be president and that I would make a bad lawyer. I was not allowed to shout or to recite unladylike cowboy poems. (Pierce, *Rides* 265-266)

This response exemplifies the structural sexism that defined Pierce's world. It doesn't matter that Alanna's struggle takes place in a fantasy world where she is a refusal to be excluded, a defiant answer to the real limitations placed on women, not by their own bodies, but by society.

In contrast, Le Guin recounts responding to structural inequality with narrative limitations. While both authors ground their work in specific feminist movements, Pierce ultimately chooses subversion and triumph over resilience and survival. Writing as American women in a genre historically shaped by male perspectives, Pierce and Le Guin diverge sharply in their strategies. Le Guin, reflecting on a 1969 story, explained, "she couldn't be a hero in the hero-tale sense. Not even in fantasy? No. Because to me, fantasy isn't wishful thinking, but a way of reflecting, and reflecting on reality" (*The Books* 243). For Le Guin, real-world limitations informed what her fiction could represent; her female characters could not take up the hero's journey because women in her world could not. Pierce, by contrast, fully acknowledges injustice but imagines a heroine who resists, subverts, and ultimately thrives. While Le Guin critiques by mirroring constraint, Pierce offers hope through transformation. Alanna initially aims only to "travel and do great deeds", planning to reveal her gender on "her eighteenth birthday" (Pierce, *Adventure* 243), with no intention of changing the system. But by the end of the series, she reflects on her impact with uncertainty: "It was easier for me to rebel than stay and make

something of myself. Why didn't I go to convent school and prove ladies are more than ornaments that way?" (Pierce, *Rampant* 156). This question underscores one of the series' central tensions—and a strength of Pierce's return to Tortall, where, as this thesis explores, she develops multiple models of female heroism. This question underscores one of the series' central tensions and a strength of Pierce's return to Tortall, where, as this thesis explores, she develops multiple models of female heroism. It also demonstrates one of Pierce's characters enacting her own practice of Revisionist Feminism, Alanna self-critically examines her own actions and wonders about alternate methods of feminism she rejected.

While the *Oxford English Dictionary* dates the term “gender” to as early as 1390, its contemporary use to distinguish identity was significantly shaped in the twentieth century, particularly by John Money, who in 1955 defined “gender role” and its counterpart “gender identity” while proposing that “sex” referred to physical characteristics and “gender” to psychological traits and behavior (397). Building on this framework, Rhoda Unger proposed in 1979 that gender should be understood as “traits that are culturally assumed to be appropriate for women and men” (Muehlenhard and Peterson 791). In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan writes of a “growing body of evidence” that contradicts dominant assumptions about femininity and fulfillment, evidence that “throws into question the standards of feminine normality, feminine adjustment, feminine fulfillment, and feminine maturity by which most women are still trying to live” (26). Friedan's work questioned the biological determinism of gender, “Anatomy is woman's destiny, say the theorists of femininity; the identity of women is determined by her biology. But is it?” (76–77). She challenged the notion that women's identities were static or naturally fixed, asserting that “much of what Freud believed to be biological, instinctual, and changeless has been shown by modern research to be a result of specific cultural

causes” (Friedan 97). Similarly, Phillips argues that “The discursive turn within feminism [...] came as a solution to the biological determinism, essentialism and reductionism that too often comes with focusing on the body” (*Female* xv). However, L. Phillips goes on to argue that it is possible to examine gender as both discursive and closely related to the body without a *reduction* of gender to biological determinism. Friedan and L. Phillips both challenge the notion that women’s identities are biologically predetermined, emphasizing instead that gender is shaped by cultural, social, and linguistic forces. Their work underscores the instability of traditional norms of femininity and highlights the importance of examining women’s lived experiences as socially constructed rather than naturally fixed. Critical discourse increasingly sought to distinguish gender from sex and began to expose the instability of socially constructed norms around femininity and women’s lived experiences in the 1970s.

Adrienne Rich, writing in 1986 while Pierce was actively publishing *The Song*, similarly noted the contested nature of the term “sex”, particularly in feminist debates over sexuality, pornography, and the physical body of women (526–528). In America, these arguments anticipated more radical critiques of identity, including those articulated by J. Butler. Alanna is biologically female, but her gender is more ambiguous, shaped both by her performance throughout the series and by Tamora Pierce’s 2019 tweet identifying her as genderfluid, demonstrating that her gender is both connected and yet untethered by Alanna’s born sex. Pierce writes: “Alanna has always defied labels. She took the best bits of being a woman and a man and created her own unique identity. I think the term is ‘gender-fluid,’ though there wasn’t a word for this (to my knowledge) when I was writing her” (Pierce, @TamoraPierce). While the books never use this language, Alanna’s outfit as King’s Champion—blending male and female fashion—visually signals gender hybridity and the culmination of Alanna’s gendered identity

exploration (Pierce, *Rampant* 245). As I explore in the section on Body in this chapter, Alanna's cross-dressing is a part of a broader trend in YA Fantasy of young girls' cross-dressing that both existed before Pierce and has also been popularized in a contemporary cultural context by Alanna's character in *The Song*.

Alanna's journey involves learning both femininity and performing masculinity since Tortall lacked any model of female warrior identity. As Hilton and Nikolajeva argue, women who defy gender norms are often seen as "abnormal, strange, and potentially socially dangerous" (78), yet Alanna resists such categorization. She simultaneously occupies roles as woman, genderfluid person, warrior, healer, sexual agent, and, after *The Song*, as wife, mother, and grandmother. Esme Symes-Smith, reflecting on childhood, writes: "I was genderqueer but I didn't have the words to explain myself yet...but I did have a role-model: Alanna of Trebond, Tamora Pierce's first Lady Knight" (par. 4). Both Pierce and Symes-Smith did not have the language to express Alanna's gender identity in terms we would use to categorize it today, but they both note a clear ambiguity and tension between body and gender identity in Alanna's journey. However, Pierce has not revised Alanna's pronouns or elaborated on this interpretation in newer works (e.g., the *Test* graphic novel).<sup>8</sup> If the *Numair Chronicles* or recent *Song of the Lioness* graphic novel omit these elements, their absence may reflect not historical limits but Pierce's authorial choices. Her Revisionist Feminism is characterized by re-engagement with past ideas and how she develops Alanna's gender in future texts will reveal an interesting tension between "retconning" and revisionist feminist practices. Alanna's identity does not resolve gender into fixed categories but instead complicates and queers them—representing nonbinary

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<sup>8</sup> The graphic novels are rife for a Revisionist Feminist reading incorporating the work of this thesis and of a continuation of my work, which attempts to analyze and connect all texts across the Tortall Universe. However, they were published too late for an inclusion of any worthwhile depth in this work.

gender identity and disrupting binary norms in both Tortall and 1980s America. As Butler asks, “what political possibilities are the consequence of a radical critique of the categories of identity?” (*Gender* xxxii). Alanna’s story, and Pierce’s evolving interpretation of it, models how YA Fantasy can interrogate and destabilize gender norms, showing identity as constructed, performed, and context-dependent.

Alanna’s anatomical sex is female, and according to Pierce, her gender is genderfluid, and her gender performance, especially in the first half of the series, is predominantly male—or at least deliberately not-female. I resist calling Alanna’s disguise “drag”, as drag, from a contemporary standpoint, is often coded as artistic expression distinct from genderfluid or transgender experience. Alanna is not adopting a persona when she presents as Alan; rather, she is herself, using disguise to conceal her sex. The distinction between persona and identity is nuanced—some drag performers identify as transgender, and others consider their performances extensions of their identity. Alanna’s choice reflects necessity rather than spectacle: she adopts male presentation in order to access the freedoms and training otherwise denied to girls. This performance is further complicated by the uneven way Alanna learns gender roles. She is formally taught to behave as a Tortallan nobleman, while she must later learn how to perform femininity on her own. Her acquisition of female-coded behaviors—flirting, dressing, courtly manners—is elective and belated, emphasizing the constructed nature of gender. As Butler explains, “If one thinks that one sees a man dressed as a woman or a woman dressed as a man, then one takes the first term [...] as the ‘reality’ of gender” while the second is assumed to be mere “artifice, play, falsehood, and illusion” (*Gender* xxiii). Alanna’s performance complicates such binary logic.

## SCHOLARSHIP

This section attempts to gather the majority of scholarship written on Pierce to date in order to demonstrate where this thesis begins in relation to this scholarship and what it accomplishes by comparison. The Song and Alanna's character have received the most scholarly attention of Pierce's work. Several critical works on The Song examine the function and perceptions of Alanna's cross-dressing, especially as part of a larger historical trend within children's and YA literature. Victoria Flanagan provided one of the earliest critical works on Tamora Pierce in 1999 in the article "Cross-dressing as Transvestism in Children's Literature: an Analysis of a 'Gender-Performative' Model". Flanagan additionally included Pierce in her examinations of cross-dressing in Children's Literature in *Into the Closet: Cross-Dressing and The Gendered Body in Children's Literature and Film*. These works place Pierce beside other Children's narratives with cross-dressing and examine how Alanna transcends limited tropes of cross-dressing.

The Master's Dissertation "Female Cross-Dressing in Young Adult Fiction: Protagonists' Changing Perceptions of Women and Femininity" (2019) by Emily A. Riley examines Alanna through a historical analysis of cross-dressing female characters in YA literature (not limited to fiction). Alanna's dressing as a boy during knight training is compared to Tris, a character from The Circle of Magic series, which is set not in Tortall, but in Pierce's other magical world Emelan, as reviewed in Anastasia Salter's book chapter *Closed Minds* (2013). Salter analyzes Alanna's cross-dressing as evidence of her individual "desire" triumphing. Although there are some similar elements to my examinations of gender performativity as categorized by J. Butler, Salter's comparison is necessarily limited in scope due to its length and focus on Emelan.

Leah Phillips' chapter on Alanna in her book *Female Heroes in Young Adult Fantasy Fiction: Reframing Myths of Adolescent Girlhood* (2023) provides a new and thought-provoking consideration of Alanna's cross-dressing and her role as a "mythopoetic" hero; her conception of Alanna's cross-dressing as "lack" is an idea I will return to in a queer reading of *The Song*. L. Phillips' book has, in turn, inspired new examinations of Pierce through a specifically "mythopoetic" tradition, such as reviews and further explorations by Tara West and So Koo in 2023 and Emma Tueller Stone, Jeddie Mae Bristow, Elizabeth Little, and Corinne Matthews in 2024. While I occasionally examine Pierce's heroes and Pierce herself through a mythopoetic lens, the analysis in this thesis goes beyond myth-making to consider broader thematic and political dimensions. Alongside L. Phillips' book and this thesis, Grogan's essay "A Quiet War: Revising Heroism in Tamora Pierce's Tortall" (2014) is an in-depth exploration of Alanna and Kel as hero archetypes. Though L. Phillips' book and Grogan's essay both analyze the heroism of Pierce's characters through a broader trend of literary heroism than this work engages with, previous analysis of Pierce's work still primarily focuses on *The Song* in connection with *one* of Pierce's other series, *The Immortals* in Phillips' book versus *The Protector* in Grogan's essay, versus analyzing *The Song* and all other series as part of a connected and expansive Tortall Universe. Accordingly, L. Phillips' focus on *The Song* and *The Immortals* and Grogan's on *The Song* and *The Protector* centers on individual heroic narratives rather than on the evolving, interconnected world of Tortall as a self-revising feminist project.

Shauna Maragh's master's dissertation "Negotiating Femininity: Tomboy Gender Performance in the Writings of Tamora Pierce and Suzanne Collins" (2012) compares Alanna to the character Katniss in *The Hunger Games* through the "tomboy" tradition, using Michelle Abate's definition of the tomboy tradition in children's literature (4-5). The term tomboy is

increasingly falling out of use in contemporary American discussions of gender, as efforts toward greater equality and inclusion have shifted toward understanding gender as a spectrum rather than a fixed binary or even trinary framework (Stahl, par. 1).<sup>9</sup> As journalist Lynne Stahl writes, the term tomboy has “come under scrutiny [...], with some critics arguing that it upholds the essentialist notion that anatomy largely determines children’s behaviors and inclinations” (par. 2). Additionally, as this chapter will explore, Alanna’s gender identity, both within *The Song* and the larger Tortall Universe, is more complicated than a person who identifies as female and portrays aspects of masculinity.

April Disque closely examines Alanna’s role as healer in the Master’s dissertation “Warriors and Healers: Messages About Heroines in Young Adult Fantasy Novels” (originally 2005, last updated 2019) through a library sciences perspective. Though I touch on Alanna as a healer in this chapter, I examine the Gift in Tortall through a literacy as social power perspective rather than Alanna’s character as healer. Sahn’s article “Decolonizing Childhood: Coming of Age in Tamora Pierce’s *Fantastic Empire*” (2016) closely examines the relationship between patriarchal and colonizing structures in *The Song*. Jessica R. Dube’s Master’s dissertation “Cultures and Colonization in Tamora Pierce’s Young Adult Novels” (2021) examines both Alanna and Kel’s relationship to non-Tortallan cultures. Dube agrees with Sahn’s portrayal of Alanna’s relationship to the Bazhir in *Rides* as problematic and rooted in “Western literary Orientalism” and they both concur that though Pierce’s exploration of the self and Other “may not always be satisfactory, these [*The Song*] texts empower readers by prompting them to interrogate discourses of power within the text’s imagined world, and to keep asking questions

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<sup>9</sup> Others still find use and identification with the term (Craig and La Croix 450-451), but in my personal experience as a teacher, it’s more often a term applied by parents *to* a daughter, who invariably doesn’t perform traditional femininity in some way, rather than a young adult’s self-identification.

about our own” (Sahn 168). Sahn and Dube’s critical examination of the Bazhir people in *The Song* is thorough, though I will expand briefly on Pierce’s portrayal of the face veil in Chapter 4. Sahn’s final analysis of Alanna is more “ambiguous”, but Dube takes the analysis of Alanna and Jonathan as white saviors a step further and argues that Pierce’s “*Trickster* duology, published fifteen years after the conclusion of the *Song of the Lioness* quartet, provides a much more well-rounded representation of indigenous populations and works to undo some of the white savior issues present in her earlier writings” (Dube 31). As I will explore in Chapter 4, I ultimately find the *Tricksters* duology problematic in its portrayal of race rather than “well-rounded”.

Cecire directly engages with and criticizes Pierce in her book *Re-Enchanted: The Rise of Children’s Fantasy Literature in the Twentieth Century*. Cecire notes Pierce’s problematic practice of melding together non-white racial identities and particularly focuses on a critique of Alanna’s interactions with the Bazhir in *Rides*. On the subject of Pierce’s characterizations of racial identities, Cecire writes:

Meanwhile, American author Pierce amalgamates “Saracen” and ambiguously “Native American” qualities in her depictions of the Bazhir [...] This combination conflates tropes of European medieval-ism with those of American westward expansion, reimagining and recasting both as congenial cultural interactions that, through respectful consensus, gave rise to mutually beneficial Western authority. (203)

This corresponds with Cecire’s critique of the *Tortall* universe as ultimately reinforcing colonialist ideologies, although her analysis focuses primarily on *The Song* series.

Charlotte Johnson’s Master’s dissertation “Friendship through Fantasy: Amity in the Novels of Tamora Pierce” (2021) examines the role of the human-animal friendships between

Alanna and Faithful. Alexandra Garner's article "Neomedievalism, Feminism, and the Sword in Tamora Pierce's *Song of the Lioness*" (2020) explores the relationship between Alanna and her sword, Lightning, through a queer, mediative, and disruptive reading. Garner also completed a PhD on Tamora Pierce in 2022 on the same topic. The sword is an enduring weapon and symbol in fantasy and heroic stories, but Alanna, despite Kel also becoming a knight, is the only Tortall Universe protagonist who carries a sword as Daine uses a bow, Kel prefers her Yamani glaive, Aly uses whatever weapons she can get her hands on, and Beka has her steel-weighted baton. Garner's exploration of the queer symbolism of Alanna's sword, Lightning, resonates with my own queer readings of other facets of her identity discussed in this chapter. However, Garner's work as thus far been limited to focusing on *The Song* rather than a holistic approach to Pierce's Tortall Universe as this thesis undertakes.

In Day's PhD thesis "'Girls Who Kick Butt': A Cognitive Interpretation of Tamora Pierce's Adolescent Feminist Fantasy" (2018), the exploration of Alanna and Kel's characters is approached through a children and young adult's cognitive relationship to text. K. Day's work is interesting from a scientific perspective, but my framework differs significantly from Day's work, as I take a literary and philosophical approach to analyzing Pierce's work and Day focuses her study on Alanna and Kel. Bonnie Kunzel and Susan Fichtelberg's *Tamora Pierce* briefly considers heroism more broadly in Pierce's work, but the majority of the book is focused on summaries of texts, interviews, and tracking Pierce's popularity. Joel Nordström's Master's dissertation, "The Teaching of Magic and Other Subjects Arcane in Children's Fantasy" (2012), compares Alanna's magic instruction with Harry Potter's and Ged's in their respective series, but ultimately their examination of Pierce's portrayal of instruction is rather limited as Nordström only analyzes *Adventure*. While I also examine magic in *The Song* in relation to education and

instruction later in this chapter, I do not situate Tortall within the broader trend of magical schools in YA Fantasy. Harriet Bentley's Master's dissertation, "Voices of the Lioness: Representation of Female Characters in Selected YA Fantasy Series by Le Guin and Tamora Pierce" (2020), likewise compares Pierce and Le Guin, though in greater detail than Nordström's dissertation and could be used alongside this thesis as a foundation to begin an extensive comparison of Pierce and Le Guin. While Bentley compares the heroic arcs of Alanna and Le Guin's Memer, my thesis focuses on Pierce and Le Guin as Revisionist Feminist authors and the worlds they construct. As both Bentley's work and my own suggest, the thought-provoking overlaps between Pierce and Le Guin deserve further investigation. This work aims to help begin that conversation by examining Pierce's Tortall as an imaginary world across multiple texts and authorial similarities in relationship to text and world.

Donna Dailey published *Tamora Pierce: Who Wrote That?*, a biographical novel on Pierce, in 2006. Dailey's book briefly examines Pierce's decision and conviction to write Female Fantasy and her popularity with the remaining chapters are a fairly extensive examination of Pierce's life (14). Dailey covers Pierce's childhood as a "Country Girl" in Appalachia country moving to California, Pierce's tumultuous relationship with her mother while Pierce's family lived on welfare, and Pierce's move again, this time to Pennsylvania where Pierce eventually graduated from University. Dailey's book catalogues Pierce's life-long love of writing, her relationship with her husband Tim, and the beginning of her recognition as a public figure and profitable author.

In the journal article "The Lioness and the Protector: the (Post)Feminist Dialogic of Tamora Pierce's Lady Knights" (2020), May argues "Alanna is certainly a feminist character" who set "new standards for heroines in fantasy literature as whole" but is ultimately "too

unavailable as a legend” due to her “hyperindividualism [...] and the divine assistance which grants her social and political capital” (65). Additionally, May argues that Kel is representative of postfeminism’s “decentralization” aims (69). While May’s characterization of postfeminism is similar to some of my own revisionist feminist language, such as the focus on “collective rather than individual action” and “a retroactive reevaluation of previous feminisms”, she does not consider the limitations of “postfeminism” as implying a distinct break from historic feminist action or how Alanna’s characterization shifts in each subsequent Tortall text that includes her as a tertiary character (*ibid.*). While Alanna’s actions during *The Song* most radically alter Tortall’s political and cultural world, Alanna’s character as a female hero is more complicated and multifaceted when she appears as the King’s Champion and a mother, grandmother, and a global legend in later series.

## ALANNA’S WORLD

Tamora Pierce’s Tortall Universe participates in a tradition of Neomedieval Fantasy that uses elements of history to critique the contemporary world. As Shiloh Carroll and Jane Tolmie argue, many contemporary fantasy authors—especially women—center the perceived oppression of medieval women as a site of feminist intervention. Tolmie writes that this focus is significant in a genre “increasingly dominated by female writers, many of whom have explicitly feminist politics” (150). In YA literature especially, adolescence is framed as a critical period of identity formation and resistance. Battis notes that medievalist YA frequently engages “gender and sexuality, class issues, the high school experience”, making distant histories emotionally resonant for contemporary readers (20). He emphasizes that in the Middle Ages, adolescence

was not defined by chronological age but by milestones like menstruation and apprenticeship and was understood as “a time of great turmoil, fiery emotions, willfulness, and temptation” (5). Pierce’s *The Song* builds on this tradition, using Alanna’s coming-of-age to explore how identity is shaped—both internally and by the social structures that seek to constrain it. Yet in order for Alanna to challenge these structures, Pierce must first construct them. Tortall is a society in which masculine-coded traits, such as toughness, logic, and physical strength are idealized, while the scripturally feminine—associated with emotion, passivity, sensuality, and nurturing—is devalued. As Day writes of Alanna, “what she achieves often results in her overcoming the scripturally-male” (*Reading* 90). Alanna’s success, however, is also enabled by her exceptionalism: noble birth, magical talent, and the support of powerful male allies. These privileges allow her to transgress gendered expectations in ways that are not accessible to most girls in her world or our own.

There are two subversive levels operating within Pierce’s Neomedieval Fantasy: first, her narrative challenges modern historical assumptions about the Middle Ages, particularly the idea that women were wholly passive or absent from public life; second, her depiction of gender identity and embodiment resists contemporary binaries, presenting femininity as powerful and complex rather than oppositional to heroism. Alanna’s character exemplifies this tension. As Tolmie notes of medieval romance heroines, they are “at once aggressive and oppressed, active and acted-upon” (146), and Alanna too occupies this contradictory space. While she pushes against the roles assigned to her, her journey is also shaped by anxiety about appearing desirable, skilled, or worthy—concerns that often gain meaning through external validation, particularly from men. Much of this tension is grounded in the historical framework that Pierce draws from. As Marina Warner explains, “Medieval culture demanded certain virtues in the female sex—

gentleness, sweetness, and innocence—and it nurtured a womanly type that came to be seen as the natural character of the sex, and more virtuous than the male” (190). Deviations from this ideal, as Hilton and Nikolajeva observe, were often perceived as unnatural or even monstrous (78). Against this backdrop, Alanna’s determination to become a knight not in disguise but as herself becomes politically charged. In blending the trappings of chivalric heroism with a refusal to conform to conventional femininity, Alanna reframes what it means to come of age as a girl. The next section explores how these tensions are embodied in Alanna’s experiences, focusing on menstruation, clothing, and sexuality, and demonstrating how the personal is inextricably linked to the political.

## FEMINIST MAGIC

The difference between technology and magic can sometimes be a matter of time. For example, instant communication, travel by air, robots on Mars, and access to the information on the internet would be science fictions, fantasies, or technology depending on the historical period. Throughout this thesis, I explore Pierce’s authorial choices that closely reflect realism or fantasy and what effect this choice has on the narrative construction of these elements. However, the most fundamental fantasy worldbuilding choice in the Tortall Universe is the inclusion of pregnancy charms. In the U.S. during the 1970s, the oral contraception pill was readily available to single, unmarried women for the first time. This shift in the availability of contraception fundamentally changed the lives of American women, who went to higher education institutions in greater numbers, stayed in the work field longer where they advanced more economic opportunities for women, and the average age of a woman’s first marriage increased (Goldin and

Katz 765). When Mistress Cooper offers Alanna a pregnancy charm, she does so nonchalantly after Alanna's first period. It seems natural and usual for a hedgewitch or healer woman to offer contraception after the age they can procreate, "I'll give you a charm against your getting pregnant, then. If you change your mind, you can throw it away" (Pierce, *Adventure* 159). The "throw it away" indicates that Mistress Cooper respects Alanna's decision to have sex or not, to get pregnant or not, but places the importance on Alanna having the choice. This conversation between Mistress Cooper and Alanna is one I return to throughout this chapter, as it is a crucial conversation for Alanna as her only sex education discussion and the first time since Alanna begins knight training that she talks to another female who knows Alanna's true sex. Mistress Cooper's explanation of sex is factual and accurate, noting that sex leads to pregnancy, one should be prepared with contraception if having sex, females can change their minds about children but should have the choice, and, rather progressively for the time period and genre conventions in YA Female Fantasy contexts, that females also enjoy sex. Mistress Cooper tells Alanna, "You know the man's side of it [sex], I see. Well, a woman enjoys it too, and one time is enough for you to get with child" (Pierce, *Adventure* 159.). These two sentences contain more expansive sex education than many American students who receive abstinence-only sex education which does not present female desire as a positive and equal sexual experience to men, instead focusing solely on men's sexual pleasure and portraying sex as something females do not and should not enjoy (Santelli et al. 73). Indeed, female pleasure is often constructed as perfunctory, morally depraved, or even as a mental illness (Jones 645, Welles 33).

Pierce's inclusion of the pregnancy charm is revolutionary not only in explicitly depicting contraception in a YA story, but also in the wider worldbuilding implications of its existence. Linda Gordon notes "effective forms of birth control were used in nearly all ancient societies",

but their accessibility was shaped by moral, cultural, and political forces (2). Gordon emphasizes that “reproduction control brings into play not only the gender system but also the race and class system, the structure of medicine and prescription drug development and production, the welfare system, the educational system, foreign aid, and the question of gay rights and minors’ rights” (321). These insights reveal that birth control has never been solely about technology, it has always been about power and a cultural construction of women’s function and role within a society. Gordon notes that in a thorough examination of historical methods of birth control regardless of which effect came first, there was invariably “a complex, mutual, causal relationship between birth control and women’s status” in society (2). In societies where birth control is readily available and reliable, women also have more freedoms, opportunities outside the home, and economic independence.

The conservative backlash of the 1980s, when Pierce was writing *The Song*, aimed to limit young adults’ access to contraception, especially prescribed medication, such as the birth control pill, and to eliminate secular sex education through state policies on abstinence-only education and reproductive restrictions (Zafirovski 420). As Beth Younger observes, “novels on sexuality are necessary because America’s parents are often reluctant to provide their children with adequate information and guidance” (xv). Pierce’s work defies these silences by offering accessible, non-punitive sexual education within a fantasy world. Besides its apparently perfect success in preventing pregnancies, Pierce’s contraception also eliminates birth control side effects, something Gordon notes can be just as risky to health and even potentially deadly as childbirth or pregnancy. Pierce’s fantasy novels blend imaginative world-building with real-world concerns by providing accessible, non-punitive sexual education, showing young readers

how to exercise knowledge and agency in ways that address the gaps and risks present in real-world American sexual education.

In America, the conservative desire for greater control of women's bodies and procreation is explicitly linked to a fantastical version of the European Middle Ages that is more neomedieval reconstruction than based on any real historic precedence. As Sara Butler exposes, recent legal decisions have misused medieval precedent to justify restricting women's rights, and her article was "inspired by Justice Alito's selective and often misleading use of the medieval history of abortion law to justify the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*", which reveals how distorted interpretations of the past continue to shape the present U.S. (*Context 1*). This history, Butler notes, is interconnected with society's attempts to control women through accusations of magic, as "those who provided abortions were thought to be witches", underscoring how fear and misinformation regulated reproductive control even then (*Context 23*). These discourses persist today in framing contraception as morally suspect or indistinguishable from abortion—an equivalence that continues to undermine women's autonomy. There is a contentious historic relationship between women who provide or seek reproductive care, whether birth control or abortion, and being accused of being "witches". This frames female reproductive rights as inherently unnatural, the result of magic rather than "nature" even though, as Susan Stuard writes, these remedies were often made from herbs (7). Alanna's character in the *Tortall* series reclaims and transforms this historic association, portraying witches not as morally suspect or dangerous, but as knowledgeable, empowered, and ethically responsible women whose abilities contribute positively to their communities.

Since pregnancy charms in Pierce's *Tortall* Universe appear to be perfectly effective, it would seem to almost eliminate the need for abortion. If pregnancy charms are widely available,

there is no stigma to procuring or wearing them, even if they may not be advertised, and these charms are fully effective without any further action on the wearer besides needing to wear one during sex. Still, accidents and sexual assaults must happen, and while Pierce probably would not have been able to include a reference to abortions with her publisher in the 1980s—if the magic/technology of pregnancy charms exist, it seems logical that a society concerned with creating spells and charms for contraception would also have magic related to abortions. There are limits to magic in Tortall, even advanced forms of medical science replicated by magic cannot stop people from dying or cure all diseases. Alanna’s mother dies giving birth, and Myles tells her, “Sadly, it often happens” suggesting that whatever Feminist Magic exists in Tortall, mortality rates in childbirth are still common for mothers (Pierce, *Rides* 166). It’s unclear, however, if this is a result of the lack of magical technology or lack of care in the Tortall Universe for mages to research childbirth as a condition only experienced by women. Through Feminist Magic, Pierce bypasses the historical and political battles that have long defined reproductive rights. In doing so, she does not merely include contraception as a magical convenience; she reimagines reproductive freedom as an expected and uncontroversial part of daily life. This shift challenges dominant historical myths that birth control is either technologically new or morally suspect—myths that continue to inform U.S. debates over contraception and abortion. The pregnancy charm, easily acquired and devoid of stigma, serves as a revolutionary device that removes the need for more politically fraught questions, such as abortion. Through this mechanism, Pierce uses the imaginative space of fantasy not to escape reality, but to strategically rewrite it.

Magic in Tortall functions within a structured system: achievement is marked by formal examinations like the Ordeal of Sorcery (Pierce, *Hand* 179) and mastery relies on learning

complex practices, such as knot magic, fire-seeing (*Adventure* 5), healing (*Adventure* 10), and reading symbolic diagrams (Pierce, *Rides* 55). Instruction is essential, as is the ability to read magical texts—Alanna adds “the names and power of herbs, stones, and metals” to her lessons (Pierce, *Rides* 104). For example, while The Gift is inherited—“Jonathan has the Gift. He gets it from me—from the Conté line” (Pierce, *Adventure* 111)—objects can be magically enhanced, as seen with a non-Gifted character owning and using a truth bauble (Pierce, *Squire* 59), the blast keys in *Lady* (Pierce, *Lady* 69), and the charms used in *Bloodhound* (Pierce, *Bloodhound* 28-29). These enchanted tools, however, are costly and rare. In Beka’s earlier chronological time, there are several powerful female mages. For example, two of the main antagonists in *Mastiff* are powerful female mages, one noble born and one presumably of common birth (Pierce, *Mastiff* 374). Yet between the time of *The Song* and *Tricksters*, there are very few powerful female mages depicted as actually living in Tortall. Alanna received her magical training under the guise and access of a noble boy, the percentage of Tortallan society with the most access to educational instruction and knowledge. Daine has a different form of magic than the book-learned Gift while Gissa in *Wolf-Speaker* and Varice in *Emperor* are both educated in and citizens of Carthak. Maude and Sarra are hedgewitches, or, in other words, women who learned magic through informal instruction and have minimal gifts, and Aly is not a great mage and is taught privately through her father. There are no great female mages mentioned in relation to the Immortals war, which takes place during *Realms*. With the exception of *Tempest*, which thus far is set in Carthak not the kingdom of Tortall, Pierce’s protagonists have not attended exclusively mage training, so it is possible there are female mages in Tortall but in comparison to the Tortall of Provost’s Dog, there are conspicuously few powerful female mages. There is no mention across any text in the Tortall Universe that magic is diminishing; therefore, the lack of female

mages must be a result of Tortallan society refusing to educate girls and women, even of noble birth, with the Gift.

Reading and literacy are deeply linked to magical power and social mobility. As Kelly Schrum writes, “literacy in America was considered the essential skill for entering into society”, with reading and writing seen as foundational to both democratic participation and cultural competence (105). Barbara Sicherman argues that “literature in general and fiction in particular have been of critical importance in the construction of female identity” (2), emphasizing how literacy historically empowered women by granting them access to emotional and moral models. Jane Greer writes, “Because literacy so often serves as a means of brokering power [...] it is possible to track deeply rooted cultural concerns” through youth literacy (xvii). Access to magical knowledge is thus closely tied to power, especially when *The Gift* transcends class or race, as with Numair. However, it is ambiguous whether noble girls are allowed formal training. In *Adventure*, Alanna jokes, “You should have been Alanna. They always teach the girls magic” (Pierce, *Adventure* 2), to which her guardian replies, “The Daughters of the Goddess are the ones who train young boys in magic [...] When you’re older they’ll send you to the priests” (Pierce, *Adventure* 3). While there are hints of female magic-users, no powerful women mages are visible during Alanna’s knight-training years—suggesting that even with the Gift, girls lack access to advanced magical education, especially outside noble or religious contexts. Magic and literacy are also gendered forms of power. Sicherman writes that “because of their subordinate position in society and their traditional consignment to the home, women more than men have had to learn about life from books” (2). Karen Rowe and Kim Byong-Suh argue that women’s education has shifted historically from domestic moral instruction toward economic mobility (33). In Pierce’s world, these tensions are enacted through magic.

Liam's discomfort with Alanna's femininity, especially her use of the Gift, reflects gendered discomfort with power. Valerie Frankel notes that Liam "hates it when she wears dresses or acts girlish", trying to mold her into an "asexual warrior" devoid of emotional or magical sensitivity (62). Thom, who isolates himself from peers and refuses help, ultimately dies from his own unchecked magical ambition (Pierce, *Rampant* 309). Alanna warns Ishak, her only male student in the Bloody Hawk tribe, several times about his impatience and arrogance with magic, but he disregards her and the result is tragic, as he is burned by the evil magic while laughing at Alanna (Pierce, *Rides* 123). These moments echo Will Courtenay and Donald McCreary's findings that men who prioritize control and toughness are more prone to high-risk behavior and harm (248–249). Risk-taking, especially when masculinity is perceived to be threatened—particularly in competition with women—leads to deadly outcomes (Wilkerson 7). The results of this risk-taking masculinity, both within the Tortall Universe and American society, can have deadly results, whereas the more balanced, patient, and empathetic approach to magic demonstrated by Alanna's healing and Kara and Kourrem's patience and willingness to listen to Alanna's lessons in opposition to Ishak's behavior. This is also an example of Revisionist History: Alanna gains access to magical knowledge through revolutionary means, and given the Gift is hereditary, it must pass through mothers, which raises a final question: why hasn't magic been more equalizing? While raw magical ability, like that of Bazhir girls, can threaten existing systems, education remains tightly controlled. The daughters at the convent appear to teach just enough to ensure girls conform to society rather than disrupt it. Magic in Tortall is ultimately not a liberating force, but a metaphor for the acquisition and control of literacy, knowledge, and power—one that might have been revolutionary for all women in Tortall, had they been granted equal access.

## QUEER READINGS

A queer reading of *The Song* begins by recognizing that queerness in fantasy literature often operates beyond the author's original intent. Bristow writes, "Representation must flow into [fantasy] genre as well", and names Alanna and Thom as examples of early neurodivergent representation (21). Whether or not these characters were explicitly intended as such, Bristow argues that they function as complex models of identity that push the boundaries of expected fantasy roles. This tension between authorial intent and interpretation is central to many contemporary readings of fantasy. Roberts notes that "In creating a fantasy world anything is possible; therefore writers [...] must acknowledge degree of responsibility for their world beyond that of other creators" (2). If Tolkien can be read through a queer lens—as in critical texts by Jason Fisher, Johana Tornikoski, David Craig, and Derek Pacheco demonstrate—then so too can Pierce's *Tortall Universe*, especially given Pierce's own comments about queer characters in her later works.

Trites notes that "even when authors attempt to destabilize gender binaries by creating trans characters, they sometimes still reinscribe the performativity and materiality of gender in binaristic terms" (*Twenty-First* 142). Discussions online have debated the relationships between Roger, Alex, and Thom, and Pierce herself clarified Thom's sexuality as gay and Roger's as bisexual, noting that their relationships "actually began when Thom first came to court" (Pierce, "Roger, Thom, and Alanna" par. 3). Importantly, Pierce admits that she initially avoided explicit exploration of queer sexuality in her narratives because she worried that emphasizing it would dominate attention: "If I make a point of who is gay, then suddenly that's all anyone will talk

about: the gay characters. If I were writing about what it means to be gay, that would be fine, but I'm writing about the empowerment of the underdog, particularly female underdogs" (Pierce, "Roger, Thom, and Alanna" pars. 5-6). This statement illustrates her evolving awareness of representation and the tensions inherent in including queer characters within a narrative focused on female empowerment. In her later Emelan Universe works, she explicitly writes queer and transgender characters, demonstrating a willingness to revisit past limitations and revise her approach. Such reflection and adjustment exemplify the critical, self-aware Revisionist Feminism that distinguishes her work, showing how authors can respond to earlier oversights and integrate more inclusive practices over time. As Lehtonen argues, "conventional aspects do not prevent the text from being revisionist" (97). Therefore, Pierce's engagement with these issues highlights the ongoing, iterative nature of her revisionist project.

While Pierce initially hesitated to explicitly depict queer characters, this tension can be understood through De Beauvoir's insight into the structural constraints of patriarchy. As De Beauvoir observes, "Now, what peculiarly signalizes the situation of women is that she—a free and autonomous being like all human creatures—nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other" (xxix). Even privileged women, she suggests, must internalize and negotiate patriarchal structures in order to effect change. She further notes, "Evidently to play at being a man will be for her a source of frustration; but to play at being a woman is also a delusion: to be a woman would mean to be the object, the Other" (51), highlighting the impossibility of fully accessing male power while remaining constrained by the social expectations of femininity. These observations illuminate the structural challenges Pierce confronts in her narratives and within herself as feminist: her protagonists are autonomous and empowered, yet they operate within worlds shaped by historical hierarchies that define women as

Other. Pierce’s evolving approach to queer representation—acknowledging earlier limitations, later including queer and transgender characters, and encouraging fan interpretation—is reflected in her own words: “I encourage fan interpretations and readings alongside my own” (Pierce, *Tortall Universe FAQ*, par. 12). Mixed or critical opinions about her depictions of race and gender (Berkeley, Emmalita) exist, but unlike debates over her queer representation, there is little division between her audience and herself. As Pierce admits in an interview with Leigh Bardugo:

It's important that readers feel part of my universes—there's too much exclusion and battering in this one. I'm not perfect at it. Sometimes I screw up royally in my attempts to portray people of different races and beliefs, and sometimes I offend royally. Then I have to shut up, listen, learn, and try to do better. It's a process, but it's worth it. (qtd. in Parnassus)

Through this reflective process, Pierce demonstrates how Revisionist Feminist authors can grapple with internalized structures of power and revise both past limitations and the worlds they create to expand the possibilities for gender and queer representation.

Pierce’s own public comments also reflect a growing willingness to explore queer possibilities for her characters and their descendants. In response to a fan question about whether the children of her protagonists are queer, Pierce replied: “The youngest daughter [of Jonathan and Thayet], Vania, is gay [...] As far as George and Alanna’s kids go... Maybe Alan is gay [...] Thom is omni [...] Vania is probably going to go into the service of the Goddess, which conveniently would not interfere with her sexual preferences” (Pierce, “FAQ”). This comment reflects a Revisionist Feminist framework that leaves space for characters’ futures to evolve in response to reader engagement and cultural change. Even when not explicitly plotted in the main narratives, Pierce’s acknowledgement of queerness in the next generation of heroes signals a

conscious break from more rigid fantasy conventions. These revelations—shared not through the books themselves but through direct dialogue with fans—highlight the Tortall Universe as a living world, one that continues to grow in complexity and inclusivity.

Butler asks, “How do certain sexual practices compel the question: what is a woman, what is a man? If gender is no longer to be understood as consolidated through normative sexuality, then is there a crisis of gender that is specific to queer contexts?” (*Gender* xi). These questions resonate throughout Alanna’s journey. Her fluid navigation between femininity and warrior identity opens space for gender instability. Liam, who is romantically involved with Alanna, becomes increasingly uncomfortable with her use of magic. He does not only fear it—he attempts to suppress it. Liam doesn’t understand that Alanna’s refusal to choose between her femininity and her warrior identity is precisely what defines her. When Alanna wears a dress, Liam questions the practicality of the garment and an argument ensues with Alanna defending herself:

“It’s well enough,” he said at last. “Doesn’t seem practical, though.”

Would she ever understand him? “It isn’t supposed to be practical. It’s a dress. A dress that feels beautiful when you put it on.”

“Feeling beautiful won’t win a fight”.(Pierce, *Rampant* 124)

Liam’s inability to reconcile Alanna’s dual identity reads as queer-coded suppression—an attempt to flatten her complexity into a palatable binary. This scene, along with her earlier “coming out” as a woman moment with Gary (Pierce, *Hand* 197) and Myles (Pierce, *Hand* 229), contribute to a queer reading of Alanna that focuses on her refusal to conform. Bristow points to Alanna’s “bluntness” (18), hyperfocus (20), and the difficulty of articulating neurodivergence in pseudo-medieval settings where no diagnostic language exists (21). She writes that “it is

immediately clear that Alanna is not like other girls [...] prefers fencing to sewing” (Bristow 21), though she notes that this phrasing risks reinforcing a false preference binary. In Alanna’s case, the issue is not simple preference—it is about autonomy and control in a patriarchal society. Bristow concludes, “Since Alanna is an influential character [...] her books have influenced YA literature” (15), making these layered readings particularly significant.

This complex engagement with gender and identity is further evident in *Bloodhound*, particularly in the character of Okha, whose drag/femme name is Amber. Okha is a trans woman who introduces herself with a theological framing: “Inside I am a beautiful woman [...] The Trickster [God] tapped me in my mother’s womb and placed me in this man’s shell” (Pierce, *Bloodhound* 262). Okha’s identity is affirmed through the divine, positioning her transition as not only natural but sacred. She continues, “Some of us even claim the Trickster is one of us, and makes us so She/He has company” (Pierce, *Bloodhound* 262). This cosmological justification of queerness allows Pierce to integrate trans identity into the metaphysical structure of the Tortall Universe. However, the representation is not without issues. When Beka first sees Okha as Amber, Beka narrates: “She wore gold sandals on her feet. It was those feet, and her hands, with their gold-painted nails, that gave her away. They were much too big [...] It was Okha” (Pierce, *Bloodhound* 257). This moment reverts to a harmful trope—implying that trans women can be “exposed” by physical characteristics, reinforcing a reductive, biologically deterministic view of gender. Furthermore, even after Okha explains that she is “a beautiful woman”, the narration continues to refer to Okha/Amber using “he” pronouns: “Okha nodded to me, then wandered through the crowd, stopping at tables to say hello to folk he seemed to know” (ibid.). While Okha herself is portrayed with compassion and clarity, the narrative voice undercuts this by failing to affirm her gender identity through language. The religious framework grants Okha

dignity, but the pronoun usage and reliance on biological cues reproduce some of the very norms Pierce seems to be attempting to challenge.

Fan reception to Okha has reflected these contradictions in their portrayal within the narrative. In the subreddit *r/witchesagainstthepatriarchy*, an anonymous user praises the character of Okha/Amber as one of the few explicit transgender characters in YA Fantasy writing: “I’ve read a lot about Rowling and her issues with representation, but I’ve never seen anyone talk about how Pierce casually included a trans woman, let her explain her situation to the main character in a way that flowed with the story, and gave her a fleshed out character arc” (Creative\_Dinner3024). In contrast, another post in a different subreddit group criticizes the Provost’s Dog duology, a poster recounts a mixed reading experience of initially being disappointed in the transgender representation, “i [sic] actually made a FB comment about the trans character in Provost’s Dog on Tammy's page in 2016, from the perspective of being a trans woman myself” (anemone\_arms). However, the poster then goes on to claim, “Tammy actually messaged me privately [...] it was an amazing experience, and she was really open to acknowledging where she might have gone wrong” (ibid.). While the poster provided no proof, these fan experiences are not uncommon in online spaces where Pierce frequents. Even where the text falls short, Pierce’s willingness to admit missteps and to engage with her fanbase positions her work as part of an evolving feminist tradition. Rather than treating criticism as threats, she uses the criticism as an opportunity for growth—extending the Revisionist Feminist ethos to all her interactions with the Tortall Universe.

As the number of characters Pierce identifies as queer both within the published books and in other additions to the Tortall Universe has increased over time, it is clear that Pierce is increasingly attempting to reconcile the relationship between queerness and feminism. Alanna

and the broader Tortall Universe continue to be read as both queer and neurodivergent in ways that may not have been fully intentional but are no less meaningful. These layers reflect how fantasy literature, more than many other genres, opens possibilities for identity exploration that move beyond contemporary binaries. As Derritt Mason notes, “risk” is often used to frame queer youth identity in moralizing ways, particularly in the U.S. context (6). But Taylor Driggers reframes this entirely, writing, “it is not only characters that have the potential to be read as queer but often secondary worlds themselves and the (im)possibilities that they present for embodiment, relationships and theology” (3). As Driggers continues, “Fantasy literature, in short, has the potential to bypass both existing religious institutions in our world and the primary-world gendered and sexual identity categories – even ‘queer’ ones – in opening onto other ways of being and relating” (3). This vision of fantasy as a space of radical possibility brings the discussion full circle: in Pierce’s world, queerness exists not only in characters but in the very structure of the world—a world that continues to evolve through the shared imagination of its author and readers alike. Fantasy, in this view, does not merely contain queer characters—it offers alternative ontologies. Tortall’s contradictions, limitations, and ruptures are themselves part of its queer potential.

## RELIGION

Alanna begins her journey as one small girl with a dream: to serve her realm as a knight. Over time, she becomes Tortall’s most famous warrior, the King’s Champion, and a role model to future generations. Central to her rise in divine favor is the fact that Alanna is god-chosen. The Great Mother Goddess, co-ruler of the divine alongside Mithros, is her patron (Pierce, *Choice*

414). Though appearing in the form of the traditional Triple Goddess (maiden, mother, crone), she manifests to Alanna only as the Mother. At first, she speaks as a disembodied voice guiding Alanna's magic but later appears in person to offer maternal advice and divine power, helping Alanna fulfill her destiny.

The Goddess' favor is significant as it implies her support not just for Alanna's individual quest, but for the return of female knights in Tortall. Alanna's success leads to systemic change—women are again permitted to train as knights, and the rights of women expand under Jonathan's reign. When the Goddess confronts her about her fear of love, the scene functions as both a theological and psychological revelation:

“Because you fear love,” the Goddess told her. “You fear Jonathan's love and the love of the Rogue, George Cooper. You even fear the love of Myles, who only wants to be your father. Yet what is there for you to fear? Warmth? Trust? A man's touch?”

“I don't want a man's touch! [...] I'm sorry. I meant no disrespect. I just want to be a warrior maiden and go on adventures. I don't want to fall in love [...] I want to keep me for myself. I don't want to give me away”. (Pierce, *Hand* 13)

The Goddess, in opposition to Christianity and the figure of the Mother Mary, appears to encourage a young woman to explore her sexuality, to have more relationships. Pierce's Mother Goddess figure is unconcerned with virginity, monogamy, or marital purity. Warner calls the Virgin Mary “the Church's female paragon, and the ideal of the feminine personified” (xxxvi). Therefore, the image of Mary as idealized woman is a symbol of reproduction without sex, or in other words, the removal of female pleasure and the reduction of female identity to purity and motherhood ensures that social structures based on this interpretation of female identity are

similarly limiting to female sexual agency. Pierce's Goddess character creates a very different religious social structure to that of America's in giving women a specific goddess concerned with all facets of female identity, liberation, and equality. In *Adventure*, a young Alanna scoffs at the warriors at the Goddess' female temple warriors, comparing her own future great adventures to their limited freedom in being unable to limit temple grounds, but by the series' end, she seeks sanctuary there (Pierce, *Adventure* 21-22, *Rampant* 86). This change in perspective is indicative of Alanna's overall journey, from desiring individual freedom to considering the power of women more generally in society and learning to accept alternate modes of femineity.

Pierce's broader pantheon supports this complexity. The world of Tortall is populated by many gods—some humanlike, others entirely Other. In *Realms*, Daine crosses a rope-and-wood bridge into the divine realms, where “only Gods and immortal creatures may live” (Pierce, *Realms* 79). These deities govern magic, law, nature, animals, and war—more akin to Greek myth than monotheism. Mithros shares power with the Goddess and presides over magecraft, war, fire, and law. Every animal has its own god, and Pierce's invented religious calendar mirrors pagan holidays—Awakening (New Year), Beltane (fertility), the Solstices, All Hallow, and Midwinter (Pierce, *Lands* 219–222). Religion in Tortall and the Other Lands is not Christianity reworked—it is a deliberate alternate system. As Pierce explains, “People for the most part respect other ways and other gods. [...] It's my idea of an ideal world, where people grant others their own beliefs” (Pierce, “Diversity of Religion”). This pluralism stands in sharp contrast to dominant U.S. religious ideologies, which often enforce conformity and moral hierarchy and exemplifies a Revisionist Feminism creation rather than a more direct revision or reflection.

While many Tortall Universe gods appear in the image of a human, not all do as the more symbolic gods Daine meets in *The Immortals* prove. Aly is sickened by the Trickster's God's inability to feel sympathy for humans dying, "He was a god. He might care for a few chosen humans. He might even enjoy their company. But in the end, he could no more feel as humans did than could Stormwings" (Pierce, *Queen* 339–340). This shocks Aly, who had begun to think of the god as an ally and reminds her that they are fundamentally inhuman, regardless of the material form they take. Pierce's gods are emotional, imperfect, and morally complex. They guide, but do not command. Driggers argues that fantasy can offer "narrative form to theology at a remove from the usual trappings of religion", imagining alternatives to "Anglo-American Christianity" (1, 16). Pierce's spiritual world is one such alternative—a feminist cosmology rooted in choice, plurality, and mutual respect. Pounce/Faithful, the constellation of the cat that sits at the Goddess' feet, by his presence in these narratives and by providing help to Alanna and Beka, the Goddess' support is implied for their respective fundamental changes to Tortallan society, such as legalizing female knights again and the abolishment of slavery (Pierce, *Mastiff* 562).

Religion in Tortall is not merely a system of belief, but a site of ideological contestation. Pierce's narrative makes clear that social progress—particularly feminist progress—is neither linear nor guaranteed. Just as legal and reproductive rights can be won and then stripped away in real-world contexts, the rise of the cult of the Gentle Mother reflects how spiritual ideals can be weaponized to reverse feminist gains. The regression within Tortallan religion echoes the post-*Roe v. Wade* rollback of reproductive rights, illustrating that victories in gender equity must be continually defended against cultural and institutional backlash. In this way, the text warns that the moral and political ground secured by feminist movements remains perpetually vulnerable to

reinterpretation, co-optation, and erasure. As I will discuss in Chapter 2, Daine is a demigod and actually visits the Realms of the Gods in the book of the same title. Daine is not close with the Great Mother Goddess, who only appears briefly at the end of *The Immortals*, and as I briefly cover in Chapter 4, while Aly is god-chosen, it is by her father, George's god, Trickster.

Meanwhile Beka is an unofficial priestess for the God of Death, The Black God, being able to speak to dead souls as they ride pigeon-back (literally) and sometimes help their souls transition to his Realm (of the dead). The Black God as appearing in *Provost's Dog*, apart from being a useful magical tool for a fantasy law-enforcement officer, is the first god in Pierce ambiguously gendered, despite the use of he/him pronouns within the narrative. When Beka finally meets the God, she describes him as "a being in a robe, its face hidden under the folds of a hood. At first the robe seemed black, as it always was in statues. Then it changed color, turning brown, orange, white, blue, chestnut, yellow, and every other color that might possibly exist" (Pierce, *Mastiff* 456). However, she goes on to describe, "I say *he*, but he could as well have been a she. He didn't correct me, so I continue to think of him as I have always done" (Pierce, *Mastiff* 457). Religion in Tortall imagines a more inclusive pantheon of gods that provides representation for everyone, in many various facets (sex, employment, geography and so on). Though this thesis cannot fully explore Tortallan theology, religion's role in Alanna's story—and in the broader cultural transformation of Tortall—is central. Unlike Pierce's political systems, which protagonists must reform or resist, the religious system is not something to be fixed. At least in early Tortall, it is imagined differently from the outset.

In *Bloodhound* and *Mastiff*, Pierce introduces the cult of the Gentle Mother, a regressive and weaponized interpretation of the Goddess' teachings. Though the Goddess champions strength and plurality, her image is reinterpreted by human institutions to enforce domesticity

and submission (Keen 135). The Gentle Mother is a particularly interesting example of Pierce's Revisionist Feminist practices as an addition in-universe that is further back in chronological time than *The Song* with an attempt to explore the underlying friction in *The Song* that women used to be knights in Tortall, but it was outlawed. The Gentle Mother is Pierce's exploration of how a conservative ideology can result in changing cultural perception, which leads to an eventual loss of female freedoms and opportunities. Rather than portraying a linear trajectory toward justice, the series acknowledges that gains in women's rights are always at risk of being redefined or revoked. This perversion of the Mother Goddess into a tool of repression demonstrates not divine will, but human efforts to socially control women by keeping them compliant and uninformed through religion. In doing so, Pierce anticipates the cyclical nature of feminist struggle, where progress can be undone as it is achieved. One noblewoman admonishes Beka, "There are men to perform such brute work. Your spirit cries out for the touch of a child's hands, the peace of the spindle" (Pierce, *Mastiff* 291). When Beka highlights the absurdity of this situation in a dangerous world, Sabine agrees and tells Beka, "They would rather their women go pure and gentle to the grave than sully themselves with an enemy's blood" (Pierce, *Mastiff* 264). Beka rejects this reduction of the Great Mother Goddess, "This Gentle Mother nonsense is starting to give me a pain in my parsnips [...] I'll protect my own self, thank you very nicely" (Pierce, *Mastiff* 264). Later books complicate that vision, showing how even feminist cosmologies can be twisted into tools of oppression.

The cult of the Gentle Mother demonstrates how religious symbols can be manipulated to serve patriarchal interests, echoing real-world backlash against feminist gains. And even within a polytheistic framework, gods may justify violence. In *Rides*, Coram warns that Yahzed, a Scanran god, is "dead set against witchcraft, or any magic", and soon after, a priest invokes

Yahzed to incite a mob: “‘Burn the sorceress! Cleanse this village of her taint!’ The people roared their satisfaction; the woman they were burning screamed again” (Pierce, *Rides* 247). This reveals that oppression is not limited to monotheistic zealotry. Even in a pluralistic world, humans may still choose gods that reflect their own bigotry. Pierce’s narrative warns that belief systems—no matter how egalitarian in theory—are shaped by the societies that wield them. The Goddess, as a figure of resistance and radical maternal care, endures—but so does the danger of distortion and deserves further exploration in light of recent work on theology in fantasy, queer and Revisionist Feminist readings.

## BODY

A common refrain among Pierce herself and fans when discussing Alanna’s body and the many reader interpretations of her character is simply that “Alanna is Alanna” (Pierce, “FAQ”). Alanna, at the end of her series, finally realizes that she does not have to choose between parts of her identity, regardless of how they perform masculinity or femininity, playfully asking Faithful “Who says I can’t have a little bit of each?” (Pierce, *Rampant* 282). One of the most engaging aspects of Alanna’s story is the fluidity and complexity of her identity, of her refusal as a character to be limited to one interpretation, and of her freedom to explore the world as both genders and her own unique expression of her blend of gender. Alanna’s female body is central to the narrative of *The Song*, and Pierce’s inclusion of menstruation stands out as one of the series’ most subversive elements. The representation of menstruation in literature has long been politically fraught (Fingerson 4, 6-7; Pokorny-Golden 62-64), and by foregrounding it in a fantasy narrative for young readers, Pierce disrupts both genre and cultural taboos. Across the

Tortall Universe, Pierce consistently engages with the realities of adolescent embodiment—particularly the experiences of teenage girls. With the exception of the most recent series focused on Numair, each of her narratives addresses the physical and social dimensions of growing up in a female body.

Pierce's female protagonists confront bodily risk and injury, navigate the expectations imposed on them because of their sex, perform identity through clothing, experience desire, undergo puberty, and ultimately derive strength from their embodied selves. Liam's discomfort with Alanna's femininity, especially her use of the Gift, reflects gendered discomfort with power—Frankel notes that Liam “hates it when she wears dresses or acts girlish”, trying to mold her into an “asexual warrior” devoid of emotional or magical sensitivity (62). Thom, who isolates himself from peers and refuses help, ultimately dies from his own unchecked magical ambition (Pierce, *Rampant* 309). Although Alanna's experiences are set within a fantastical world, the emotions she feels in relation to her body—fear, pain, injury, puberty, desire, pleasure, jealousy, and anger—are all deeply grounded in the real experiences of adolescent girls in American society. As discussed previously, Alanna's body functions as a site of gender disruption; in this section, I expand on that claim by examining the portrayal of her menstruation, her experimentation with gendered dress, including cross-dressing, and her romantic and sexual relationships throughout *The Song*. Alanna's efforts to navigate her changing body highlight the tension between individual agency and the social structures that seek to regulate female embodiment, and their presence in the narrative actively resists the traditional silencing of female bodily experience.

Alanna goes to Mistress Cooper for help after getting her first period, scared and unsure why she is bleeding—scenes that are incredibly familiar to many young women, especially those

who went through puberty before the internet and had to rely on other women for information about their own bodies. Mistress Cooper tells Alanna about her monthly period and the normalcy of menstruation:

“Did no one ever tell you of a woman’s monthly cycle? The fertility cycle? [...] it happens to us all. We can’t bear children until it begins [...] It’s as normal as the full moon is, and it happens just as often. You may as well get used to it.”

“No!” Alanna cried, jumping to her feet. “I won’t let it!”

Again Mistress Cooper raised her eyebrows. “You’re a female, child, no matter what clothing you wear. You must become accustomed to that”. (Pierce, *Adventure* 159)

Alanna’s visceral reaction to getting her period—her body doing something she does not want it to do—underscores her discomfort with being perceived or constrained by a biologically female identity. The shock, resistance, and distress she expresses align with broader feelings of alienation many adolescents feel toward their changing bodies, and in Alanna’s case, deepen the tension between her gender presentation and embodiment. Pierce reinforces this tension through a continuation of that same exchange, which introduces a metaphysical framework to explain Alanna’s biological sex:

“You’re a female, child, no matter what clothing you wear. You must become accustomed to that.”

“Why?” Alanna demanded. “I have the Gift. I’ll change it! I’ll—”

“Nonsense!” the woman snapped. “You cannot use your Gift to change what the gods have willed for you [...] the gods willed you to be female and small and redheaded, and obviously silly as well”. (Pierce, *Adventure* 158)

Mistress Cooper's assertion that Alanna's sex is "what the gods have willed" frames her body as unchangeable and divinely fixed. Within the world of *The Song*, where magical healing and transformation are possible, this refusal of bodily change is particularly revealing. It presents a theological-binary framework that implicitly invalidates trans identities: to alter the body is not just unnatural—it is sacrilegious. Even though Alanna's emotional response could open the text to a trans or queer reading, this response is immediately constrained by the narrative's invocation of divine will as biological destiny. The absence of magical or medical options for changing one's sex in *Tortall* becomes especially striking in a world where other forms of bodily alteration are common. As scholars of speculative fiction have noted, worldbuilding choices around medicine, gender, and transformation are inherently political. That Pierce does not include magical gender transition—even within an otherwise flexible magical system—reveals a larger tension between representing young adult bodily concerns realistically and preserving cisnormative structures within this fantasy genre. The graphic novel of *Adventure* was published two days before this thesis was submitted. There was not enough time to engage with the comic series more fully nor to engage with critical frameworks of analyzing graphic novels or direct adaptations. However, I did look ahead at this specific exchange to see how it was handled in Pierce's revision of the story and *the entire latter half of this exchange is removed in the comic version*.



Fig. 1. (Pierce, *Book I* 116)

This demonstrates Pierce's direct engagement with revision in its most direct form, retelling the same narrative in a different medium, and the exclusion of this language does show Pierce's continued revision of her previously limited construction of the relationship between biology and gender identity. However, Mistress Cooper's explanation to Alanna about the explicit enjoyment of sex for women as well as men is also missing in the comic version, which I note is a particularly subversive and sex-progressive statement in cultures where women's sexual desires are demonized and sex is most often depicted as solely providing male pleasure (Pierce, *Adventure* 159, Dienberg et al. 223). These direct revisions are a balance between retaining the original, updating the format, and allowing a living author to fix previous mistakes that they identify as mistakes. The limitations and possibilities of these adaptation revisions can be seen in

this one example drawn from the comic that both removes problematic historic language relating to sex but also removes progressive language on female pleasure in sex. Had Alanna been presented with the option of magical bodily change, would she have taken it? Could such a storyline have even been published in the 1980s, especially given that Pierce's publisher at the time required her to remove references to sex workers for being morally inappropriate? The answer is likely no—highlighting the cultural constraints under which Pierce was writing, and the boundaries of what could be imagined or made visible in YA fiction at the time.

Cross-dressing is a familiar trope in both feminist and YA literature (Hilton and Nikolajeva 78), and Alanna's time living as Alan has received substantial critical attention. Children and adolescents frequently engage in "cross-dressing" through imaginative play or by experimenting with identities. As Day observes, cross-dressing "is an overt way of showing that gender is perceived truly in the way a person presents themselves—and it is not fixed" (*Reading* 24). For Alanna, the act is not about performing masculinity, but rather about suppressing femininity in order to access male-only spaces. Flanagan notes that while Alanna does join a broader history of cross-dressing in YA literature, Alanna's journey is still distinct in its treatment of Alanna's dressing and performing gender:

Alanna, however, is one of the few female cross-dressing narratives that attempt to deal specifically with the issue of physicality. Pierce refers, on more than one occasion, to the way that Alanna binds her breasts, in order to conceal them. (*Into the Closet* 28)

Alanna's cross-dressing is rendered with particular depth in Pierce's portrayal, which emphasizes the tangible realities and challenges of her disguise, while simultaneously subverting common children's literature tropes that treat cross-dressing merely as a temporary or superficial disruption of binary gender norms.

Alanna does not attempt to change her personality or mimic male behaviors; her disguise is pragmatic. Phillips notes that Alanna does not even attempt to simulate male anatomy: “she has nothing, lacking a penis, Alanna looks like Thom and not the other way around” (*Female* 60). This underscores the assumption embedded in the narrative—that the default human form is male. Thom could never convincingly pass as Alanna, but Alanna’s body is assumed to be easily hidden or negligible. Phillips continues:

The foundation of similarity that initially makes Alanna’s cross-dressing possible also depends upon Alanna and Thom being children. At some point on this journey, Alanna will become “a girl – you know, with a chest and everything” [...] while this claim taps into essentialist notions of what it means to be a sexed and gendered self, I would argue that it also speaks to a common assumption about what it means to be a girl: that until puberty and the development of secondary sexual characteristics...the little girl is, as Freud declares, “only a little man”. (*Female* 59)

In other words, Alanna’s ability to pass is predicated on her being not fully a girl—because the cultural logic assumes a girl is defined by visible physical markers. This absence—or “lack”—makes it possible for Alanna to inhabit a male-coded identity without performance, which is central to how her heroism is framed in the series. As Sahn notes, Alanna’s journey of self-determination is complicated by the systems she must navigate: “Mixed in with Alanna’s story of self-determination is an accession to the power structures that limit her in the first place—and while Alanna breaks down the barriers that would keep her from her vocation as a knight, she does so for herself, not for anyone else” (147). Her resistance is personal, not systemic.

Pierce is also careful to show Alanna’s emotional conflict over her deception—she frequently expresses guilt at the deception, and after being outed to the king, her first words are:

“I hated lying to you” (Pierce, *Hand* 235). This distinction is key: Alanna’s disguise does not serve to acquire masculinity, but to access the right to forge her own version of heroism. She does not perform drag or abandon femininity altogether; rather, she temporarily suspends its visibility. This framing allows her to become a hero without having to reject her identity, and it establishes a model of cross-dressing that is aligned more with gender fluidity than with fixed binary categories. Mary Pipher’s observation that preadolescent girls “can be androgynous, having the ability to act adaptively in any situation regardless of gender role constraints” (18) underscores the degree to which Alanna’s fluidity is constrained not by nature but by narrative framing. While childhood offers a space for gender ambiguity, Alanna’s identity is often defined negatively—as the inverse of maleness—rather than positively, as a form of female heroism in its own right.

This idea of “lack” can be read through a genderqueer lens. Alanna does not entirely disavow femininity, nor does she fully inhabit masculinity. Instead, her identity remains fluid, contingent, and resistant to clear categorization. Butler, in the 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble*, articulates the consequences of decoupling gender from sexuality: “Gender can be rendered ambiguous without disturbing or reorienting normative sexuality at all” (xiv). Alanna’s romantic relationships remain conventional, but her gender expression challenges the assumption that femininity is stable or natural. This aligns with J. Butler’s foundational argument that gender is always a performative act, an identity constructed through repeated behaviors. As Butler writes:

If gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. (*Gender* 520).

Alanna's very existence disrupts the claim that gender is biologically inherent. She must learn how to be a woman—just as she learned to be a knight. Mistress Cooper explicitly trains her in femininity, noting that learning how to walk, speak, and dress “like a lady” is just as challenging as mastering court etiquette for boys (Pierce, *Hand* 145). This performance is laborious, practiced, and unnatural—demonstrating that femininity, like masculinity, is something acquired. This is not to suggest that Alanna is uninterested in gender or in how she is perceived. On the contrary, she clearly wishes to integrate femininity into her identity without compromising her strength. As Tolmie notes of warrior women in medievalist fiction, “They dress up as men to escape restraints on their freedom, run away from abusive fathers, escape unwanted marriages, avoid, avert or survive rape, or take up arms” (148). Alanna fits all of these motives. Her physical presence as a knight continues to defy gendered norms even into adulthood; from Daine's perspective, “Out of saddle, the knight was two whole inches shorter than she was, and built on stocky, not muscular, lines” (Pierce, *Wild* 32). Alanna herself even jokes, “Mistress Cooper tries to cure me of walking like a boy, but it doesn't seem to take” (Pierce, *Hand* 159). These moments reveal that Alanna's gender expression is dynamic, learned, and full of slippages—not rigid or biologically predetermined.

The first half of the series centers Alanna's internal conflict around gender. But with her exposure—first magical, then physical—the focus shifts outward. The question becomes not how she understands herself, but how society sees her. Ylanda's unmasking of Alanna in *Adventure* is framed as a joke at the heroine's expense: “In all my centuries [...] I have not known such a jest. Young lion—see your companion for what she really is!” (Pierce, *Adventure* 229). Alanna's clothes are stripped away through magical force: “Before Alanna could bring Lightning's crystal up, power from Ylanda and Ylon smashed into her defenses, breaking through [...] Her clothes

were gone” (ibid.). This is not a moment of empowerment or revelation—it is one of humiliation, framed as spectacle. Similarly, in *Hand*, Alanna is physically exposed during battle: “Alanna stumbled and the tip of Duke Roger’s sword sliced down her chest from collarbone to waist [...] and, to Alanna’s great embarrassment, the curves of her breasts showing through. Roger dropped his blade and stood back, his eyes wide with shock” (Pierce, *Adventure* 234). Her body, gendered and vulnerable, becomes visible only through violence. Butler reflects on the cultural desire for gender to be revealed as a kind of interior truth: “I wondered whether we do not labor under a similar expectation concerning gender, that it operates as interior essence that might be disclosed, an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates” (*Gender* xv). Flanagan’s analysis illuminates the broader significance of these episodes:

Transgressive and nonconformist gender behavior is examined and validated in female cross-dressing literature, specifically in relation to the issue of individual identity and the complex questions that can often surround a young subject’s quest for autonomy and selfhood. (*Into the Closet* 48)

Alanna’s exposures, though framed as humiliation, underscore precisely this lesson: her worth is not determined by her adherence to socially prescribed femininity, nor by her ability to perform the expected gender role. In Alanna’s case, the narrative does not allow her to choose the moment of disclosure; instead, she is outed—both magically and violently. Her “truth” is revealed not through consent but through spectacle. Yet ironically, these exposures remove the burden of secrecy. Alanna never has to orchestrate a coming out, never faces the anxiety of choosing when and how to tell. This paradox—of being spared choice through violation—reflects a broader queer tension around visibility, safety, and autonomy. Together, these

moments dramatize the power structures that attempt to stabilize identity through revelation, and the ways in which gender nonconformity resists being neatly made visible.

## ROMANCE

Romance was a defining feature of 1980s American popular culture, particularly in media marketed to adolescent girls. As Linda Christian-Smith notes, “romance reading for teenage girls has provided an escape from school and home problems [...] and afforded a means for reflecting on developing desires and feminine identity; hence they can be powerful tools of ideological reinforcement” (qtd. in Browne and Browne 11). Romance as a genre has long been entangled with both the constraints and possibilities of women’s sexual liberation, serving as a cultural site where normative femininity is both reproduced and contested. The inclusion of romance in YA fiction, especially during the 1980s in American culture, reflects shifting cultural anxieties around adolescence, gender, and sexuality. *The Song* was published at a time when YA fiction was, as Cart argues, often nostalgic and moralizing, failing to authentically capture teenage experience. Cart describes much of 1980s YA romance as superficial and regressive, populated by “shy, inexperienced, small-town girls” whose “primary interest in life is boys” (30). On the surface, *The Song* might appear to align with this trend: a coming-of-age narrative centered on a girl’s secret identity, romantic entanglements, and eventual heterosexual pairing. Yet the series ultimately resists and reworks these genre expectations. Alanna’s story challenges the postfeminist sensibility of contemporaneous “chick lit”, which Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff define as characterized by “neo-liberal feminine subjectivities”, self-surveillance, and a fixation on the sexualized body as the core of female identity (487). While Alanna

experiences desire and romance, her journey is not defined by romantic fulfillment. Rather, she emerges as a female hero who moves beyond the narrative constraints that often position young women's stories in relation to men. Her romantic experiences are meaningful but not definitive; they are part of her development, not the endpoint of it.

Christian-Smith's description of romance fiction up to the early 1980s contextualizes the American cultural environment preceding *The Song* and the mixed representations of romance as empowering female desire while limiting female action within narratives. Alanna does not pursue romance as a means of self-actualization, nor does she allow romantic interest to dictate her appearance, purpose, or value. Pierce subverts these tropes by writing a protagonist who embraces both romantic desire and personal ambition without allowing one to eclipse the other. Janice Radway's foundational study of the romance genre underscores the complexity of readers' relationships to romance fiction. She argues that "romance reading is a profoundly conflicted activity centered upon a profoundly conflicted form" (Radway 14). While readers seek escape and comfort—"a happier, more trouble-free version of existence" (Radway 88)—they also engage critically with the genre's conventions. Fantasy fiction, too, is often dismissed as escapist, yet, as I explored in the Introduction, Tolkien's idea of fantasy as "recovery" offers a different model: escape not from reality, but for the sake of returning to it with greater insight. Similarly, Tolmie argues that fantasy allows space for both recognition and political critique, "contemporary fantasy novels can offer all of these pleasures of recognition and familiarity plus the added pleasures of politicized critique" (147). Romance, in this context, does not preclude critical engagement—rather, even its most conventional pleasures can be reconfigured as sites of resistance and transformation. While many 1980s romance narratives reinforced narrow, heteronormative constructions of femininity, *The Song* complicates these frameworks. I agree

with Cart's critique of the limitations of YA "chick lit", particularly its tendency to reproduce a homogenous vision of adolescent girlhood. However, Alanna diverges from these patterns in meaningful ways. Pierce uses the fantasy genre to mirror the adolescent experience while imagining paths toward radical change. Romance in *The Song* is not merely escapist or normative; it is a narrative element that both participates in and resists genre expectations—inviting readers to take pleasure in desire while also questioning the systems that define what desire should look like.

Liam's attraction to Alanna prompts further self-doubt, even though Liam is also not conventionally attractive. As Alanna thinks, "He shouldn't be attractive, not with a broken nose and his face all scarred [...] But he is attractive! she thought nervously. Why is he interested in me? I'm not as pretty as some of the other women here" (Pierce, *Rampant* 12). Alanna cannot understand why any man would find her attractive over more traditionally beautiful women. Despite her insecurity, she is desired by three powerful men. However, her validation still comes from their attention—not from her own self-acceptance. Liam, however, makes it clear that Alanna's appeal lies in her unique identity as a warrior: "'She's as known in her way as I am in mine.' He put a massive hand on Coram's arm. 'I'm not a village lad wanting to boast of having the Lioness' pelt in my hut, Master Smythesson. I like her'" (Pierce, *Rampant* 28). The feminist implications here are mixed. Liam and Coram clearly respect Alanna, but their conversation reduces her agency by making her the object of debate. Still, Liam rejects the idea of treating her as a conquest. That said, rereading *The Song* as an adult, Alanna's persistent self-criticism becomes emotionally difficult; it signals how even empowered female protagonists are judged by their romantic and physical desirability. "Growth" for girls, it seems, remains tied to whether they are loved.

At times, Alanna's status as an outsider becomes almost comedic. She has no idea how to flirt, as she describes her uncertainty approaching Liam, which she cannot do as a noblewoman with no "fan" or "handkerchief" nor as a Bazhir tribeswoman by flirting with her "eyes" behind veils, nor finally can she be direct with Liam and sit down at his table as a man would (Pierce, *Rampant* 13). This moment reflects a universal awkwardness during adolescence and early romance. But more importantly, it reveals that flirting and attraction are socially coded behaviors, governed by expectations of gender, class, and culture. Alanna does not know how to behave romantically because she falls outside these social gender binaries. YA romance often relies on tropes: the beautiful, virginal heroine and the powerful male love interest. And yet Pierce engages with these expectations critically. Younger's analysis of YA contradictions finds echoes in the scholarship on *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*, which similarly balance feminist disruption with re-inscription of norms. Yet decades earlier, Pierce was already exploring such tensions, centering protagonists not defined by romantic outcomes and building narratives that resist traditional binaries. Alanna's worst fears surface when Jonathan weaponizes her appearance during an argument. After she refuses to leave the desert despite his presumption that she will leave, Jonathan lashes out, telling her at least other court ladies are "real" (implied) women, "At least they're women, Lady Alanna! [...] And they know how to act like women!" (Pierce, *Rides* 186). If Alanna is female, then the crucial part of Jonathan's criticism is Alanna's ability to *act* like a woman, not to be biologically female and constitutes a rejection on Jonathan's part of Alanna's genderfluid identity.

Trites examines a YA novel in which a young female protagonist has her first sexual experience; the character expresses shame at her expression of sexuality which her boyfriend

responds by comforting her. However, Trites notes the contradiction implied by the inclusion of this element in the narrative:

[...] the dialogue can be criticized for its hypocrisy, for the language is couched in institutional discourse with rhetoric ostensibly about patriarchal attitudes toward girls' chastity that are thinly disguised reinforcements of those values. I read those words and cannot help thinking, "Shame never crossed my mind until Michael said no one should be ashamed". (Trites, *Disturbing* 88)

Though the author may have been attempting to frame adolescent female sexuality as a positive element, the boyfriend's reassurance within the narrative might reassure a reader already feeling shame but to the reader who does not feel shame, it introduces the idea that they should. A similar scene takes place between Alanna and Jonathan. Alanna objects to marrying Jonathan because she is no longer a virgin, but Jonathan reassures her that she was a virgin when their relationship began and affirms that he wishes to marry her despite her having engaged in premarital sex (Pierce, *Rides* 130). For a contemporary young American reader encountering *The Song* for the first time, Alanna's objection to premarital sex as inappropriate for a respectable noble marriage may not simply signal that she has done nothing wrong; instead, it could suggest the opposite by introducing and reinforcing the notion that she ought to be concerned about it.

Although sex is never graphically described in *The Song*, it plays an important role in Alanna's coming-of-age. Questions remain about how these relationships and moments of intimacy will be adapted in the graphic novel versions of the later books. Battis contrasts Alanna's sexual autonomy with the "celibacy of Le Guin's wizards" (Battis 100), suggesting that Alanna's story marks a significant departure from more traditional, often desexualized fantasy protagonists. Pierce complicates traditional romance dynamics by simultaneously centering

Alanna's sexual agency and blurring the boundaries of consent in moments that foreground male desire, revealing the ambivalence at the heart of narratives that attempt to both empower and romanticize. In Alanna's experiences with romance—her laughter with George, the passionate makeup sex with Liam, and her internal conflicts—highlight the emotional and physical complexities of early sexual experiences. As Radway observes, “It seems clear that while the sexually explicit romance of the eighties may have begun positively to valorize female sexuality and thus to question the equation of femininity with virtue and virginity, it nevertheless continued to motivate sexual action through love” (Radway 16). Alanna, by contrast, struggles to locate herself within such romantic binaries: Liam only values her masculine strength, while Jonathan prefers her femininity—highlighting her discomfort in being desired in only partial, binary-conforming ways. Alanna begins her sexual relationship with Jonathan during the same period that she is also learning to dress and present herself as a woman, a confusing and emotionally fraught time for her. Jonathan treats Alanna-his-squire and Alanna-his-lover as almost separate people.

By contrast, George sees Alanna as a more complete person who is both a warrior and a woman: “Men got ideas when a person wore skirts! George vowed love to you without ever seeing you in skirts, a reasonable part of her mind said, but Alanna kicked that thought away” (Pierce, *Hand* 161). Later, when Alanna reflects on her evolving relationship with George, she notes a growing comfort and mutual respect:

Never before had she been coddled and treated like something precious. Jon had always treated her as a comrade, except when they were making love. She usually liked the way the prince handled her, but a small, treacherous part of her longed for the gentle courtesy

he gave noble ladies. Now George gave her that courtesy, as well as treating her like a comrade, and she liked the mixture. (Pierce, *Rides* 206–207)

Alanna again longs for a way to live that draws from both the male and female traditional roles in Tortallan society, this time those surrounding courtship and sex, rather than gender wholly determining how these relationships are enacted between individuals.

After Alanna and Liam become romantically involved, Coram expresses concern about the effect this might have on her reputation and is also unsure where Alanna's sexuality fits within gender ideals in Tortallan society. Although she is a knight and warrior—positions that should exempt her from such scrutiny—her embodiment of gender still subjects her to social judgment and ostracization. Liam, however, sees her differently:

“She’s a pretty thing—different, and full of fight. I never heard that she avoids men.”

Remembering Prince Jonathan and the thief, George, Coram flushed.

“She’s still not a woman without all virtue.” Liam chuckled.

“She’s too good a warrior to have a bad reputation as a woman. At least, no one will call her bad when she might hear”. (Pierce, *Rampant* 27)

Because Alanna is respected as a warrior, she is able to escape some of the traditional constraints and scrutiny placed on noblewomen. Her identity as a fighter protects her from the same reputational stakes, offering her greater sexual freedom and autonomy. Alanna's status as a warrior allows her to navigate social scrutiny in ways that traditional female roles in Tortallan society would restrict, granting her greater freedom in both public and private spheres. This relative autonomy extends to her sexual relationships, where Pierce portrays desire and choice without shame, highlighting the interconnectedness of gender performance, social judgment, and

sexual empowerment. I return to this depiction of embodying a mixed privileged identity in the Chapter 3 section Body and the Chapter 4 section Class.

Pierce's depiction of Alanna's first sexual experience is notably progressive. Alanna chooses to have sex with a close friend, and there is no language about "losing" her virginity—only the acknowledgment that she is learning about romance. While nervous, she does feel safe with Jonathan (Pierce, *Hand* 161). Pierce has spoken about the importance of representing female protagonists who experience sex, desire, and romance without being shamed. Clementine Ford writes, "Patriarchal society might be afraid of women's bodies, but that doesn't mean women should be taught to fear them too. We should be teaching girls to feel pleasure instead of shame and giving them a framework to express sexual autonomy and confidence" (*Fight Like 77*). Alanna's early sexual relationships reflect this balancing act—presenting sex as both empowering and sometimes fraught. Radway notes that romance often relies on "picturing the heroine in relative positions of weakness" in order to explore coping strategies (75), and warns that readers may internalize problematic tropes: "I suspect their willingness to see male force interpreted as passion is also the product of a wish to be seen as so desirable to the 'right' man that he will not take 'no' for an answer" (76). Pierce complicates these dynamics without wholly avoiding them. When George and Alanna's friends drug her before the Ordeal without her knowledge or consent, it exemplifies how well-meaning romantic gestures can replicate patriarchal tropes. As Grogan notes, *The Song* "implies that women eventually enjoy assault" (30)—a deeply troubling undertone that resurfaces in some of the series' more romanticized moments. Nonetheless, Pierce's decision to include a protagonist who explores sex and desire without shame—while also being allowed to say no, change her mind, and make mistakes—is still rare in YA Fantasy. Alanna's navigation of romantic relationships reflects broader tensions

between bodily autonomy, gender performance, and sexual empowerment that continue to shape young readers' understanding of themselves and the world around them.

Like much of children's literature, YA fiction often favors happy endings in which female protagonists enter monogamous romantic relationships, concluding their stories with marriage. This heteronormative structure persists even in later, commercially successful series, such as Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005) and Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008), both of which—despite being published nearly two decades after *The Song*—ultimately reinforce traditional romantic and narrative resolutions. Younger describes such texts as existing “between repression and liberation” in which texts “both resist patriarchal norms and simultaneously portray the structures that enforce them” (133–134). Alanna's characterization aligns with Younger's observation that female protagonists in YA literature often enact “resistance to both individual acts of repression and patriarchal oppression”, which “exposes them for the harmful structures they are”, yet remain limited in scope—particularly in terms of the diversity of romantic narratives represented (*ibid.*). These apparent contradictions and limitations are inherent to Revisionist Feminism, particularly within YA Fantasy, which is shaped by tensions between youthful revolutionary impulses and the moderating influence of adult expectations, especially in its treatment of romance.

In Alanna's case, the narrative simultaneously challenges patriarchal norms surrounding marriage, sexual romance, gender fluidity, and female identity, while ultimately resolving within the frameworks of heterosexuality and legal monogamy. As Lehtonen writes:

One might argue that the romance ending not only celebrates marriage as the real fortune of a female hero but also supports heteronormativity, and thus does not make the novel truly subversive in the context of gender. However, because it is possible for texts to

include contradictory discourses [...] these conventional aspects do not prevent the text from being revisionist in some other sense. (97).

This observation underscores how YA Fantasy can sustain competing ideological positions, allowing conventional romantic resolutions to coexist with, rather than negate, Feminist Revision. As with The Song series more broadly, “very often these two strands exist simultaneously within individual texts”, suggesting not just a contradiction, but a defining feature of feminist YA as a genre negotiating the demands of mainstream appeal alongside the political urgency of structural critique, often leaving certain hegemonic norms, such as heteronormativity, largely intact (Lehtonen 97). As I will argue in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, Pierce’s female heroes frequently embody progressive feminist ideals, yet retain elements of traditional American values. What distinguishes her Tortall Universe, however, is her sustained commitment to revisiting these tensions—through shifting character perspectives, recurring settings, and ongoing engagement with complex political and social justice issues. This narrative continuity and evolution help prevent the stagnation of feminist ideals in her work and offer young readers a dynamic model of growth and resistance.

Radway’s concept of romantic escape is framed through the “passivity” of the heroine, whose central narrative function is to become “the object of someone else’s attention and solicitude” (97). Alanna, however, is neither passive nor completed by marriage—particularly since her marriage to George occurs only in the series epilogue. For Alanna, marriage has long been associated with the loss of freedom: giving up her sword and shield to stay home, raise children, and support a husband who continues to have adventures, because that is the only kind of marriage she has witnessed. In *Rampant*, Alanna and Liam argue over this very idea of what a marriage constitutes:

“Do you plan to marry? [...] Your plans for the future—do they include a husband? Children?” She fingered her ember-stone.

“Give up my shield after working so hard? Spend my time at court or on my husband’s lands? I have no patience for that kind of life. Besides—I don’t know anything about children younger than ten [...] Child care is one of the few duties a squire isn’t expected to perform, Ironarm! The Bazhir never asked me to, unless a child was sick. Then I was a healer, not a nanny.”

Why was he asking such uncomfortable questions?

“I just wondered why you feel you have to be all warrior or all woman. Can’t you be both?” (Pierce, *Rampant* 63–64)

In this exchange, Alanna dismisses the roles she associates with womanhood—motherhood, childcare, and domesticity—despite both Liam and Coram demonstrating nurturing behavior throughout the series. Yet Liam challenges her binary thinking and plants the question that becomes central to Alanna’s arc: “Can’t you be both”? Eventually, Alanna embraces this possibility. She forges a path that allows her to be a woman and a warrior, married to a man who fully understands that knighthood is central to her identity. Her discomfort around children is repeatedly referenced and later softened when Buri and Thayet join her party, accompanied by rescued children and a baby.

Pierce’s treatment of marriage and naming conventions also introduces subtle but significant progressive elements. It is noteworthy, even by contemporary standards, that George takes Alanna’s last name—an idea echoed in *Mastiff*, when Farmer also takes Beka’s surname, “Cooper”:

“Farmer—” the king began.

“Cooper,” my man said firmly, walking over to kneel before the king.

“Farmer Cooper, then,” said the king, raising an eyebrow at me. (Pierce, *Mastiff* 570)

Earlier in the series, Jonathan assumes Alanna will marry him and become Queen of Tortall. However, Alanna questions not only her readiness but also their compatibility. In reflecting on this, Alanna distinguishes love from long-term partnership, confiding to Myles that “Love’s wonderful, but it is not enough to keep us together for years of marriage. I’m not sure if I’m ready; I’m not sure if Jon’s ready. I have to be sure” (Pierce, *Rides* 148). This distinction is important for a young adult audience and represents a meaningful departure from the fairy tale structure. Jonathan, Alanna’s best friend and romantic partner throughout much of the series, also happens to be the crown prince. A more traditional fantasy would end with their wedding and ascension to the throne.

However, Alanna is not interested in giving up her independence or becoming defined by royal duties. She enjoys her fame as a knight and resists being second to Jonathan in public or private life. Pierce reflects on this revision as a moment of character growth, “If Alanna can turn down the handsome prince [...] it’s not so unthinkable. Life goes on, and there may be another, more suitable, partner in the wings. In the meantime, there is freedom and discovery. That’s what matters” (Pierce, *Rides* 268). Alanna’s refusal of Jonathan retains the pleasure of being desired crucial to romances while retaining Alanna’s individuality and identity. This moment of feminist revision becomes a turning point in Pierce’s career. It marks her awareness of and resistance to the romantic tropes she had previously leaned on, and her attempt to write beyond those limitations. Compared to many later YA series—*Twilight*, *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games*, *Vampire Academy*—in which protagonists often have sex for the first time with their

eventual spouses, *The Song* presents a more sexually autonomous and realistic narrative. Alanna has more on-page sexual experience than any other Pierce protagonist to date and is not tied to the concept of virginity as a prerequisite for romantic resolution. She neither marries “the handsome prince” nor exists solely as an object of desire, but as a character who experiences and expresses desire on her own terms.

While Alanna’s eventual marriage does provide a heteronormative “ending”, her conversations with Liam, Thayet, and Buri challenge the assumptions she holds about marriage and womanhood. Early in the series, Alanna equates marriage with submission, but over time she comes to recognize the diversity of experiences within marriage. Liam’s remark that Alanna can protect her own reputation highlights the fact that not all women in Tortall have this privilege. Many are subject to ridicule or danger for stepping outside normative gender roles, and Alanna’s ability to do so is partly due to her social class and the constant presence of Coram, who acts as both protector and confidant. Though *Rampant* does not overtly address these intersections, Alanna’s increasing awareness of the structural nature of inequality and her redefinition of marriage reflect her broader journey. Not all marriages are oppressive, and not all women within them are passive. This realization allows Alanna to reclaim the institution on her own terms. Ultimately, as I will explore through additional depictions of romance in subsequent series, these same tensions—alongside questions of ethnicity and race discussed in Chapter 4—remain central to critiques of Pierce’s work. These are also the elements that have most divided fans and scholars, revealing both the limitations and the enduring complexity of *The Song* as a feminist YA text.

## HEROISM

I have split Alanna's heroic qualities into seven categories that make up her character as a distinctly female hero: Determination, Bravery, Strength, Loyalty, Being Herself/Personal Growth, Legacy/Protecting, and Community. Although, as I will explore shortly, Alanna's journey does conform in many ways to the traditionally male hero model first defined by J. Campbell, these elements take on new dimensions when embodied by a female warrior who is neither genderless nor sexless. Alanna's legacy instead expands heroic categories into ones that are distinctly female, as defined by Tolmie, Tatar, and Frankel.

Alanna discovers that her personal desire to become a knight is, in fact, a political act—one that unsettles the patriarchal power structures of Tortall. By the end of the quartet, her legendary status is affirmed by Jonathan, George, Roald (Pierce, *Rampant* 259), the Bloody Hawk tribe (Pierce, *Rides* 11), and Thayet (Pierce, *Rampant* 86), each of whom recognize her as both symbol and fighter. When Le Guin reflects on her creation of Ged in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, she notes that prior to writing it, the fantasy tradition overwhelmingly centered male heroes—typically white, heterosexual, and normative. As Le Guin writes:

The principal characters were men. If the story was heroic, the hero was a white man; most dark-skinned people were inferior or evil. If there was a woman in the story, she was a passive object of desire and rescue [...] Anyway, the stories weren't about the women. They were about the men, what men did, and what was important to men. It's in this sense that *A Wizard* was perfectly conventional. (*The Books* 129)

A decade later, Pierce's creation of a revolutionary female hero ensured that Tortall would be foundationally invested in female perspectives of heroism. Alanna's legacy, in turn, helped

define a trend of female heroism that many contemporary scholars trace through the genre of YA Female Fantasy.

Although Clarissa Pinkola Estés argues in her 2004 introduction to *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* that J. Campbell’s use of gendered language is symbolic rather than literal, this interpretation does not hold consistently when placed against Campbell’s actual wording. Estés writes in reference to Campbell, “sometimes there has been a confusion regarding modern depth psychology and mythology, and what these gendered images represent [...] an archetype is a representation of the Irrepresentable” (qtd. in Campbell, *A New Ivi*), and later adds, “Some think that certain symbols stand only for women, and certain other symbols, especially those found in mythos, stand only for men. But [...] in mythos, the hero’s attributes belong to both feminine and masculine, both to men and to women” (qtd. in Campbell, *A New Ivi*). Yet Campbell’s language is explicitly gendered. In “Woman as the Temptress”, he describes the female figure as a passive object that confirms the hero’s authority: “The mystical marriage with the queen goddess of the world represents the hero’s total mastery of life; for the woman is life, the hero its knower and master. And the testings of the hero [...] made capable of enduring the full possession of the mother-destroyer, his inevitable bride” (*A New* 111). These metaphors rely on gendered hierarchies—woman as symbolic terrain, man as actor and agent. Even if women can theoretically play the role of the hero, they must do so by adopting a framework that privileges masculine-coded ideals. J. Campbell’s description of the heroic journey is not neutral; it is shaped by patriarchal assumptions about gender, agency, and authority.

Although some scholars argue that mythic language could be read as gender-neutral, the structure and repetition of male-centered imagery make this claim difficult to sustain. Altmann observes that “the ‘he’ of the mythographers [...] stands in for a gender-neutral pronoun”,

however, “the sheer number of male images and masculine pronouns makes the hero almost ineluctably male” (145). This prevalence of masculine pronouns is not a neutral linguistic quirk; it shapes the cultural imagination of heroism itself, establishing male experience as the default and normative frame for action, agency, and narrative centrality. Aisenberg similarly argues that “the dictionary defines a heroine as a ‘woman of qualities like those of a hero’—she is, at best, a simulacrum of someone male” (15), a definition that inherently positions female heroism as derivative. Even when women assume heroic roles, they are measured against a masculine-coded standard, limiting the recognition of their achievements as fully autonomous or archetypal. Yet Phillips offers a corrective vision, emphasizing that both female heroes and the worlds they inhabit “push the boundaries of what it means to be a hero” and show that mythopoeic narratives can “build networks of relation to create worlds in which female-heroes are possible” (*Female* 24). This expansion demonstrates that heroism is not an immutable, male-coded concept; rather, it is a flexible narrative construct that can accommodate alternative models of power, courage, and agency. By creating spaces where female heroes can operate on their own terms, contemporary mythic storytelling challenges the assumption that heroism must adhere to patriarchal norms and suggests that the archetype itself can evolve.

This becomes especially apparent in J. Campbell’s consistent use of male pronouns. While he may gesture toward universal applicability, the pattern of “he”, “his”, and “man” reinscribes a male-centered model of heroism. Women are included only insofar as they can inhabit the masculine-coded space of the male hero. As Margery Hourihan writes in *Deconstructing the Hero*, J. Campbell’s narrative is part of a longer tradition in which “the hero is male, white, and usually young”, and heroic ideals are bound up with Western values of conquest and individualism (2). Hourihan outlines a familiar structure: the male hero 1) leaves

his civilized home, 2) enters the wilderness, 3) overcomes enemies, 4) proves himself through strength, 5) is rewarded, and 6) returns with a beautiful, chaste woman (9–10). As I return to the formation of female heroism and heroism more broadly throughout this thesis, Aisenberg's argument that discovering female heroism necessitates imagining female heroism not defined in opposition to or in comparison to male heroism is crucial:

As we go in pursuit of the new heroine, we confront immediately the traditional, overwhelming dominance of the hero whose identity has obscured hers. She is a new heroine, then, in the sense that her outline is just emerging from the huge shadow cast by the hero. Until now it has been almost impossible to discuss the heroine without reference to the hero, as if she were merely the obverse side of his coin—she taking definition simply from what he is not. (Aisenberg 13-14)

This tension between the heroine and the overshadowing hero highlights how entrenched narrative conventions actively shape readers' perceptions of agency, suggesting that the emergence of female heroism involves not only crafting new characters but also reshaping the symbolic and cultural frameworks through which heroism itself is understood. This practice of female heroism is especially interesting to chart from a perspective of Pierce's Tortall Universe, which has primarily focused solely on female stories since *The Song*.

The following traits serve as broad categories outlining the primary qualities of Alanna's heroism, providing a baseline drawn from Pierce's texts rather than from characteristics traditionally defined as male or female forms of heroism.

**Determination:** Alanna refuses to abandon her goal of knighthood, despite repeated obstacles. She proves her skill by defeating a Tusaine knight (Pierce, *Hand* 38), retrieving the

Dominion Jewel, and recovering from failure, such as when she loses to Duke Roger in the first duel and has to fight him again (Pierce, *Adventure* 149).

**Bravery:** Alanna defies both law and social expectations to train as a knight. She endures the pain and stigma of menstruation in silence, seeks help when her body changes, and must constantly hide her sex in *Adventure*. Her defiance of treason, despite personal risk, and her actions in war demonstrate both physical and moral courage.

**Strength:** Alanna is bullied and physically injured by Ralon, who breaks her arm (Pierce, *Adventure* 31, 75), yet she eventually defeats him. Her combat victories—such as against the Tusaine knight—and her magical healing abilities (Pierce, *Hand* 96), mark her as a hero. She becomes Shaman of the Bloody Hawk Tribe and is the one who defeats the Ysander, not Jonathan (Pierce, *Adventure* 236). Her magical intervention also saves Jonathan's life during the sweating sickness (Pierce, *Adventure* 119).

**Loyalty:** Alanna's commitment to the crown, her friends, and her ideals is unwavering. She risks everything to protect those she loves—Jonathan, Myles, Thom—and remains faithful to Tortall despite personal disillusionments.

Hourihan argues that the male hero's journey asks what it means to be a man in the world (69). Alanna's journey, then, becomes one that asks what it means to be a woman. Pearson and Pope note that if "female heroism is not condemned, it often is simply ignored" (6), which speaks directly to Pierce's impulse in creating Alanna. Female heroes, they argue, often possess immense strength and "grit", but are also "in tune with spiritual or natural values that the society advocates but does not practice" (9). These heroes are often outsiders, by gender, race, or class, and are revolutionary by nature. Alanna complicates this model. Though she is not an outsider by

birth—she is noble and magically gifted—her female identity places her at odds with the structures she must navigate. Though not wholly radical, her journey transforms the gendered expectations of the hero's path and sets the foundation for a new, distinctly female heroic tradition. Alanna's heroism is inseparable from her femininity. Her acceptance of her gendered identity, even while navigating a traditionally masculine domain, creates a uniquely female model of heroism. As a warrior, a fighter, and a killer, Alanna is not a softened or metaphorical combatant—she is deadly and skilled with a sword. This warrior identity does not make her less feminine; rather, it reframes what female strength can look like.

Women warriors have historical precedents: the Amazons of myth, Joan of Arc, and Nakano Takeko all stand as evidence that female combatants are not fantasies but figures of both history and legend. Pierce grapples directly with this challenge, working to craft a female hero who is both explicitly and actively female—not merely a heroine or a re-gendered male archetype. Tolmie notes that fantasy continues to rely on conventions associated with the maiden warrior, observing that Alanna's arc preserves many of these characteristics: cross-dressing, exclusion from public life, resistance to heterosexual norms, and eventual demonization (Tolmie 153). Yet Pierce also works to move beyond these limitations. Tolmie writes, “there is a constant and deliberate effort, in the life trajectory of Alanna, to get away not only from the limitations imposed by a general condition of female disenfranchisement but also from the limitations imposed on someone like Silence, the authentically medieval warrior-maiden” (154). That movement—away from disenfranchisement and from inherited narrative roles—allows Alanna to define her own form of heroism on her own terms as the categories I outlined demonstrate.

Frankel and Tatar also offer expanded models for female heroism that reject the rigid structure of the traditional male hero's journey. Frankel describes the heroine's path as one that

moves from conflict to communion, replacing "The Road of Trials" with encounters, such as "Sidekicks/Trials/Adversaries", and ending not in solitary glory, but in the "Ascension of the New Mother" (Frankel 49–50). Tatar similarly reframes female heroism as relational, observing that women "wear curiosity as a badge of honor rather than a mark of shame", and that their connection to knowledge, long censured as prying or sinful, more often signals "empathy, care, and concern" (Tatar 6). Alanna's personal growth reflects this model. Her journey is not only physical, but emotional and psychological. She is known for her temper, yet she also struggles with feelings of inadequacy, expressing disbelief at the idea that she might be worthy to serve as Jonathan's squire or be admired as a knight. Her modesty is offset by her uncompromising individualism and romantic idealism, and her insistence on doing things her own way (Pierce, *Adventure* 247). Her relationship with Jonathan, including moments, such as their shared triumph over the Ysadir where Alanna, not Jonathan, is wielding the sword (Pierce, *Adventure* 236), also demonstrates the integration of emotional connection within a heroic framework. Aisenberg's observation that "Hero and heroine belong not only to separate sexes, but to different worlds. The conventional terminology of hero and heroine, distinguishing the characters by sex, has obscured this" underscores the necessity of creating new narrative spaces to imagine female heroism (Aisenberg 16). In Pierce's work, Alanna occupies such a space, emerging as a fully realized protagonist whose heroism is not merely a reflection or reimagining of male models of heroism but a reconstruction of what a female hero can be in a world not wholly dominated by patriarchal stories as our own.

Alanna's heroism also expresses itself through protection and legacy. She protects those more vulnerable—Ishak, Kara, and Kourreem, the children in *Rampant*, and Thayet and Buri when they flee for their lives. Her connection to the Goddess marks her not just as an individual

fighter, but as someone enmeshed in a wider cosmic and spiritual network. Her marriage to George, the King of Thieves, symbolizes a union between different spheres of Tortallan life, and their children and grandchildren biologically continue her legacy. When she chooses a court position over a wandering knight's life, she acknowledges that purpose matters more than independence, stating, "I never thought I'd hold any place, but I like it far better when I have a purpose. [...] I feel as if I'm a sort of weapon, but a weapon must have someone to wield it, or it just lies around rusting" (Pierce, *Rampant* 259). This moment marks a shift from the solitary adventuring she once idealized to a deeper engagement with duty and public good—her heroism increasingly defined by service rather than self-determination.

The final heroic quality Alanna exemplifies—and one that recurs across Pierce's female protagonists—is her creation and maintenance of community. This reframing of heroism disrupts traditional myths of girlhood, offering a new model centered on growth, connection, and multiplicity, rather than conquest or individual glory. By only examining *The Song*, criticism on Pierce presents a more reductive version of female heroism rather than considering the shift of Alanna's character beyond her series. Though Alanna completes her own heroic arc in *The Song*, she reappears throughout later series, guiding new female heroes both through personal mentorship and her sustained presence as a warrior. In this way, the series itself continues the legacy of female heroism, extending it to young readers. As Levy articulates, "The book's appeal is at least in part because of the extensive instruction in strength training it gives to young female readers—these are very empowering books" (124). This instructional aspect mirrors Tolmie's framing of curiosity and knowledge as central to female heroism, reinforcing themes of persistence and the physical and mental discipline required of female warriors. Phillips connects

these ideas further, identifying how bodily awareness—menstruation, motherhood, and cycles of identity—becomes intertwined with the hero's path:

[...] female-heroes bring cyclicity into the hero's story. They go “on big adventures” and fight “external enemies” while also getting their period, learning more about themselves as individuals and members of society, becoming mothers and developing many of the traits Aisenberg associates with the ‘new ordinary heroine’. (Pierce qtd in Phillips *Female* 21)

This continuity of experience builds a broader legacy of communal female empowerment, supported by the relationships Alanna maintains with characters like Thayet and Buri, George, Jonathan, and her yearmates, and later, with the protagonists who follow in her footsteps. In the later books, Alanna becomes both a mother and a grandmother. Her heroism continues not only through physical achievements but through her influence—sometimes flawed—on others. She misjudges her daughter Aly, is overly strict (Pierce, *Choice* 17), and makes mistakes, but in doing so, Alanna becomes a more fully realized hero—one whose legacy is shaped not just by youthful victories, but by the ongoing, imperfect work of nurturing, leading, and continuing to shape the world around her, and the first example of Pierce's Revisionist Feminism even though it follows only one consistent narrative.

Throughout her own series, Alanna has few close female relationships. Her bond with Thayet and Buri marks the first time she builds lasting friendships with other women, apart from her connection with Mistress Cooper. These friendships allow Alanna to begin grappling with the structural sexism in Tortallan society. Buri, a warrior raised in the K'mir tribes, and Alanna develop instant mutual respect: “Her reaction made Alanna like her. From what she knew of the K'mir tribes to Sarain's north, Buri probably was reared as a warrior. She took being disarmed

well” (Pierce, *Rampant* 85). Buri and Thayet become the first companions Alanna can openly share the twin burdens of being a woman and a fighter with. It is also through Thayet that Alanna first begins to understand the possibility of institutional change. While Alanna initially saw queenship as symbolic and submissive—turning down Jonathan’s proposal because she didn’t want to be a powerless figurehead—Thayet recognizes that such a role could be politically transformative (Pierce, *Rampant* 112-113, 156). Tortall, unlike Thayet’s home country offers a pathway to real leadership for women. Alanna even offers Thayet the Dominion Jewel, but Thayet refuses, citing the deeply rooted misogyny in her homeland:

“No female can hold the Saren throne [...]The Book of Glass forbids it. Children hear tales of other lands, less wise than ours, who came to grief because they let a woman rule. The chiefs of the Hau Ma, the Churi, and the Raadeh are women, but they’re K’mir, and everyone knows that K’mir are savages”. (Pierce, *Rampant* 154)

Pierce consistently promotes pragmatic feminist ideals: that meaningful progress is often best achieved within existing institutions, rather than through total upheaval. Alanna ultimately sees through Thayet’s example that traditional femininity can be wielded strategically and powerfully within patriarchal structures. She comes to recognize the value in blending gender performance with subversive action.

Pierce allows Alanna to have relationships with multiple men and never frames her sexuality as shameful. Instead, these romantic narratives further humanize her, offering readers a more nuanced and realistic model of young womanhood within a fantasy world. Alanna’s story does not end with the defeat of her enemies or the completion of her knightly quest; rather, it expands across generations. Though Phillips notes that Alanna’s children offer “another kind of repetition and further disruption to the linear, technological impetus of the hero story” (*Female*

143), this extension is not merely thematic it is solidified in the narrative. A reader's experience of the Tortall Universe as a whole, informed by knowledge of multiple texts across the series, can produce recurring patterns of interpretation that transcend any single reading order.

However, it would be worthwhile to explore further how different approaches to reading order within such an interconnected imaginary world shape a reader's perceptions of the Tortall Universe.

Alanna is not a static symbol of empowerment or a singular moment of exception; she remains an active character, a mother, a mentor, a flawed adult, and a hero whose relevance persists. This continuation is the most crucial aspect of Pierce's Revisionist Feminism: female heroism is not defined by isolated deeds or youthful rebellion but by its capacity to grow, to be passed on, and to participate in shaping the world long after the first quest has ended. Alanna's heroism is collective, embodied, and ongoing, all of which is rooted in her refusal to disappear from the narrative after aging or becoming a mother and her insistence on building a future in which more girls can follow. As Aisenberg emphasizes, "Suddenly, we are no longer talking about limits and boundaries, but about beginnings, about change. Now we are in the heroine's world" (Aisenberg 18). This captures the necessity of creating new narrative spaces where female heroism can exist. Alanna's heroism is collective, embodied, and ongoing as it is based on her refusal to disappear from the world after becoming a mother and the power she begins to wield to effect Tortallan society through her legendary identity.

## CONCLUSION

Within *The Song*, Tamora Pierce begins a Revisionist Feminist project that evolves across the Tortall Universe. Alanna's journey marks the first disruption of patriarchal structures, but it is through her mentorship of characters, such as Buri, Thayet, Daine, and Kel, that she transforms from a solitary hero into a builder of feminist community. This echoes Wendy Pearson's vision of the female heroic legacy "Each is a role model to another...until eventually, the myths and institutions of the entire society are altered" (260). Unlike Le Guin, who retroactively recognized the absence of women in her early work and the limitations of her magic system, thereby rewriting Tehanu with feminist intent, Pierce began her series in 1983 with Alanna—a warrior, a chosen one, and a girl. *Adventure* was published between *The Farthest Shore* (1972) and *Tehanu* (1990), and before *Tales from Earthsea* (2001) reversed Le Guin's earlier gender dynamics.

Pierce's approach mirrors Tatar's vision of feminist storytelling as inherently transformative. As Tatar states, "Writing transforms us. When girls read books with powerful heroines, they come away with new scripts for action, new ways of seeing the world, and, above all, new dreams for what they might become" (290). Pierce's fiction not only reshapes the fantasy genre but equips readers with expansive models of power, identity, and resistance. While later critics have noted problematic romantic tropes in *The Song*, its popularity endures. Alanna remains Pierce's most beloved protagonist—more privileged, more romance-driven, and more "chosen" than others. As Josephine Wolff observes, her appeal transcends fantasy: "Her work thus appeals not only to hardcore fantasy readers but also to bookish girls raised on more traditional girls' fiction" (par. 5). That Alanna is beautiful, powerful, and divinely favored may explain her resonance with readers who seek escapism alongside empowerment. As Flanagan

observes, YA Female Fantasy often fails to reconcile with the cross-dressing character's altered relationship with gendered identity, "Having experienced what it is to be considered masculine, can the character easily resume a feminine subject position? If they do so (as is usually the case), surely this subject position will differ from the subject positions of other females because of its inside knowledge of masculinity?" (*Into the Closet* 48-49). Pierce's Alanna disrupts this characterization of the usual limitations of cross-dressing female characters by significantly altering Alanna's relationship to gender after her negation between their binastic perceptions in Tortallan society. Indeed, Alanna takes her knowledge of performing both genders in Tortall to create her own hybrid identity.

When taken as a self-contained quartet, *The Song* follows a more traditional heroic structure—Alanna is the "chosen one", aided by magic, divine favor, and noble birth. But as Maria Tatar, Leah Phillips, Whitney May, and Lori Campbell have shown, Alanna is not simply a female version of Joseph Campbell's hero. She models a distinctly feminist form of heroism, grounded in embodiment, emotion, and community. This model, and its narrative arc, continues to resonate in popular culture. The series' enduring popularity may also stem from its position as most readers' first encounter with Pierce or its appeal across different genres. The same could be true of fantasy fans who do not generally read romance, which could account for its greater popularity and readership. Ultimately, by catalyzing the legalization of female knighthood by modeling bodily autonomy and forming intergenerational alliances, Alanna transforms not only Tortall's world but also the genre's expectations. Her influence reverberates through every subsequent series. *The Song* is not just Pierce's beginning—it is the foundation of an evolving feminist project that redefines heroism. Alanna, while imperfect, becomes a mythic figure in her

own right: one who rewrites the rules, builds community, and leaves behind a legacy that still inspires.

## Chapter 2:

### Instruction, Wild Magic, Posthumanism, & Ecofeminism in The Immortals

#### INTRODUCTION

Chapter 2 focuses particularly on The Immortals series and the ways Pierce expands world-building in this series to advance her Revisionist Feminist aims, returning to the world with the intention of exploring feminist concerns that were not fully addressed in *The Song*. This is achieved through Daine's distinct characterization and her hybrid identity, which centers on humanism rather than gender, differentiating her from Alanna. Pierce also deliberately situates Daine's story chronologically after *The Song*, rather than overlapping it, avoiding retconning or erasure. This temporal choice allows Pierce to depict feminist change as actively enacted within the Tortall Universe, rather than presenting it solely as a resolution at the conclusion of *Realms*.

This Introduction expands the enactment and implications of Pierce's Feminist Revisionist return to the imaginary world of the Tortall Universe and outlines the ecofeminist themes explored throughout the series. The Wild Magic section examines how Daine's magic is functionally separate from the knowledge-based Gift and what it reveals about Daine's identity as human or nonhuman animal. The subsequent section, Gender, compares the portrayal of Alanna's gender to that of Daine, highlighting the shift from Alanna's hidden, secretive experience of femininity to Daine's expansion of the already recognized roles and functions of female identity in Tortall. The Young Adult section examines Daine's trauma, hybrid identity, and shapeshifting abilities in the context of young adult experiences, particularly in the US.

The following section on Ecology views *The Immortals* through an investigation of the construction and consequences of predicating societies on the subjugation of the non-human. The final analytical section of this chapter examines the significant implications of introducing immortal creatures to the Tortall Universe and their impact on the world's underlying relationship to myth. The Conclusion connects the ideas explored throughout the chapter and imagines further into Daine's revolutionary future.

The *Immortals* series can be seen as a celebration of Tortall, with Daine, a Gallan outsider, viewing it as a symbol of freedom compared to her harsh upbringing. Since the end of *The Song* series, significant progress has been made, such as free education, women being allowed to become knights, and the establishment of the Queen's Riders for equal service. *The Immortals* explores Daine's wild magic, which makes her one of the People, the name the nonhuman nonmagical animals call themselves, her heritage as a demigod, Daine's deep, unwavering opposition to human oppression and exploitation. As a series, it serves as a fundamental transition in Pierce's writing as it cements her Revisionist Feminist lens and demonstrates an effort on Pierce's part to address what she was felt was missing or unrealized in *The Song*. *The Song* laid the groundwork for Pierce's fantasy world of Tortall and introduced many of the characters who, at the end of *The Song* series, were poised to rule Tortall and usher in a new age. Pierce herself wasn't planning on continuing the story in Tortall but kept being drawn back to the world. Pierce says in the afterword to *Wild* that it wasn't enough for fans or herself to leave Tortall on the cusp of social upheaval:

The more they [the fans] wheedled, the more I began to ask myself what did happen after those dramatic events. As a person who takes interest in history, I know that throne-shaking events don't simply end when a new monarch is crowned. (Pierce, *Wild* 219)

YA Fantasy is often concerned with overthrowing unjust structures, as in dystopian narratives, but tends to focus on the journey to liberation and the final struggle rather than examining the aftereffects of a hero's journey on a larger society (Cart 97-98). The Tortall Universe is not a dystopia or a utopia, it reflects limitations in our society and images alternate ways of being that move beyond these limitations. In 1992, when Pierce published *Wild*, the first book of The Immortals series, it marked the beginning of her dedication to writing stories within the Tortall Universe through diverse perspectives. Daine's books begin a pattern for Pierce of focusing on young women's stories taking place in the same world and king's rule years, or sometimes just months, after each other's adventures. As I explored in the previous chapter, these stories are a continuation of the hero's journey and an expansive method of examining social structures. Moving the story into a different character's perspective brings specific struggles into greater focus depending on the protagonist's inclinations and abilities. The significant revisions to the worldbuilding of the Tortall Universe with the introduction of magical creatures called immortals in this series structurally destabilizes the previous environmental hierarchy of human dominion over the nonhuman and fundamentally challenges the supposed biological differences between the human and nonhuman binary. Due to Daine's unique magic and identity, The Immortals is concerned with posthumanism, environmental crisis, and the use of immortals in contemporary YA Fantasy rather than becoming a knight or hiding one's gender.

The Song ends on a revolutionary, triumphant chord. The great evil has been defeated, a young king who is deeply concerned with the well-being of his citizens and who grew up friends with commoners now sits on the throne, and Alanna is knighted the first ever female King's Champion. Had Pierce never returned to Tortall in subsequent series, the realm would have remained suspended at a moment of victory—poised on the edge of progress but untested by its

aftermath. Stories that end with triumph often avoid confronting the messier realities that follow: the uneven, compromised, and frequently disappointing efforts to enact meaningful change within broader social, cultural, legal, and political systems. By choosing to revisit Tortall, Pierce shifts the narrative from isolated success to the ongoing struggle of sustaining progress in a flawed world. However, Pierce continues writing Tortall, and because of this return, she begins to examine how a country changes its ideals and laws, how difficult it really is to enact change, and how slow the process of change for an entire country can be.

The rise in political and social environmental awareness in the U.S. during the 1980s led to these issues appearing in children's and YA literature, prompting a critical examination of the intersection of identity politics and ecocritical literature (Murphy, *Key Concepts* 112). Pierce reflects the overall changing views of the American public toward the environment and a growing global concern for the future of humans in the natural world in the ecological focus of *The Immortals*. Elements of Daine's story, when extrapolated to the wider Tortall Universe, resonate with a posthumanist approach to environmental crisis by structurally dissolving the boundaries between humans and the nonhuman. Pierce was already a published author in the 1980s and throughout that decade had shown a consistent engagement with and understanding of contemporary U.S. politics, both through her writing and in her personal life. Just as Alanna's journey reflected cultural attitudes in the U.S. during the 1980s, Daine's environmentalism reflects an emerging political concern with environmentalism in America. Environmentalism, like all intersectional political concerns, is closely tied to race in the U.S., characterizing the environmental movement as one aligned with marginalized identities. As the authors of "Evolution of the Environmental Justice Movement: Activism, Formalization and Differentiation" outline in a study of the evolution of the environmental movement in the U.S.

how the current environmental movement emerged after a 1982 “wave of grassroots protests in response to the siting of a PCB landfill in a predominantly African-American community” (Perez et al. 2). The study establishes that “environmental justice was institutionalized as a central priority of the federal government in 1994 through an Executive Order by President Bill Clinton”, which puts the publication of *The Immortals* right in the middle of a growing public and political discussion of environmentalism. The series reflects a growing understanding of humans’ effects on their environment and argues, through Daine’s connection with animals, for a greater cooperation among animals, immortals, and humans living in the same environment.

Pierce herself notes in the afterword of *Wolf-Speaker* that she received criticism for her “blatant” environmental ideologies in *The Immortals*:

When it comes to the plot of *Wolf-Speaker*, I received criticism early on for 'blatant ecological themes', though in truth, the mining spillage, deforestation, and bloodrain are drawn from my youth in western Pennsylvania. Coal mining was a plague there and in West Virginia, just across the border from my county of Fayette. My mother talked about it all the time. (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 211)

Pierce credits her early environmentalism with her upbringing in a coal mining town in western Pennsylvania, where she would have directly seen how generations of humans had wreaked havoc on the ecosystem. Pierce goes on to describe how bloodrain, a magical creation that destroys all living things within an environment, was the product of real-life environmental concerns:

The bloodrain was an artefact of my youth, too: Agent Orange, the herbicide and defoliant that killed plants and leaves in Vietnam and anywhere else it was used. Our

government didn't seem to care what effect it had on the Vietnamese or on our soldiers, so I didn't even have to imagine the kind of people who would use it as a weapon of blackmail. (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 212)

Pierce's reflections reveal that her depiction of environmental devastation in *The Immortals* is not simply allegorical but rooted in direct personal experience and a conscious effort to transpose real-world ecological crises—particularly those tied to American military and industrial practices—into a fantasy framework that critiques the sociopolitical realities of the era in which she was writing.

Michael James Hancock's 2008 Master's thesis argues that the environmental message in *The Immortals* is not explicitly political, and he also dismisses ecofeminism's ability to address these explicit environmental explorations. Hancock writes:

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. (15)

A YA text does not need to be wholly didactic in order to share radical ways to reinterpret the basis of humanity's relationship with animals. As Pierce herself argues above and I concur, the environmental and ecological concerns in *The Immortals* are central to the narrative and Daine's character. As I have argued throughout this thesis, Pierce's incorporation of reflections, reinterpretations, and revisions of real-world American cultural and social structures serves both to critique existing hierarchies—such as through Daine's ability to communicate with and advocate for nonhuman animals—and to imagine alternative modes of being that challenge the

foundational assumptions underpinning dominant conceptions of humanity. Contrary to Hancock's claim, this is not didactic in the traditional sense—readers cannot replicate Daine's magical abilities—but it does function as an imaginative exploration of how essentialist notions of humanity can be destabilized, revealing the mechanisms that produce Othering, oppression, and ecological exploitation. Moreover, the fantasy of Daine's relationship to the world in *The Immortals*, even though fantastical, can have a real effect on teaching readers to treat animals as individuals and to question how the nonhuman is "Othered".<sup>10</sup>

In this chapter, I will use the terms anthropocentric, posthuman, and ecofeminist. All of these terms are useful for examining human dominion over the environment and for attempting to reconcile, interrogate, and understand humans in relation to the environment. I argue that this series exemplifies a creative approach to these topics precisely because of its placement in YA fiction as a genre. As Lisa Maurice notes:

The emergence of the animal rights movement, and that of YA fiction as a genre, were contemporaneous, and this is far from a coincidence, since many of the same social forces were behind the recognition of animals and of adolescents as social groupings with rights and needs. (161)

There is a history of connectiveness and similarity of ideological thinking between authors concerned with the child or young adult experience and the non-human as a practice in exploring those voices typically marginalized or devalued in society. For my purposes, anthropocentrism is defined as the belief—turned into action by law or society—that humans are the most valuable

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<sup>10</sup> For instance, as a child myself I tried to speak to animals. I knew I didn't have the magic Daine had to make myself intelligible, but it also fostered a fundamental respect for the nonhuman and the belief that they could have lives beyond *my* comprehension

and dominant species on earth. Ecofeminism is a theoretical approach to understanding human relationships with the environment through a feminist lens. As Alice Curry writes, “Ecofeminist discourses draw from feminism and critical ecology to identify comparable mechanisms of exploitation that affect women and the environment to challenge both the theoretical underpinnings and actual manifestations of these mechanisms” (1). The term “posthuman” attempts to imagine and understand a future where anthropocentrism does not dominate human conception and relationship with the non-human and in which humans are not prioritized over the nonhuman—whether animal, environmental, or hybrid identity.

As Anita Tarr and Donna White contend, “Posthumanism rejects androcentric ideology in order to embrace all forms of beingness. There is no one aspect that makes a being human, not self-awareness or emotion or a sense of justice or artistic creation or problem-solving or having a soul” (x). Posthumanism in *The Immortals* focuses on the equality of all nonhuman life and an egalitarian view of ecology that prioritizes survival as a whole rather than the survival of humanity alone. Posthuman thinking deconstructs what it means to be human and what it means to be animal, requiring the reader to adopt a flexible and hybrid understanding of both. Nick Fox and Pam Alldred explain the necessity of this radical shift:

A posthuman approach requires that we shift from an essentialist model of entities with fixed attributes [to one that considers each entity] in terms of what it does relationally; what associations it makes as it affects and is affected, and what consequences and capacities derive from these affective interactions (124).

The biblical assertion of human dominance over the environment has shaped centuries of Western thought and continues to affect constructions of ecology in the U.S. In particular, the passage Genesis 1:26 declares, “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness:

and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth” (King James Version). This language of “dominion” laid the foundation for anthropocentric ideology and the exploitation of nonhuman life within Anglocentrism. *The Immortals* challenges this legacy by centering both human and nonhuman characters who resist being defined by frameworks of domination or utility, and by exposing the cruelty that such anthropocentric thinking enables through its human protagonists.

Posthumanism breaks down barriers while also interrogating the social, biological, and ideological divisions that create them—an idea closely tied to young adult identity and the ways in which it is represented in YA and children’s literature. YA protagonists frequently inhabit liminal spaces, not fully children and not yet adults, and their identities are often defined relationally, in tension with outside expectations. Daine’s character embodies this hybridity not only in terms of age, but in her human-animal-divine identity, which challenges stable notions of selfhood and species. Tarr and White argue that “for young adults negotiating the transition from childhood to adulthood, identity is constantly being evaluated in terms of how they are perceived, how they perceive themselves, and how they wish to be perceived by others”, and argues that such narratives allow readers to “challenge the idea of what it means to be human” (75). Daine’s identity does exactly this—not only as a young woman caught between human worlds but as a character whose empathy and transformation offer an alternate, posthuman vision of selfhood. These definitions are not immovable. A contemporary reading of *The Immortals* already engages with an ever-changing understanding of what it means to be human in a global climate emergency. However, these definitions serve as unifying language to interrogate and discern boundaries between the human and the nonhuman and examine how Pierce complicates—and in some cases tears down—those boundaries. *The Immortals* is an example of

Pierce's Feminist Revisionism: returning to the world, but through Daine's perspective, allows Pierce the narrative freedom to radically expand the political issues she explicitly engages with and resists the trend of solitary heroic figures. This is the crux of revisionist practice: to return to earlier depictions in order to reconceptualize them through time and characterization—embracing the past while remaining critical of it. Elena Dell'Agnese observes that “feminists [...] are responsible for highlighting the parallelism between the domination of nature and the domination of women as resources” (43), pointing to a key ecofeminist insight: that patriarchal systems treat both women and the natural world as exploitable. This framework is central to *The Immortals*, which imagines alternative relationships between human and nonhuman life. Marek Oziewicz et al. ask, “How can fantasy and myth help us reimagine ourselves as biocentric, ecological civilization?” (7)—a question that Pierce's work not only engages but narratively enacts. Through Daine's magical ability to communicate with animals, the text reconfigures the human-nature binary and critiques the instrumental logic that underpins ecological and social domination.

Mary Phillips and Nick Rumens further expand this ecofeminist critique, arguing that categories, such as “feminine, women, nature and other subordinated groups” are excluded from dominant frameworks because they are deemed to lack rationality and autonomy—qualities reserved for masculinity, reason, and the human; this “Othering” serves to justify exclusion and exploitation (2). *The Immortals* rejects this logic. Daine is not aligned with animals because she is naturally nurturing or feminine, but because she sees animals as individuals—intelligences that saved her, believed her, and gave her the dignity that human society denied. Her bond with the nonhuman is not essentialist but reciprocal and political: animals did not pathologize her grief or call her mad; they help her enact justice (Pierce, *Wild* 126, 129). Oziewicz et al. critiques the

colonial mindset at the heart of environmental degradation, arguing that “‘we’—a white, Western, self-entitled ‘we’ posing as ‘humanity’—have taken Earth to be, literally, ‘dirt cheap’: a playground for endless human expansion” (1). This indictment aligns with *The Immortals*’ critique of human dominion as both environmental and ideological. Pierce’s world insists that recognizing the intrinsic value of the nonhuman is not a matter of scientific awareness but of political will. As Oziewicz et al. adds, “We know more than enough to take action. We know what action needs to be taken. We even know how” (2). In Daine’s world, as in ours, the question is not knowledge but the ethical failure to act on it.

The characterizations of animals in the series are believable mainly due to Pierce’s extensive research of animal behavior (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 213). The animals are rich and individualized—not just by species but by personhood. While Daine’s power grants her communicative equality with animals and even leaks magic that expands their own capabilities, these interactions remain constrained by cultural expectations about agency—both human and animal—and by the limits of fictional representation. As Jacques Derrida argues, “human beings and other animals they represent are equally the product of human imagination: each ‘kind’ is made in the image of the other; they mingle on the page as beings who have equal status as literary creatures” (10). This literary entanglement highlights how Pierce uses Daine’s magic to both blur and foreground those representational limits, creating space to reconsider the boundaries of species, agency, and identity in fiction. Through Daine, readers are drawn into a deeply empathetic relationship with the nonhuman world. As Curry explains, such literary identification “serves to allow humanity to perceive no boundaries between the human and nonhuman worlds, and thus to treat defence of the environment as self-defence” (161). Daine’s emotional and physical bond with animals dramatizes this collapsing of boundaries, urging

readers to believe in the wonder of a posthuman future, a crucial task that can only be completed through literary appeals to shifting ideals or challenging inherent structures that are harmful.

Daine accidentally imparts magic to animals around her, making them smarter in what they, and Daine, consider a human way: “I mean, animals learn things from me, and probably that’s how most of the pack got so smart, but Brokefang’s [a wolf] even smarter. I got hurt, when we were after those bandits, and he licked the cut clean” (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 10). This is, of course, a form of anthropomorphization—it is a human imagination of the nonhuman. However, this anthropomorphizing is not an effort to reduce the nonhuman in order to justify human superiority, but rather a detailed, caring, and empathetic portrayal of the nonhuman across the series. Making them “smarter” in “a human way” is not portrayed as a desirable or positive change, but as a necessity born of dire circumstances and an inability or unwillingness of humans to change their relationship to the nonhuman (Pierce, *Lady* 136-137). The foundational dynamic between humans and nonhuman beings is often mirrored in the marginalization of certain human groups, who are Othered through associations with animality.

In an anthropocentric society, humans not only dominate the food chain but also control the natural environment, imposing human hierarchies onto non-human elements in ways that are often destructively extractive. What change is necessary to fundamentally alter humanity’s relationship to the world and nonhumans? Would it require a foundational shift so drastic it could only come through technological revolution—almost magical in nature? The discovery of a way to communicate with the nonhuman? The development of nonhuman collective resistance, such as the wolves in Dunlath? A biological transformation altering human DNA? The Immortals engenders interest in and empathy for the nonhuman and offers a narrative possibility for a posthuman future through Daine’s triple hybrid identity. Pierce characterizes nonhuman

mortal animals both as humorous foils to overly constructed human behaviors and as individuals with distinct personality traits. For example, Daine refers to some Rider horses as “shy”, noting they keep to the fences, while others are “wicked” as they try to nip at trainees (Pierce, *Wild* 69). In *Wolf-Speaker*, when Daine requests the fastest horse, Rebel answers eagerly, described as “the best at running” (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 155). Anyone familiar with horses knows that such temperaments reflect genuine behaviors, even if terms like “shy” or “wicked” are human constructs for observed traits.

Pierce’s depictions of animals are a mix of these observable animal behaviors and anthropomorphizing characterization in order to represent them in an intelligible way within the narrative and world. Cloud, her pony, and the wolf Brokefang are particularly affected by Daine’s magic through both long exposure and her blood. When Daine travels to help Brokefang in *Wolf-Speaker*, she is surprised to find the wolf capable of strategic thought, anticipating human behavior, and actively seeking help, “New thoughts came thick and fast now, more every day, and he did not understand them all. [...] Then he had no one to turn to, no one in the pack who would understand and explain these thoughts” (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 56). Daine’s magical bond with animals is reciprocal: while she gains insight into nonhuman minds, they too begin to absorb aspects of human cognition. Though Daine *does* actually biologically affect humanity, as I explore later in this chapter, her ability to change humanity’s perception of the non-human is less biological and more based on education.

In *The Immortals*, the fantasy elements—such as animal communication—create a world in which real-world struggles like environmental degradation and anthropocentrism can be examined in alternative terms as Chris Baratta describes:

Fantasy literature can help in two ways: it can, through creativity and awe, raise awareness for an issue in a way that reality is unable to and it can force an individual to [in] turn bring this awareness back to the mundane world in a re-evaluation of the role of nature. Fantasy literature has an ability to bring reader's out of their comfort zone—away from the daily intrusions of the media, jobs, political dysfunction—and into a world where the landscapes and characters are unfamiliar, thereby placing them within a world outside of their current modes of knowledge. (4)

In this unfamiliar but emotionally resonant world, the animal becomes a site of recognition and disruption. Daine's interactions—flying as a bat, hunting with wolves and hyenas, assisting in births, raising a dragon who sings locks off doors (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 125, 197, 37; *Emperor* 195)—reimagine the human-animal relationship as one of collaboration, not control. These moments contain wonder but also articulate an ethical imaginary rooted in interspecies respect. Pierce's representations are grounded in research as well as imagination. Pierce's representations of the nonhuman in *The Immortals* are grounded not only in imaginative worldbuilding but also in deliberate research. Writing within YA female fantasy provides Pierce with a form of "safety", enabling her to use imaginative worldbuilding to reimagine and revise human constructions of the non-human, while still offering a serious critique of how humans interact with non-human animals. Her audience will take these non-human characters more seriously than an adult reader might. For *Wolf-Speaker*, she consulted animal behaviorists, visited wolf habitats, and observed wolves in zoos ensuring that her depictions were informed by both scientific understanding and narrative purpose (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 215-216). The animals in the series serve a dual function: they offer a posthuman perspective that challenges anthropocentrism, and they educate

readers about ecological interdependence and animal behavior without reducing the narrative to mere instruction.

As Janet Maybin and Nicola Watson ask, “Should children’s books be for instruction or delight?” (12). They argue that the role of adults in shaping children’s literature must be examined in terms of ideology, motivation, and the commodification of childhood. Pierce’s work refuses to position instruction and pleasure as mutually exclusive. The ethical and ecological awareness conveyed in *The Immortals* emerges through the story itself, not through overt moralizing. The instructional value of the series lies in its capacity to provoke curiosity, empathy, and critical reflection—qualities that are particularly urgent given that the series appeared at a time when environmental discourse was only beginning to reach the mainstream in the U.S., and even more so now, in the face of escalating climate crisis. This capacity to blend fact and fiction is especially significant in fantasy literature, where, as Juliette Wood observes, “the interplay between concrete observations of real animals and speculative traditions about them is complex, and the notion of where the boundary between human and non-human lies varies considerably” (4-5). Pierce’s narrative engages this complexity by using fantasy not as escape, but as a framework for ecofeminist and posthumanist exploration. In YA literature, this work carries particular weight: young readers are the inheritors of environmental catastrophe, and stories that nurture ecological awareness may shape not only their imaginations but their future politics as I explored in the Young Adult section of the Introduction chapter. Within YA Female Fantasy, this work is further complicated by the cultural positioning of women’s bodies as sites of binary opposition—between nature and culture, emotion and reason, the human and the Other.

In the Tortall Universe, nonhuman entities extend beyond animals to include divine beings. However, unlike the Christian God—who, in Genesis, creates man in his image and grants humanity dominion over nature—Tortall’s gods are less anthropomorphic, and often not human at all. While they may reflect aspects of human culture, they reside mostly in the Divine Realms and are largely removed from direct influence in the mortal world. As such, they do not function as the central nonhuman Other in Pierce’s fiction. Instead, it is the animals—who think, feel, speak, and act alongside Daine—who most consistently challenge anthropocentric structures and invite readers into a more biocentric worldview. However, the beginning of *The Immortals* series marks the introduction of a new category: immortal creatures, many of which are influenced by various human mythologies (Pierce, *Wild Influences*). These include griffins, centaurs, dragons, sprites, minotaurs, winged horses, and several other animal-human hybrids (Pierce, *Spy’s* 173-197). The first two books of the series focus primarily on Daine’s relationship with animals, the development of her magical abilities, the trauma of her childhood, and her growing loyalty to Tortall. In contrast, the final two books take place beyond Tortall’s borders—first in a neighboring kingdom, and then on another plane entirely—and shift their focus toward the rights and recognition of nonhuman fantasy creatures. Daine’s narrative is not centered on romance; she begins a romantic relationship only in the final book of the series, and romantic developments receive far less narrative attention than in *The Song* series. Pierce does not depict Daine’s first menstruation or sexual experience, but this absence does not suggest a retreat from representing female embodiment. Unlike Alanna, Daine received a thorough education about these matters from her mother, who was a midwife (Pierce, *Emperor* 83). Their exclusion from the narrative instead reflects Daine’s own disinterest in these issues, which are neither sources of confusion nor central to her sense of self.

This thinking is Revisionist Feminism, not only because it centers a young female protagonist, but because it imagines an alternate mode of being in the world—one that critically engages with existing constructions of gender, class, species, the nonhuman, the environment, and the Other in our own world. It is fantasy, not only because of Daine’s powers or the presence of immortals, but also because it imagines a world in which climate destruction is not inevitable and gestures toward a radical posthuman future. This is also the work of mythology, which is always revisionist—engaging and reshaping symbols, stories, and cultural imaginaries across time. As Wood writes, “The myths surrounding these creatures are mutable, changing and developing over time, but they continue to shape our perception of reality and impose meaning on the ways we interpret the world” (*Fantastic* 169). *The Immortals* participates in this mythic tradition, deploying the medieval not as escape, but as confrontation and reimagination. Daine does not question her gender identity—she knows she is female—but she often grapples with what it means to be female in both Tortall and the natural, “Other” environment. She is also not a noble, unlike many of the characters in *The Song* series as Daine comes from a poor mountain village and is legally a bastard, as her mother never married or disclosed Daine’s father while alive. As a young adult, she must also learn to live with the trauma of losing her family to violence and being nearly murdered by her community in the aftermath (Pierce, *Wild* 124-128). With no family to rely on, Daine finds support and healing through friendships—both human and animal—that allow her to rebuild her life. Slavery plays a crucial role in *The Immortals* and the construction of Otherness, which is explored in Chapter 4 alongside other depictions of slavery in the Tortall Universe.

## WILD MAGIC<sup>11</sup>

Much of the first book of The Immortals series focuses on Daine learning and gaining control of her abilities, which continue to grow throughout the series. With Daine, a new type of magic is introduced into the Tortall Universe—wild magic. Wild magic is not like the Gift, whose users can do various things from lighting fires magically to traveling between planes to healing and battle magic, which is the magic possessed by Jonathan, Alanna, Thom, Roger, and every other gifted person in The Song series. The Gift is largely controlled by its wielder through practice and mastery. As Ishak and Thom demonstrate, losing control of the Gift is the result of using magic beyond one's knowledge or capacity not a loss of control of self. This is contrasted to the uncontrollable, "wild", "pure", and "brimming" of Daine's magic in Numair's description (Pierce, *Wild* 47). Numair is an eccentric and powerful scholar, who is first introduced in the shapeshifted form of a Crow, and is one of the extremely few magic scholars who believe in its existence and has studied it.<sup>12</sup> However, Daine and Numair discover that many types of magic that are unexplained in The Song series, like Alanna's integration into a Bazhir tribe or Jonathan's rite to become the voice of the tribe, are actually this type of magic. Buri tells Daine that Numair, a very respected and knowledgeable mage, agrees with her that she does have a kind of magic:

Numair believes—and I agree—you have magic. You may have no *Gift*, but there are other magics, "wild magics". The Bazhir tribes use one kind to unite their

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<sup>11</sup> The title of the first book in the series is *Wild* in this thesis whereas wild magic refers to the type of magic.

<sup>12</sup> This thesis does not analyze *Tempest* as a solitary text precisely because the series is not complete. It may be the first of Pierce's texts to significantly overlap with a previous work, or it may remain unfinished; however, as long as the possibility of further additions to the series remains, so too does the potential for a more complete understanding of its relationship to Revisionist Feminism within the Tortall Universe, which is as yet unfinished.

people. The Doi read the future with another. There are creatures we call “elementals”, whose very nature is composed of wild magic. (Pierce, *Wild* 84)

Daine’s mother had small healing and protection magic before her death and constantly pushed for Daine to develop the Gift. This is an early point of tension for Daine, as she begins to study her magic. Daine feels abnormal because she doesn’t have the most accepted form of magic and her mother’s desire to see Daine become a hedgewitch like herself makes this an emotional issue for her (Pierce, *Wild* 47). Daine is even more ostracized because of her wild magic since it is unusual, unstudied, and unaccepted by the magical academic community both in and outside of Tortall. Alanna disrupts society with her hybrid identity as both woman and warrior, but her Gift, gender, and profession are conceivable to others. Daine, on the other hand, represents a wholly unique embodiment of natural power that is fantastic even to Tortallans with magic. Both Daine and Alanna come to learn that they have to use their magic because it is intrinsically part of them and that they both need to accept the gifts they have, magical or otherwise, and use them—a lesson that is repeated throughout Pierce’s books. These texts also represent a continued theme in Pierce’s work focused around accepting yourself even if you have characteristics that are not accepted by mainstream society (Pierce, *Adventure* 95).

The rules for wild magic are different from those for the Gift. They require the user to delve into their own strength in order to give it to other animals: “Healing in wild magic is more difficult than it is with the Gift. Wild magic depends on the body’s own power to mend what’s damaged. The Gift simply restores health that was lost” (Pierce, *Wild* 134). Daine has to give her bodily strength to animals that she heals. Both, the Gift and wild magic both require the magician to exercise inner power and discipline (Pierce, *Wild* 132-133). Daine must “want” to heal the animals in order to use her magic, similarly to Alanna’s healing Gift, focus and intention are

necessary for the magic to work. Magic is framed not as an innate force independent of morality, but as something deeply tied to emotional will and choice. It raises the stakes of Daine's devotion to animals unlike Alanna's healing Gift as failure in this case would imply a failure of Daine's *desire* to help an animal.

While animal communication is a familiar trope in children's literature, Daine's ability to speak with animals is subversive in both form and function. Her relationships with nonhuman creatures are not whimsical or decorative; they are grounded in mutual respect, political solidarity, and ecological urgency. The narrative walks a careful line between giving voice to marginalized nonhuman beings and risking anthropomorphism—but children and young adult readers are capable of navigating this tension. They can recognize that these animals are not human stand-ins, even as they are affected and shaped by their representation through human understanding. Through Daine's activism—whether confronting those who labeled her mad, resisting environmental destruction in Dunlath, fighting against slavery, or challenging the gods themselves—Pierce reframes animal communication as a radical tool for dismantling systems of oppression. The personification of animals by Pierce deals with a complicated history of talking animals in children's literature that can both challenge and sustain anthropocentrism:

Talking animals, which feature prominently in children's literature, are both anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic [at] the same time. Animals are often used in adult literature as an analogy for social hierarchy, but in juvenile books the hierarchy can be upset, since the relative positions of adult and animal are not the same as those of animal and child, whose own place is lower down the social scale. (Maurice 161-162)

However, the narrative focus in this YA series is the upheaval of human hierarchies rather than the affirmation of them. The animals in this series are not sidekicks or servile companions to Daine, but beings and individuals in their own right with their own cultures, lives, and morality. There are several times throughout the series where animals come to Daine's help unasked for, and Daine often struggles to distance her magic and her desires from the animals she is in mind contact with. At one point, Daine gets too caught up in meditating, in an attempt to order her thinking, and her "horse" spirit almost runs away from her body (Pierce, *Wild* 106). This magical problem is solved when Numair creates a spell that separates Daine's human self from her animal magic, or potentially, her animal self.

In *The Immortals*, animals refer to themselves as "The People" and recognize Daine not as human, but as one of their own: "You may look like a human, but you aren't. You're of the People: the folk of claw and fur, wing and scale [...] Inside you're People" (Pierce, *Wild* 51). This reclassification of identity challenges anthropocentric hierarchies by positioning Daine as a hybrid figure who straddles species boundaries. Her ability to see magical energy—"copper" or "green fire"—in animals and plants, but not in humans, further distinguishes humanity as separate from the natural symbiosis of the world (Pierce, *Wild* 95). While humans possess the Gift, they are notably excluded from this visible network of ecological connection. Daine, in contrast, acts as a conduit between species. She does not control animals but communicates with them, and they consistently take her side. Her companions refer to animals as her "friends", a framing that personalizes her magic and foregrounds empathy over dominance. Pierce's characterization of animals reflects both imaginative invention and an attempt at scientific accuracy. Although Numair claims that animals "remember the past only vaguely" and "have no comprehension of mortality" (Pierce, *Wild* 101), Pierce complicates this assertion through both

narrative and subtext. Scientific research has demonstrated that elephants, crows, dolphins, and chimpanzees engage in mourning behaviors and show signs of memory and complex emotional lives (Cormier; Clayton et al. 1483). These findings suggest that human assumptions about animal simplicity are themselves a form of anthropocentrism. Pierce's portrayal challenges this by portraying nonhuman characters with emotional depth and individuality, while still rooting their behavior in species-specific logic. As Gates et al. observe, fantasy literature "can take extreme liberty with the actuality of animal behavior", but "its success as a fantasy depend[s] upon the accuracy of the information about animals undergirding the story" (81). Pierce strikes that balance, combining accurate biological traits with magical embellishment to evoke awe and instruction simultaneously. Pierce's authorial choices to create these separations raises interesting questions about her anthropocentric need to divide the human from all other non-human. For instance, Daine's magic does not work on humans. Yet, if Daine heals an otter through her desire, magic, and knowledge of its biology, it stands to reason that this approach would transfer to humans who are, after all, animals. However, all animals in Pierce's Tortall Universe see themselves as separate from humans, as People, while humans are Others despite the variety of differences between non-human animal. Was there a time in the past when humans were also People?<sup>13</sup> Does Pierce envision this separation as biological and inherent or as created and perpetuated? These questions are ultimately unanswered in the narrative, but because of Pierce's Revisionist Feminist aims which encourage asking questions and interrogating binaries, they are interesting interrogations that young adult readers are encouraged to contemplate on their own.

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<sup>13</sup> As this chapter explores, there are dinosaur fossils in the Tortall Universe which implies that a similar evolutionary process happened in Tortall's past as in our own world.

Throughout the series, Daine regularly disputes human generalizations about animals. When Kaddar refers to crocodiles as “vicious”, Daine objects, “There’s few animals that’re ‘vicious’ by nature [...] Usually there’s a good reason for them acting nasty—like you’re stepping in their nests, or you’re stealing their food” (Pierce, *Emperor* 18). These corrective moments position Daine as both character and ethical narrator, educating readers in animal behavior and environmental ethics. In *Wolf-Speaker*, for example, Daine chooses to bathe downstream from a wolf pack to avoid contaminating their water source: “Not wanting to bathe in the pond, where soap would linger in water drunk by the wolves, she used a stream nearby” (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 65). This small detail models ecological stewardship and reflects Daine’s alignment with sustainable, nonhuman-centered values.

Daine’s ecological sensitivity also marks a shift in Pierce’s Revisionist Feminist project. While Alanna's story centered on the right of women to enter male-coded spaces of power, Daine's narrative expands the political lens to include environmental justice and posthuman ethics. Rather than a solitary hero breaking gender norms, Daine allies with communities—both human and nonhuman—that suffer under these hierarchical systems. Her relationships are expansive and interdependent, and her activism centers on collective well-being. This aligns with ecofeminist critiques of dualistic structures that link the domination of women with the exploitation of nature (Curry 1; Phillips and Rumens 2). This ideological framework also raises questions about the role of YA literature. As Peter Hunt argues, “it is arguably impossible for a children’s book [...] not to be educational or influential in some way; it cannot help but reflect an ideology and, by extension, didacticism” (216). The *Immortals* fulfills this dual function—entertaining readers while also providing a clear ethical stance on environmental and interspecies relationships. By embedding scientific ideas in a fantasy world, Pierce provides a subtle but

effective educational experience, particularly suited to a YA audience navigating their relationship to politics, identity, and the planet. Finally, Daine’s hybrid subjectivity—neither fully human nor fully animal—opens space to imagine a posthuman Tortall. As Curry explains, YA fiction often explores “the dualistic conception of human/nonhuman, culture/nature and male/female categories” (3), while Zoe Jaques adds upon this idea that fantasy’s imaginative scope “questions a rigidly hegemonic, humanist ontology” (6). Daine’s story blurs these boundaries, encouraging readers to consider more fluid understandings of self, species, and power. Pierce’s narrative thus resists anthropocentric and patriarchal norms, offering instead a feminist, posthuman vision grounded in solidarity, empathy, and collective survival.

## GENDER

As the previous chapter explored, Alanna’s gender identity is a central concern in *The Song*. However, Daine’s character, while not always coded as explicitly gender subversive in comparison to Alanna, nonetheless reflects the gendered constraints and expectations faced by lower-class young women. Daine’s identity as a young, working-class girl shapes how she navigates both the environment and Tortallan society. To acknowledge such variance among human experience, ecofeminism interrogates the unique relationships women form with their social and ecological environments (Fox and Alldred 124). Thus, exploring humanity’s relationship to nature in *The Immortals* also demands attention to how dominant male-coded institutions in Tortall reinforce gender hierarchies and how those parallels reflect our own world, in particular U.S. gender politics.

Female community is crucial to Daine’s story, not only in the direct relationships she holds, but the symbolism that people, such as Alanna, Thayet, and Buri hold within the Tortall Universe. By each becoming legends in their own right, their stories proliferate to other kingdoms and in turn alter the perception of Tortall as a whole—Tortall itself becomes legendary because of the actions of female heroism, such as Alanna. Regardless of the real, cultural, daily reality of Tortallans, which I return to in Chapter 3 through Kel’s perspective, the kingdom becomes a symbol in this fantasy universe of radical (in-universe) feminism. For Daine, Tortall represents possibility and escape preciously *because* of the legend of Alanna, as Daine enquires of Onua:

“Where a lady knight is the King’s Champion, right? And they let girls in the army? That Tortall?”

“You heard the stories too [...] Well, they don’t let girls in the regular army, mind—just the Queen’s Riders. Why—have you a fancy to be a soldier?”

Daine shook her head. “Not me. But if they take girls for that, maybe they’ll let a girl be an ostler, or work around the camp, or some such.” Her eyes were filled with painful hope.

“As it happens, they do let girls work as ostlers—or at least, they let me. I’m in charge of the horses for the Riders”. (Pierce, *Wild* 6)

Alanna’s heroism—and, by extension, her appointment as the King’s Champion, as seen in her early confrontation with Wyldon in *Test* (discussed later in Chapter 3)—has had a lasting political impact in Tortall. As her legend grows, so too does her symbolic power. Daine’s dreams, which frame Alanna as the crown’s most iconic weapon and warrior, suggest that her prominence signals a broader societal shift: women in Tortall are increasingly entering roles and

professions once strictly reserved for men. The significance of Alanna's legacy lies not only in the inclusion of women in military roles but in the promise that in Tortall, girls can choose their own futures. In *The Immortals*, Alanna is no longer just a mythical figure but a living, working mother and champion of the king. She is fully human to Daine—shorter than expected, prone to swearing, temperamental—and thus all the more powerful as a symbol, as Daine describes Alanna, “She’s shorter than I expected. And I never thought she’d swear or make jokes. She’s a legend, sure enough, but she’s so human. An idea made her jaw drop: if she’s a legend, and a hero, then anyone could be a hero” (Pierce, *Wild* 45). This portrayal is radical in YA Fantasy, where female heroes are often defined by youth and singularity. In contrast, Alanna is mature, politically established, and still a formidable warrior (despite her height). Her ongoing presence in the series resists the trope of the solitary female exception—seen in figures like Joan of Arc, Éowyn, Brienne of Tarth, or Hua Mulan—by establishing a generational legacy. Her relationships with Daine, Thayet, and Buri suggest that female empowerment in Tortall is no longer confined to the rare outlier but can exist in community. Daine, like Alanna, becomes legendary by the end of her series, and in turn becomes an inspirational figure to Tortallan girls like Kel in the future.

What Alanna's and Daine's ongoing presence across multiple books demonstrates is that women can be heroic beyond adolescence with their growth revealing challenges faced at different life stages. There is something particularly resonant in witnessing Alanna's development—from a solitary child hiding her gender to a celebrated warrior and eventually a mother. Pierce depicts women as complex individuals, capable of transformation across time. The difficulties that Alanna and Thayet face as working mothers are shown through Daine's relationship with their respective children. It is evident that Jonathan, Thayet, George, and

Alanna are raising their children with a different conception of gender than the one they inherited:

“We’re lucky to have mothers who fight. Our fathers must stay home and protect their people.”

“Da fights when they hit the village.” Thom was a stickler for fact.

“Papa fights if he can”. (Pierce, *Wild* 164)

These moments reflect the broader cultural change initiated by individuals. This intergenerational shift also continues a larger pattern throughout the Tortall Universe, in which Pierce returns to her protagonists at different life stages to examine how change and resistance evolve over time (Pierce, *Wild* 153-154, *Choice* 17, *Lady* 138). Alanna underscores the importance of female friendship: “A girl’s got to have females to talk to” (Pierce, *Wild* 216). Daine’s understanding of womanhood and resistance is shaped by these women and the paths they forged.

In Carthak, a kingdom to the South of Tortall, Daine is ridiculed for her association with Tortall’s more progressive gender norms. The Carthaki boys mock the idea of female warriors, seeing Tortallan culture as soft and immoral, “‘Tortall—that’s where they have a female as King’s Champion,’ one [of the boys] remarks. ‘Maybe Tortallan men are easily beaten,’ another adds, to which a third asserts, ‘No Carthaki men are bested by a woman’” (Pierce, *Emperor* 102). Even Kaddar, who is otherwise portrayed as sympathetic, assumes Daine’s physical inferiority, telling her:

“Sorry, Daine,” said Kaddar, “but we have only men’s bows. You couldn’t draw one.

Her blue-grey eyes glittered up at him. “Oh?” She let herself into the yard. “You’d be

surprised what I can do,” she told the grinning young men. [...]

“Careful, Kaddar, she might be one of those Queen’s Riders, the ones that let *females* join!”

“Or so they say. *I’ve* never seen one of these Rider maidens, have you?”

Daine's smile was sweeter than ever. “I work for the Rider Horsemistress. Trust me—there are females in the Riders, and they work for a living”. (Pierce, *Emperor* 102–103 emphasis original)

What begins as ridicule ends in Daine outshooting all the boys. The Carthaki boys do not question her skill on the basis of evidence but on entrenched assumptions about gender. Their mockery reveals how female excellence is often treated as exception rather than proof, even when figures like Alanna have spent a decade serving as Champion. That these boys accept Daine as a peer and then watch her dismantle their biases demonstrates the importance of generational change. Unlike Alanna, who fought for acceptance in isolation, Daine benefits from the legacy of women who came before her—though she must still prove herself again and again. This moment also foregrounds the relationship between masculinity and power. Kaddar’s eagerness to see Daine fail speaks to a deeper investment in maintaining male superiority. When she succeeds, it becomes harder for him—and others—to maintain the illusion that men are inherently stronger. As Daine later states, it is not biology but opportunity that determines whether women fight: their exclusion has always been social, not physical (Pierce, *Emperor* 104). In this way, the episode underscores Pierce’s feminist ethic: that female strength is not rare but routinely suppressed. Daine, given the space to grow and explore her power, becomes proof of what women are capable of when they are not constrained by fear, shame, or structural limitation, as I explored in the Revisionist Feminism section of the Introduction Chapter.

Throughout the series, Daine is treated as an outsider in part due to her mother's refusal to conform to the social expectation that women should only have sex within marriage. Sarra is herself a kind of revision: first introduced posthumously as a murdered woman, she later returns as both goddess and mother (Pierce, *Wild* 125, *Realms* 20). Daine's complex and emotionally layered "talking back" to her mother offers a rare depiction of intergenerational tension that does not seek resolution through complete rejection or uncritical idealization. Instead, Sarra becomes a model of alternate femininity—one grounded in traditional domestic skills and pleasure but equally marked by her resistance to patriarchal constraint. Daine's status as "a bastard", explicitly marked in her the language of her surname, is a social label imposed on her for circumstances beyond her control (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 41). Her mother's refusal to marry, combined with the rumors that surrounded her romantic life, position Sarra as socially deviant. Yet Pierce never depicts Sarra's actions as shameful. Instead, Daine's frustration is directed at the community that judges them. When Sarra is murdered and no one comes for days, Daine sees this delay as a cruel betrayal, "'After Ma helped them birth their children, and nursed them when they was sick. Two days!' she thinks bitterly. 'She could've been alive and hurt all that time!'" (Pierce, *Wild* 126). Humanity's reliance on rigid, reductive constructions of gender that regulate women's sexuality is valued more highly than Sarra's actions, despite their positive impact on her community. This dynamic not only marginalizes women who act outside prescribed gender roles, it perpetuates a culture that results in violence against women. They so gravely undervalue women, such as Sarra that she is able to become a Goddess in this region only because there is not one already in existence. It is fortunate for villages like Snowsdale that religion in the Tortall Universe can revive a woman murdered in part by their indifference and integrate her in society in an immortal form.

This critique is reinforced by the perspective of the Cat God, Queenclaw. When Daine expresses her disbelief that her mother, despite being stigmatized, still helps the women of their previous village as a regional goddess, Queenclaw responds that the villagers don't know it's her mother (*Realms* 40). Queenclaw expresses confusion over the villagers disliking Sarra just because she had sexual relationships with several men, replying to Daine that "Cats have more sense" than to care about such things (*ibid.*). This moment exemplifies a recurring motif in Pierce's work: animals serve as a foil to the irrationality of human norms, exposing the artificial nature of rigid social constructs. In contrast to the human world, where Sarra's sexuality invites suspicion and moralizing, animals see no contradiction in her roles as mother, healer, and lover. Queenclaw's remark reframes Daine's internalized anxiety—not by denying its reality, but by undermining the legitimacy of the structures that produced it. This tension resurfaces when Daine confronts her mother in the Divine Realms. Sarra expresses dismay that Daine has spent much of her time in Tortall fighting:

"Speaking of war, I never raised you to be always fighting and killing. That's not woman's work."

"It's needful, Ma. You taught me a woman has to know how to defend herself."

"I never!" gasped Sarra, indignant.

"You taught me when you were murdered in your own house" Daine said quietly. (Pierce, *Realms* 26)

Rather than disowning her mother's example, Daine reframes it, recognizing that the social ideals Sarra once clung to failed to protect her. Sarra also shapes how Daine sees other women, particularly those who are dismissed for their femininity. When she encounters Varice, Numair's former lover, during the invasion of Carthak, Varice assumes Daine will judge her for being soft,

pretty, and seemingly apolitical: “I just like things pretty,” she confesses. “Only, when you have the Gift, you can’t just go to parties and keep house. They expect you to study, and to do something in life” (Pierce, *Emperor* 184). Varice fears being seen as useless because she uses her magic for baking and entertaining rather than battle or fame. But Daine, shaped by her love for her mother, replies simply: “You needn’t explain yourself to me” (ibid.). Varice reminds her of Sarra—another woman who embraced domestic pleasures and feminine expression without submitting to societal demands. Daine’s empathy in this scene reaffirms her rejection of binary thinking: just as Alanna doesn’t have to choose between being a woman and a warrior, Daine refuses to place femininity in opposition to strength. Sarra’s character is one of contradictions, who balks at Daine’s fighting yet flaunted social norms while alive by having multiple romantic partners and remaining unmarried. Sarra likes pretty things but works as a midwife which gives her, and, in turn, her daughter an extensive sex education.

As “a midwife’s daughter”, Daine “knew very well that men enjoyed going to bed with women they weren’t necessarily married to” (ibid.). This comment underscores that, despite her limited personal experience with sex, Daine is no stranger to how female sexuality is weaponized by others, especially men in power. That gendered double standard reaches its most vicious form in Ozorne’s final insult to Daine: “You’re a common-born bastard, a camp follower’s brat who spreads her legs for any passing man—just like her mother” (Pierce, *Realms* 181). His words aim to shame Daine through association with Sarra, suggesting that female sexual autonomy—especially outside of marriage—is inherently degrading. Yet by this point, Daine has already rejected that worldview. Her loyalty and respect for her mother and forging of her new identity all serve as foundations for a feminist ethic rooted in empathy, complexity, and nonconformity. In the Tortall Universe, the Divine Realms mirror the mortal world, with gods embodying

specific regions, needs, or symbolic identities. Extinct or non-mortal animals still have gods, and each deity reflects a concentrated aspect of the material world. Regional gods like the Graveyard Hag (Carthak) and Daine's mother—who becomes the Green Lady of the northern forests—represent specific communities (Pierce, *Emperor* 153, *Realms* 32). Notably, Daine's mother ascends to godhood not because of her relationship with Weiryn, the god of the hunt, but because her personality aligns with an unmet need among mortals: care for gardens and childbirth (Pierce, *Realms* 32).

The final book of the series, set primarily in the Divine Realms, reveals that Daine is a demigod—her father is Weiryn—which explains the unusually strong wild magic she possesses. While some gods like Uusoae defy rules, the Divine Realms are governed by immutable magical laws. For example, when Ozorne attempts to bind creatures with his blood, the spell fails; in the Divine Realms, no being can be magically enslaved: “Any being created in the Divine Realms belongs to itself and serves no one else” (Pierce, *Realms* 63). Religion in Tortall offers a direct feminist and posthumanist alternative to dominant Christian theologies that center male gods. Gods, such as the Mother, the Graveyard Hag, and the Badger support mortals indirectly—through familiars like Faithful, resurrection, or magical aid—rather than through prescriptive moral codes. Daine, more than any other protagonist, challenges divine authority. She refuses to resurrect humans at the Graveyard Hag's request and instead animates dinosaur bones, symbolically rejecting hierarchy. As Phillips notes, Daine's “god-touched” journey allows her to dismantle rigid social structures (*Female* 114). Godhood in Tortall transcends human moral judgment. Sarra, once a poor, unwed mother shunned by her village, is no longer constrained by social norms in divinity. The gods, rather than enforcing good or evil, represent symbolic and communal functions. The Mother, for example, embodies all women, not just a single version of

femininity. Her legacy stands in contrast to the limited cult of the “Gentle Mother”, which is notably absent in later books. Characters like Beka and Alanna, blessed by the Goddess through Faithful/Pounce, reject reductive ideals of feminine weakness and instead embody active, transformative power.

In *Wild*, Daine is freshly orphaned and still processing the trauma of her family’s murder. She was first ostracized by her village for her mother’s romantic relationships outside marriage; after the bandits killed her family, the villagers tried to hunt Daine down like an animal. She describes returning to the farm and finding both her human and nonhuman family dead (Pierce, *Wild* 125). Daine notes the bandits might have passed over the house if her mother hadn’t been so pretty—not to blame her, but to emphasize the horror and injustice of the attack. Additionally, this is part of a persistent trend in Tortallan society of gendered violence, particularly sexual violence of men against women. The bandits kill the men but take the women, implying they are sexually assaulted (ibid.). At this point, Daine is only described as having a “knack” with animals, not full magical control, and the animals’ willingness to defend the family is therefore done, not through Daine using her magic to control them since Daine is not there at the time, but out of love for all the humans at their farm. While other farm animals may love their humans, Daine’s magic is the bridge between species that allows them to recognize affection and loyalty across species. It also reinforces the belief that humans react violently to intelligence and free will in non-human beings (Pierce, *Wild* 11).

Clothing carries significant symbolic weight in Pierce’s novels, reflecting both gender norms and individual autonomy. For Alanna, feminine clothing is an avenue to perform femininity while still disguised as male. For Daine, by contrast, clothing is deeply tied to shame, constraint, and later, transformation. In *Snowsdale*, Daine is forced to wear skirts and dresses—

garments that not only are impractical for her life in the wilderness but also reinforce restrictive gender roles. Even though she hates these clothes, she initially resists change due to internalized social pressure. When Onua suggests she wear breeches, Daine hesitates:

“Then why wear ’em? Get yourself breeches and a shirt like me.”

Daine gaped at her. “Men’s gear? With folk talking about me all the time as is?”

Onua shook her head. “You’re not home now. The rules have changed.”

Daine opened her mouth to object—then closed it. She looked at her skirts. To be rid of them, and the petticoats [...] it hit her, really hit her, that she was free of Snowsdale. What could they do to her now? (Pierce, *Wild* 66)

“This realization—“she was free of Snowsdale”—marks a pivotal moment in Daine’s development. Clothing becomes a tangible expression of her shifting sense of self and a symbolic rejection of the norms she has been taught to enact by fear. The moment parallels the coming-of-age experience for many young readers, particularly those leaving home for the first time. As Daine gains distance from the rules of her childhood, she begins to see them as culturally constructed, not universal. The palace seamstress Kuri reinforces this view by situating Daine’s transition within a broader community of women who have survived violence and defied expectations, “You’re ours, now. [...] Here life’s what you make it. Who you used to be doesn’t matter” (Pierce, *Wild* 68). Kuri reminds Daine that every woman she now looks up to—Onua, Thayet, Alanna—has faced danger for defying patriarchy (ibid.). Their histories of abuse, exile, or rejection point to the persistent threat faced by those who step outside gendered norms, even in a society as relatively progressive as Tortall.

As Meredith Harbach writes, clothing in adolescent life serves both as “an artifact of the sexualization of girls in our culture and also a part of the larger process of identity formation

over which girls exercise some control” (1042). In Daine’s case, her shift from skirts to breeches signifies both a rebellion against gendered expectations and an act of self-definition. Still, her relationship to clothing remains complex. When Daine travels to Carthak, she is given a wardrobe of luxurious dresses to wear for courtly appearances. Despite her earlier distaste, she finds herself enjoying the beauty and status these garments convey—especially when they draw admiration from others (Pierce, *Emperor* 23). While not inherently problematic, this reinforces how clothing remains tied to external validation and gender performance. The desire to be seen, accepted, and attractive is never fully separate from societal scripts, even in moments of agency. These shifts mirror the broader themes in Daine’s story: identity is not fixed but formed through negotiation, reflection, and resistance. Clothing, like magic or speech, becomes a site where that identity is tested and remade. The tension between what is chosen and what is imposed lingers throughout Daine’s journey, reflecting how even seemingly mundane choices like dress are never free from social meaning.

## YOUNG ADULT

Daine’s upbringing is arguably more tragic than Alanna’s experience of maternal loss and paternal absence, as Daine encounters the brutal murder of her mother and grandfather, endures the destruction of her home, and is subsequently forcibly expelled from her community by former neighbors. When Daine’s story begins, she is freshly dealing with the trauma of these losses. Teenagers experience trauma differently than adults. Young adults are often at the mercy of the adults in their lives and can be restricted in the support they receive. They also have developing brains, which makes the impact of stress, anxiety, and trauma particularly intense

(Richmond 124–125). I do not intend to diagnose Daine, but through an understanding of how trauma-related stress specifically manifests in young people, I aim to show how her experiences might resonate with a young adult audience. Following the loss of her family and the violent response of her village, Daine embodies the kind of grief and alienation many young people face. As Kia Richmond notes, “more than 65 percent of children report experiencing trauma by age 16”, including “physical, emotional, or sexual abuse; violence; war; disasters; suicides” (3). Daine’s exposure to death, war, and ostracization throughout the series repeatedly undermines her self-worth, causing her to suppress her magic and fear the loss of her mind. These are consistent with PTSD, which occurs “in individuals who have either experienced or witnessed a traumatic event, such as death, serious injury or accident, natural disaster, an act of terrorism or war, assault (e.g.: rape or torture), or another violent or disturbing incident” (Richmond 115). For Daine, the trauma is not limited to a single loss but is inextricable from her identity: her magic, her exile, and the misogyny that made her mother a target.

As Michelle Balaev argues, trauma should be understood “as relational and positioned within a social setting that is framed by a specific culture, historical period, geographic place, and community” (67). This is evident in *Wolf-Speaker*, when Daine returns to the wolf-pack that helped her seek revenge and enters a valley reminiscent of her home. There, Tait, the hound master of Dunlath, recognizes her and says, “So, ye’re that one” with the implication that Tait has heard the story of her, the wolves, and the bandits, even though he is from a different village (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 148). The landscape, the wolves, and the people she meets all evoke the original site of violence, revealing that Daine’s trauma is not solely psychological but also shaped by place, memory, and social stigma. Yet, despite the rumors, Tait chooses to befriend Daine. His eventual defense by his own dogs, who plead with her that he is a good man, suggests

that his deep connection with animals grants him a more nuanced moral understanding—one that places trust in Daine where others see threat.

During the period surrounding Pierce's writing and publication of *The Immortals*, American cultural constructions of girlhood became increasingly contradictory. Girls were granted greater opportunities for personal autonomy yet remained constrained by a rigid and prescriptive definition of femininity. For example, cultural messaging simultaneously promoted sexual autonomy for girls and women while continuing to stigmatize female promiscuity. In 1994, Pipher examined how American girlhood was increasingly shaped by concentrated media messaging that promoted a singular, rigid cultural ideal, emphasizing stereotypical gender roles, such as passivity, valuing girls based on their appearance and attractiveness to men, and portraying the female body as inherently sexual. Pipher writes, "America today limits girls' development, truncates their wholeness and leaves many of them traumatized" (Pipher 12). Pipher's focus is on tracing the reasons why girls are so unhappy, arguing that this contradictory yet rigid media construction of gender in the U.S. results in an inability to form, and be celebrated for, an individual identity, as "Girls know they are losing themselves" (Pipher 20). However, Pipher also relies on language laden with stereotypes and dismissive reductions of young girls' emotions and performances of identity in society. Pipher characterizes young American girls as overly emotional, despite lamenting the same structural attitudes that depict girls as needlessly emotional: "They are easily offended by a glance, a clearing of the throat, a silence, a lack of sufficient enthusiasm or a sentence that doesn't meet their immediate needs" (Pipher 20). Moreover, although American cultural media during this period differed in some respects from earlier decades, the apparent increase in girls' expressions of dissatisfaction in the 1990s does not necessarily indicate a rise in dissatisfaction itself. Rather, it reflects a growing

willingness to document and take seriously these perspectives, which had long been silenced or devalued, even as the dissatisfaction of girls and women with roles prescribed by a patriarchal society predates the 1990s. Undermining girls and women as overly emotional and, therefore, weaker, unstable, and illogical makes these opinions the more easily dismissed. Pierce explores the frustrations and anger that young girls often feel toward society's contradictory and limiting depiction of girlhood through the character of Daine, without undermining the validity of these experiences as Pipher does.

As discussed throughout this chapter, Daine often questions whether she is “crazy” for feeling the way she does after the trauma she has endured. Calling women irrational or unstable is a long-standing cultural mechanism used to minimize and control women's experiences: “Women experience discrimination differently, but we share the experience—in anger or merely when simply speaking assertively—of being told we are ‘crazy,’ ‘irrational,’ even ‘demonic’” (Chemaly ch. 1, par. 1). Anger, for women, is not simply personal—it is social. Daine is frequently ridiculed or dismissed for her gender, her age, her class background, and her magical abilities. As Soraya Chemaly writes:

While we experience anger internally, it is mediated culturally and externally by other people's expectations and social prohibitions. Roles and responsibilities, power and privilege are the framers of our anger. Relationships, culture, social status, exposure to discrimination, poverty, and access to power all factor into how we think about, experience, and utilize anger. (ch. 1, par. 1)

Crucially, Daine learns to channel her anger and her passion into action. When her appeals to stop environmental destruction in Dunlath are dismissed due to her lower-class status, her fury

helps bring the perpetrators to justice. While female anger is often treated as dangerous or illegitimate, Daine's narrative insists that anger, when justified, can become a tool for change.

As Daine works to understand her experiences and trauma, she often feels anger. There is a whole chapter in *Emperor* titled "Daine Loses her Temper". While Daine is not characterized as short-tempered like Alanna, both women use anger at injustices to fuel their actions. Daine is chosen as a vessel by the Carthak Goddess the Graveyard Hag specifically because of her anger at the way society has treated her:

Daine looked down at her hand. The goddess' words had awakened memories of those times, as fresh as when she's lived through them. For a moment she actually knelt beside Ma's body, feeling how cold she was. Memory flickered: she was shivering, naked, running, the village hunters close behind, calling her name. (Pierce, *Emperor* 115)

Showing that trauma often manifests itself in anger and allowing Daine to use her anger to fight injustice helps young readers to recognize and accept female anger and to connect with the anger that women often feel to experiences in an unjust society. Perhaps the most disturbing part of Daine's trauma is what follows after she hunts and kills the bandits with the wolves. She joins the local wolf pack to hunt down the bandits, saving the kidnapped women, but is then hunted by the village. A former partner of her mother's lures her back, so the men can kill her, "He said I was like the rabid bear. I had to be put down merciful. If I'd come out, it'd be over in a minute. [...] Then they tried to set the dogs on me, but the dogs wouldn't go" (Pierce, *Wild* 127). To be both human and animal is to be monstrous—so threatening that society would rather kill her than allow her to exist, even though she poses no threat to the villagers. The villagers call her "crazy", and she, in turn, internalizes it. Several of the men who want her dead had relationships with her mother, and their misogyny justifies Daine's exclusion as both "other" and illegitimate. While

most readers have not been hunted for magical animal ties, Daine's loss, societal rejection, and betrayal by trusted adults are experiences many young readers in particular can relate to.

The most important moment in Daine's recovery, however, comes not through destruction but through vulnerability—when she finally chooses to tell Onua and Numair about her past. She fears rejection, having internalized the belief that her trauma makes her damaged or unlovable. Onua, who has survived domestic violence, responds with empathy and encourages Daine to speak. When Daine says, “They took my life, those bandits. I saved things, like clothes and food, but all my family was gone except Cloud,” she articulates the depth of her loss—having preserved the material but lost the irreplaceable in her biological family (Pierce, *Wild* 8). When she apologizes for pouring out her emotions to her friends, Onua reassures her, telling Daine that “You have to, just to bleed off the poison from the memory” (Pierce, *Wild* 9). This exchange initiates Daine's healing and underscores the importance of acceptance among a community.

As Daine begins to share more of her story, she realizes how much relief comes from putting language to her grief: “By then she had given her new friend the less painful details of her life and had come to see Onua was right—it felt better to talk” (Pierce, *Wild* 17). Talking allows her to cry again: “The tears that had stopped coming when she buried her family came again, in a hot and silent flood” (Pierce, *Wild* 129). These emotional breakthroughs mark a shift in Daine's relationship to her past. She begins to remember her family not only through the trauma of their deaths, but through joyful memories: “That night it came to her that Ma and Grandda probably wouldn't mind if she had fun now and then. They'd been partial to fun, making berry strings or playing catch with the bread dough” (Pierce, *Wild* 53). While Daine's trauma is not magically resolved, she begins to reclaim control over it. The realism of Daine's

trauma is not undercut or mitigated by any fantasy elements, but the vivid expression of emotions relating to trauma. Daine still fears loss and carries guilt—believing at times that her presence brings only harm to those around her—but she also begins to accept the necessity of connection.

This section analyzes Pierce’s depiction of Daine’s families across the series. Her friends become a found family, helping her feel connected rather than isolated. Even in grief, Daine recalls not just her human kin but her animal ones: “So we buried them, me and Cloud, every last one of our family. Cloud’s dam and sire, her brothers are in those graves” (Pierce, *Wild* 126). Their bond is not symbolic but familial and species differences do not divide them. When Daine fears rejection for her powers, Alanna reassures her: “There will always be some who dislike you, but that’s life” (*Emperor* 208). As noted in Chapter 1 and earlier within this chapter, female friendships shape young girls’ social understanding. Alanna internalizes her struggles, but Daine begins by forming a close bond with Onua. Her gift for community also extends to animals. With the exception of rats, Daine shares immediate camaraderie with the People. Even in captivity or isolation, animals aid her (Pierce, *Wild* 144-145, *Emperor* 170). Though the reciprocity of her magic is never fully explored, Daine’s trust in nonhumans is unshaken. The narrative suggests that mutual communication and respect across species would foster harmony—a point quietly reinforced when Onua reflects on her dog, as I explore more in-depth later in this chapter.

Family remains central to The Immortals series. Daine’s story begins with the loss of her family and ends with her reuniting with her mother and newly discovered father. Family, in YA literature, often plays a defining role in adolescents’ lives, as adult figures seek to regulate identity formation, “Given the rapid transformation of adolescence, it is unsurprising when teenagers find themselves experiencing feelings of disconnection not only between themselves

and others, but also between conflicting parts of themselves” (Tarr and White 75). This sense of internal and interpersonal disconnection is intensified for adolescents who lack stable familial structures, making family relationships especially significant in shaping identity. Family stabilizes aspects of conflict in adolescent identity and serves as necessary and personal examples of identity formation.

In *Wild*, before Daine develops connections in Tortall, she feels isolated: “She was a little envious of Onua, with her home and friends, but she forced the envy down. For certain she didn’t want Onua to be alone in the world as she was” (Pierce, *Wild* 60). Her adoptive father, the Badger God, is a strict but loyal guide who supports her magical development and well-being. His role does not diminish when Daine meets her biological father. Instead, the Badger reaffirms his affection for Daine by replacing his claw that she wears around her neck:

“Badger,” Daine said, tears filling her eyes. “I s’pose you’re done with me, now that I’m grown and know my da and all.”

He thrust a cold, wet nose into the hollow at the base of her throat. She flinched. Even after he backed away, the sense of coldness remained. Touching the spot, the girl felt a chilly metal curve, its base wrapped in silver wire, attached to a chain. (Pierce, *Realms* 196)

Daine even reverts to her original speech when speaking to the Badger as a representation of her profound emotion at the exchange. This moment affirms that adoptive families hold equal emotional weight as biological ones. Daine’s experience reflects the value of chosen or blended families in adolescence. As Sue Parsons et al. elucidates, these portrayals are relatively rare in YA fiction because they “raise significant questions about what family structures and contexts are valued, who has power and choice in relationships” (84–85). Neither does Daine reject either

family, biological or found, instead treating each relationship as determined by their closeness to Daine rather than determined by those closest to her biologically. Found families in YA literature reflect broader trends in Female Fantasy that prioritize community and they strongly embody Revisionist Feminist ideals by revising the definition of family as not limited by biological ties.

When Daine finally meets her divine father and confronts her mother in *Realms*, the reunion is emotional and fraught. Daine feels anger at her mother for concealing her parentage, and confusion toward a father she has never known. Pierce explores the emotional complexity of such a moment:

No one else's father had antlers, or went half naked. What was she supposed to say?

"Hullo, Da." She hid trembling hands under her blankets.

"Daine!" Sarra cried. "Is that the best you can do? He's your da!"

The girl couldn't begin to describe her feelings. Only months ago, she had learned that the horned man she saw in visions was her father, and that he was a god. [...] "It's not like you ever told me who he was, or what he was". (Pierce, *Realms* 23)

Sarra's disappointment underscores the generational divide between parents' expectations and children's emotional reality. Daine's guarded reaction also reveals her lingering anger over her mother's death and absence. The tension is mutual: while Daine's trauma has shaped her, Sarra grapples with guilt and the limits of maternal influence. The physical characteristics of Weiryn, while humanoid, certainly immediately mark him as nonhuman, unlike Daine's mother who retains her human appearance in the Divine realms. Sarra and Weiryn also indirectly revise popular myths of male gods raping mortal women, as Sarra and Weiryn appear happily married (Pierce, *Realms* 46). These scenes show parents not as distant figures or absolute authorities, but as flawed and complex people with their own burdens.

The climax of this emotional reckoning comes when Daine considers whether to adopt her father's name and discard her mother's. Despite the social pressure and the stigma of being a "bastard", Daine chooses to retain her mother's name as a sign of identity and loyalty:

"I know my da, she thought. I could change my name. No more looks from them that know I'm Sarrasri because Ma was my only family—that I'm a bastard. I s'pose Da acknowledges me now. It's my right to change my name. Weirynsra. Veralidaine Weirynsra. It didn't sound right. When all was said and done, she was Veralidaine Sarrasri, really. She'd been that for sixteen years. Changing now would be—uncomfortable". (Pierce, *Realms* 102)

This decision reflects a nuanced understanding of names as gendered and symbolic. In contemporary society, families who pass on maternal or blended surnames often face criticism, but Pierce frames Daine's choice as deeply personal rather than political. Her name becomes an expression of chosen identity and emotional truth rather than lineage. These are explicit political Revisionist Feminist practices, and as I return to throughout this thesis, revision and feminism are not a linear processes towards an eventual goal, but a constant negotiation with text and world that reveals an explicit consideration of these political and young adult elements and the inherent contradictions in human experience, whether Daine's or Pierce's, in growing up.

The remainder of the analysis of Daine's gendered body explores how she constructs identity based on her body and how it changes throughout the series. Daine is not primarily a fighter and consequently thinks very differently about her body than Alanna. Alanna is frustrated by her first period and the growth of breasts that could reveal her real gender and interfere with her ability to fight (Pierce, *Alanna* 121). Daine, raised by a midwife, has a better understanding of sex and puberty. As a result, these changes are not foregrounded in her story. This is not to say

Daine is not physically capable—she demonstrates expertise in wilderness survival and is a supernaturally gifted bowwoman, with a soldier remarking, “You are the best archer I have ever seen—better even than the Lioness” (Pierce, *Wild* 39). However, Daine’s mother also enforces a restrictive and socially conventional model of femininity: Daine was not allowed to wear breeches, not to make war, and expected always to be polite, to help, and to heal. When Daine begins to shapeshift into animals, she moves beyond acting as an ambassador between humans and nonhumans and instead becomes a hybrid creature herself. Her physical transformation reflects the already hybrid nature of her internal self, a struggle to reconcile unity and multiplicity.

The Badger God first directs Daine into this magic by telling her to “listen all around her” (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 12). This listening, or understanding, to the nonhuman results in the destabilization of Daine’s physical human form. While Daine’s mental identity was in *Wild* destabilized by listening to animals, it is not until *Wolf-Speaker* that her physical body begins to change form. As a result, she begins to believe she is going mad, imagining she is physically transforming:

Daine touched a long flap of leathery skin that flicked to and fro, catching each quiver of sound in the air. [...] What is this? She, thought, her skin prickling. Why is my body changing? It’s staying right where I left it. I don’t change when I do this, I just send my mind someplace else. (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 96)

The early stages of Daine learning to transform in *Wolf-Speaker* are similar to experiencing body dysmorphia. These experiences parallel Alanna’s fear at getting her first period and not knowing what it was. Daine, too, does not understand why her body is changing, and the transformations frighten her. She repeatedly thinks she is “mad” because of her magic, and she is unable to

remain physically whole while using it. Her magic moves from listening, to inhabiting perspectives, to full embodiment. Daine's early struggles with transformation, like Alanna's confusion during puberty and cross-dressing, illustrate how Pierce uses bodily change to explore the uncertainties of adolescence and the development of agency. By linking physical transformation to fear, fragmentation, and gradual mastery, these experiences underscore the interconnection between bodily, emotional, and social identity in her YA fantasy, framing growth as both challenging and empowering.

When Daine enters the mind of a wolf, she sees herself from outside—"A whiff of flowers, animal musk, and cotton was the girl-who-is-Pack. She looked at the girl, and realized she looked at herself" (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 27). To the wolves, she is "girl-who-is-Pack", but Daine's own concept of self is more complicated. As she continues to inhabit other animals, Pierce provides vivid descriptions of both their physical forms and mental states. When Daine merges with Flicker, a forest squirrel, she learns that squirrels are jumpy and anxious because their vision is poorer than hers and their small size makes other animals—like wolf puppies—appear enormous (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 135). Her initial irritation at Flicker's fear is replaced by understanding once she embodies him. These shape-changes are the first step in not just understanding animals through communication, but through embodied knowledge. Phillips notes that in Daine's first unintentional body change, her experience mirrors the experience of teenage girls going through puberty:

This narration of fantastic bodily change is a modelling of the very real (as in physical) changes associated with the adolescent girl: while the adolescent girl may not develop "black claws" or grow "a fine grey fuzz" [...] she does (typically) begin growing

underarm and pubic hair at the onset of puberty, while also in the West often experimenting with nail polish and other body modification techniques. (*Female* 135)

This similarly is another example of holding realism and fantasy simultaneously in a reading, and though Daine is transforming into a bat, her description of her body is similar to anxieties of puberty—losing one’s sense of self, changes happening unexpectedly, and anxieties over how these body transformations will change an individual’s social role in society. Reading Daine’s animal transformations as both a disruption of the boundary between human and nonhuman and a collapse of the distinction between child and girl engages the reader’s enjoyment of fantasy while simultaneously reflecting the real, embodied challenges faced by young adults.

Still, Daine’s embodiment exceeds a metaphor for adolescence: it is a complete immersion in another perspective. When Daine shapeshifts into animals, she begins to think and feel like them. This transformation is not without danger—she struggles to return to her human form because the animal self feels more “right”. At the climax of *Wolf-Speaker*, Daine fully transforms into a wolf:

Daine’s blood was up. A run meant a hunt to her wolf self; a hunt meant a kill. She wanted to leap for the mare’s throat, to bring her down and feast, but caution held her, though she fought it. The mare was shod in hard metal. To lunge in would be to court broken ribs or a broken head. If Yolane had not been riding her, the pack never would have gone after such dangerous prey. (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 196–197)

Here Daine begins to embody a reciprocal relationship between human and animal culture. While she teaches Brokefang about death and community, she herself learns to embody and understand a wolf. This duality underlines her ongoing negotiation between two kinds of

knowledge—human and nonhuman. Though she ultimately chooses to return to her human form, Daine’s narrative refuses to place greater value on one father over the other. Her ability to understand both is what allows her to advocate for both. Pierce uses Daine’s embodiment of different types of animals to educate her readers on the realistic biology abilities and potential experiences of these animals through the use of magic. Wolves use both scent and sound to track Yolane, while hyenas rely almost exclusively on smell to hunt Ozorne (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 194, *Emperor* 192–193). Daine’s magic alienates her from both humans and nonhumans—stormwings call her a freak, the People reject her humanity, and humans fear her ability. Still, Pierce’s narration avoids monstrous language. Instead, Daine’s immersion into animal perspectives renders emotions like fear, hunger, and community as intelligible and meaningful. Daine’s magic is stronger, at least temporarily, than survival instincts: “They trusted Daine to keep the wolves from hurting them, but their belief in her couldn’t banish natural fear entirely” (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 6). Daine recognizes that neither human nor animal ways of thinking are inherently superior, but each offers insight necessary to survival. Her hybrid knowledge challenges the binary between animal instinct and human culture. As Daine’s magic is stronger, this supports the argument I make further in this chapter that Daine is the start of a truly revolutionary biological change to humanity in the Tortall Universe.

Daine’s shapeshifting is accompanied by another physical marker: the loss of clothing. When she returns to her human form, her mind and body resist the change:

Sitting down, she began to recover her true shape. It was harder than she had expected. Her body liked the wolf shape. Bruises and hot feet notwithstanding, the wolf shape felt good, even natural. The girl had to fight a sense that she was meant to stay a wolf. [...] At last she found her two-legger self and slid into it. (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 197)

This suggests that Daine is not merely shifting forms but actually possesses a hybrid body. Her brain itself is partially animal, a division that only becomes externally separable through Numair's magic—and even then, Daine only consents to this separation out of fear. She is too dangerous to be fully animal in a human society: the men in Snowsdale hunted her, and the Rider trainees react in horror when she “loses her mind” again. Daine never permanently becomes an animal but always returns to human form—not because she prefers it, but because it is necessary for social survival.

The implications of Daine's shapeshifting reach their most radical point in her role as a mother which is revealed in the background of *Choice*. The child she bears with Numair does not merely inherit Daine's abilities—it becomes something entirely new: a being that constantly shifts between animal and human forms and even changes sex after birth (Pierce, *Choice* 130). This is not simply a fantastical element, but a deeply significant development in the context of posthumanism. The child is not tethered to a stable biological identity, and in this way, it transcends the foundational categories—human and nonhuman, male and female—that structure both social and bodily norms. Though the text offers no explicit explanation, the contrast between Daine's own human birth and the more fluid identity of her child raises important questions. It is Daine's mother, the one who carried and birthed her, who may have anchored Daine to human form. Her own child, carried by a hybrid being with divine, human, and animal lineage, is not born with that presumption. This is not merely metaphorical hybridity, but a biological one: Daine's child is the embodied product of multiple ontologies—human, god, animal, People—fused within a single, living body. Daine and Numair's children, then, are not just a continuation of Daine's legacy, but a material disruption of the very categories that defined

her struggle. The leaking of Daine’s wild magic and the ongoing intermingling of species knowledge imply that the world of Tortall itself is evolving.<sup>14</sup>

The remainder of this YA section examines two categorizations of the animal in *The Immortals* and the intersection of animal science and cultural representations. Pierce’s inclusion of realistic animals, based on scientific research, is part of her broader revisionist fantasy practice—a blending of realism and speculative fiction that subtly confronts conservative anti-science attitudes prevalent in American culture. Written in the early to mid-1990s, *The Immortals* contains a few scientific inaccuracies that reflect the evolving state of human knowledge at the time. Animal studies, particularly on cognition and social structures, have always occupied a fluid space in scientific inquiry; definitions of what distinguishes humans from nonhumans continually shift alongside technological and ethical developments. One now-discredited example appears in *Wolf-Speaker*, where Pierce adopts the term “alpha male” to describe wolf behavior—language drawn from Dr. L. David Mech’s early research, whom she acknowledges in her endnotes (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 216; Mech 6). Mech later recanted this terminology, recognizing that the dominance hierarchies he observed were artifacts of captivity, not wild wolf behavior (Mech 5). Despite his correction, the term “alpha male” entered popular American culture as a model of masculinity rooted in aggression and dominance (Russell 20-21). As Rivka Galchen notes in *The New York Times*, this idea has “infected human society” (par. 5). The persistence of this myth echoes Sylvia Wynter’s critique of scientific knowledge as ideologically constructed, a set of narrative frameworks masquerading as immutable truth (qtd. in McKittrick 23). While Wynter focuses on racial and human hierarchies, her point equally

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<sup>14</sup> Though not directly connected to Daine, in the *Tricksters* duology Aly falls in love with a crow who can shapeshift into a man, and in *Spy’s*, there is a short story focused on their children who are half human and half crow. In future of the Tortall Universe, there will be at least two lineages of human and non-human people disrupting the separation between the two.

applies to the cultural construction of nonhuman categories. Pierce's portrayal of animals however well-intentioned unwittingly reproduces one of these myths, but also opens a space to consider how stories shape scientific "facts". The portrayal of the alpha male reinforces reductive forms of masculinity by upholding patriarchal hierarchies, emphasizing male superiority and opposition to women, and implying a biological predisposition toward leadership and aggression (Ging 653). On a broader level, it suggests that social hierarchies are "natural" and therefore immutable, highlighting the complex interplay between literature, anthropomorphized representations of the non-human, scientific discourse, and cultural assumptions.

Pierce's inclusion of dinosaurs is particularly resonant in light of American continued cultural debates about evolution (Webb 1, 86). While she does not frame Daine's visit to the University in *Emperor* as overtly political, the scene carries strong cultural weight. When Daine visits the Hall of Bones and awakens a long-extinct birdlike creature, she is told: "It is a link, between the dinosaurs in the Hall of Bones and animals—birds—alive now" (Pierce, *Emperor* 128). Though the term "evolution" is never used, the language of the "missing link" evokes long-standing American anxieties around evolutionary theory. In "Antievolution and Creationism in the United States", Eugenie Scott notes that in 1996, only 44% of Americans accepted evolution as scientific fact and that public education had been a battleground for anti-evolutionist activism since the 1970s (263–264). Pierce's choice to depict magical time travel as a means of witnessing species transformation is not just a narrative flourish—it implicitly affirms a view of the natural world that many American readers would recognize as politically charged. W.J.T. Mitchell argues that dinosaurs hold a unique place in American culture not simply as scientific subjects, but as cultural artifacts shaped by popular demand. As he writes, the term "dinosaur" survives "not because it defines a natural group of animals", but because of its symbolic power

in the American imagination (Mitchell 23–24). The shift in scientific consensus—from dinosaurs as reptiles to birds—has not erased the deep-rooted associations between dinosaurs, evolution, and public controversy. As Mitchell explains, this transition “left dinosaurology within the political debate in American culture between evolution and creationism” (137). Pierce’s use of the phrase “lizard-birds” reflects this liminal, contested space. Her fantasy world mirrors not only the creatures themselves but also the human systems of meaning that surround them. Dinosaurs serve as a compelling example of creatures that bridge scientific inquiry and imaginative speculation, drawing interest both for their role in evolutionary history and their capacity to inspire fantasy. Pierce embeds scientific discourse and environmental ethics into the narrative in ways that challenge conservative norms and affirm the intellectual seriousness of fantasy aimed at young readers. This is particularly significant from the cultural perspective of the U.S., which has a particularly fraught and long-standing political controversy between evolution as a scientific theory and Christianity.

## ECOLOGY

This section explores how Daine’s character challenges and reframes human identity, first in relation to the nonhuman animal—beyond conventional trends in Children’s and YA literature (as addressed in the Wild Magic section)—and second, in relation to human constructions of environment and world. This section examines uncontrollable magic, outsider status, and transformation, positioning *The Immortals* as a fantasy text that reimagines human limitations and, in doing so, reveals and destabilizes cultures built on the oppression of the nonhuman—including the marginalized, the Other, the nonhuman animal, the environment, and

hybrid fantastical creatures, as well as the myth of humanity, which is addressed later in this chapter. As Dailey writes in her biography of Pierce, Pierce has a lifelong love of the nonhuman, which is reflected in the attention paid to nonhuman characters in the Tortall Universe as Dailey writes “some of the best characters in her books are animals” (13).

While Daine is traveling with the Queen’s Riders, they encounter Griffins, large magical bird-like creatures. As the Riders prepare to attack, Daine tries to intervene by communicating with the Griffins to prevent violence. In doing so, she loses control of her magic: the Riders’ horses’ revolt, breaking or removing their riders’ weapons. Thayet immediately reprimands her:

“You had best study control, mistress,” she warned Daine. “If we can’t trust our mounts, we’re in trouble.”

“There’s only so much she can do,” Numair put in. “This is wild magic, Your Majesty—not the Gift. She can’t help animals knowing her feelings any more than she can help breathing. I’ve tested her control. It’s as good as she can make it. Wild magic is unpredictable—thus the name”. (Pierce, *Wild* 149)

Numair frames Daine’s magic as fundamentally uncontrollable because of its root in animal connection, distinguishing it from human magic. Extrapolated beyond wild magic, this represents a broader tension between humans and environmental control. Thayet and Buri expect absolute animal obedience, but Daine’s bond with nonhuman beings reveals that even the seemingly subjugated retain emotional autonomy and will. Animals exposed to her power begin to comprehend human mechanisms of control and respond to them in kind. It also erodes the supposed relationships that those, such as Onua build with their companion animals. The Riders must all trust their horses with their lives, and the horses must trust the Rider’s, but this moment reveals that this loyalty is not as absolute as humans would prefer to believe.

Thayet even makes a point of riding her pony up to the Griffin afterwards despite the horse's fear in order to make a point of her control over the horse she considers her own (Pierce, *Wild* 149). Daine represents a threat—but not in the conventional, political sense posed by the rebellion in *Wolf-Speaker*. Rebellions are not uncommon in the Tortall Universe; they appear in *The Song*, *The Immortals*, and *Provost's Dog*, and are often depicted as contained, ultimately suppressible challenges to the state. Daine, however, poses a different kind of threat—one that is diffuse, uncontrollable, and existential in scope. Her power cannot be regulated by the monarchy, and, crucially, it is not predicated on control. Daine does not “command” animals in the manner of a superhero like Aquaman; rather, animals perceive her as one of their own. Her relationships with nonhuman beings are reciprocal, not coercive. While she chooses to aid them, she neither selected her powers nor imposes them on others. This distinction sets her apart from her human counterparts, who view magical creatures like griffins solely through the lens of human threat and containment. Daine, by contrast, instinctively recognizes nonhuman subjectivity and grants them the opportunity to explain their actions—treating them not as extensions of her will, but as autonomous beings with agency and perspective.

Much of the series' humor arises from this mutual misinterpretation, but beneath this lies a persistent discomfort with Daine's position. She occupies a liminal space where loyalty to the nonhuman becomes an existential threat to hierarchical human norms and to the biological structure of the entire environment. Phillips argues that Daine's role as translator works symbolically as well, destabilizing anthropocentric structures of meaning: “Daine's being also systematically works to deconstruct the differences between language, especially disrupting the privileged position of human speech” (*Female* 131). However, Daine is not only a translator, but an active advocate for the People to humanity in her function. The fact that, at least during the

time of The Immortals, only Daine can speak to animals and immortals that are wholly animal means that Daine's ability to mediate language challenges not only human dominion over animals, but also the authority of language itself as a marker of superiority. In positioning Daine's "being" as an active threat to this hierarchy, L. Phillips emphasizes how the very structure of Daine's existence resists the binary distinctions that enforce human exceptionalism.<sup>15</sup>

A Rider trainee who quits shortly after the griffin incident expresses the prevailing human anxiety about Daine's powers and her place among them:

Are you blind? How long can they afford to keep you on, do you suppose? After that thing with the griffins, I figured it was all over for you. [...] What happens if they're in battle and you get hurt? You think they can risk their mounts coming to your rescue? I don't. (Pierce, *Wild* 156)

The trainee's cynicism cuts directly to the core of Daine's social alienation. Her comment also accurately predicts what repeatedly happens throughout the series: animals often ignore their human handlers in favor of helping Daine. From guard dogs who instinctively trust her to the horses that respond to her emotions rather than commands, Daine's presence disrupts the human-animal power structure and by doing so reveals the actual fragility of total human dominion or understanding of the nonhuman.

As Daine's ship arrives in Carthak in *Emperor*, domesticated animals spontaneously gather at the docks to greet her. Rather than marveling, the humans respond with unease, even fear. Daine asks them to leave as soon as she arrives because of this fear, "Thank you for

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<sup>15</sup> Daine, as well as several other characters including Corum and Tobe, have a distinct accent when first introduced as a marker of their role within the Tortallan class hierarchy. Language for Daine is an intriguing struggle between expression and control.

meeting me, she called silently, her magic carrying the words to her listeners. [...] For now, though, *please* stop calling, and go home. We're making the two-leggers nervous!" (Pierce, *Emperor* 9–10). This reinforces the separation between the human and the nonhuman as even animals who do not traditionally peacefully coexist do so in this instance just to meet Daine. The humans are unsettled not because the animals are dangerous, but because they are behaving unexpectedly and cooperatively. It reveals a form of collective agency outside human control, which threatens a dominion premised on the assumed inferiority and disorganization of nonhuman animals. Human dominance is made possible by this fragmentation; unity among animals suggests the terrifying possibility that they could organize and resist humans. This incident parallels earlier ones, such as Daine's loss of control with the Rider ponies. In both, Daine's emotions ripple outward through her magic, affecting the behavior of animals in ways that prioritize her over their human companions. These episodes underscore that her magic is not a neutral tool—it is a form of relational influence that challenges social hierarchies and reorients power away from human centers.

Daine's position in society as outsider and her role as protagonist in this series serve to expose these issues. Her consistent compassion for animals, regardless of their relationship to humans, reinforces the idea that they deserve freedom and happiness independently. Nowhere in the series is this belief contradicted. This ecofeminist perspective of post-anthropocentrism, presented within a fantasy framework, enables a critique of environmental destruction while also challenging assumptions of human supremacy over nature. As Patrick Curry explains:

In according such "difference" to the natural world, ecofeminists encourage the human subject to extend the traditionally underplayed values of empathy, solidarity and

mutuality towards nonhuman others; such values can be enacted persuasively within the imaginative space opened up by literary texts. (Curry 12)

The fantasy setting becomes an ideal space for this shift. Through Daine's narrative, readers are encouraged not only to empathize with nonhuman creatures but also to imagine alternative systems in which interspecies relationships are built on mutuality rather than exploitation. Daine therefore demonstrates ecofeminist values when she pleads with Tristan to consider even selfish reasons to halt environmental destruction in Dunlath:

Think selfishly. [...] You can't go on this way. Soon you will have no forests to get wood from or to hunt game in. You poison water you drink and bathe and fish in. Even if you keep the farms, they won't be enough to feed you if the rest of the valley's laid waste. You'll starve. Your people will starve—unless you buy from outside the valley, and that's fair expensive. You'll ruin Dunlath. (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 48)

Daine is mocked in this scene, treated with only one more right than a wolf would have been on appeal—that of not being shot dead at the door. Her appeal draws on logic and the very same fear she often faces, emphasizing that destruction will ultimately harm the very people enacting it. But Tristan refuses to listen. The narrative casts his disregard as both shortsighted and deeply violent—not just to animals or the land, but to all life within that ecosystem, human included. Tristan's refusal to consider Daine's appeal reflects anthropocentric hierarchies that prioritize human self-interest over the well-being of the non-human, paralleling how cruelty, class, and social marginalization uphold structural power. Both cases illustrate how dominance and rigid hierarchies normalize harm, limit empathy, and occlude basic logic of survival, whether toward other humans or the environment. It also draws upon anthropocentric ideals, appealing to the selfishness and survival of the humans rather than arguing for a restructuring of society in such a

way that places empathy towards the nonhuman on the same importance as towards other humans.

Though not explicitly addressed in the narrative, the story of Dunlath in *Wolf-Speaker* demonstrates the importance of connection to local environment. Rather than in a globalized society similar to American society where human needs are met through importation of goods, the narrative highlights local environmentalism. If humans are tied to their local environment, such as they are in Dunlath, then they have a selfish motivation to care for the nonhuman and environment in order to ensure longevity and survival. Daine's failed persuasion illustrates a key tenet of posthumanist critique: that even when humans are offered practical, self-preserving arguments, ideological dominance often overrides reason (Ridley and Low 2-3). It is not possible to enact radical change between the nonhuman and human binary within the system, even when appealing to humanity's self-preservation. As Daine decides as well, a radical, posthuman restructure of Dunlath must take place in *Wolf-Speaker* in order to preserve the valley. Fox and Alldred echo a similar mode for humans to appeal to one another selfishly:

The posthuman commitment must be instead to promote those actions that can enhance the environment's—and consequently also (post)human—potentialities, and moderate those that would limit that potential—be that by exhausting natural resources, filling the atmosphere with greenhouse gases, or limiting human possibilities through poverty, economic inequities or threats to health. (Fox and Alldred 125)

However, Daine's appeal to the Dunlath nobles fails, demonstrating that, as Fox and Alldred suggest, awareness of self-interest alone is not enough to produce meaningful change. Instead, Dunlath is preserved through Daine's later revolutionary posthumanist actions, rather than through appeals grounded in human dominance over the environment. This illustrates that

working within an anthropocentric framework is insufficient to affect lasting transformation. Despite Daine's clear articulation of these consequences, the structures that enable environmental harm remain intact, propped up by human exceptionalism and class hierarchy.

In Tortall, as in many real-world human societies, institutions justify and perpetuate privilege by normalizing destruction and marginalization. This includes not only environmental exploitation but also the subjugation of less powerful social groups. Leah Thomas et al. draw this connection directly between these two elements writing that “Social injustice and environmental injustice are fueled by the same flame: the undervaluing, commodification, and exploitation of all forms of life and natural resources, from the smallest blade of grass to those living in poverty and oppressed people worldwide” (*The Intersectional* 3). Pierce's world consistently supports this view, portraying environmental devastation and human cruelty as inseparable forces—linked by the same will to dominate. Daine functions as a translator not just linguistically, but culturally and ethically. She translates both speech and value systems between humans and nonhuman animals. This role goes beyond communication; it becomes a mechanism of resistance and restructuring. Phillips explains, “But Daine also translates for others. In so doing, Daine uses her liminal perspective to level the communication field” (*Female* 128). Importantly, this translation empowers both sides. Daine does not act as a gatekeeper; instead, she leaves humans with a more nuanced understanding of nonhuman perspectives, such as Muara and the riders, and nonhumans with new strategies to communicate and assert themselves within systems built to exclude them.

It is the lack of interspecies teamwork and communication that prevents the Dunlath animals from organizing effectively against human destruction. Flicker, a squirrel who loses his home to deforestation, becomes a loyal companion to Daine in *Wolf-Speaker* and personalizes

the environmental crisis. His presence reframes the destruction not just as ecological loss but as intimate devastation:

“The big fellow here told me they fight tree cutters,” the little rodent said. “If anyone fights them, I will help. Do you know how many of my kind lost homes and feeding grounds this year? The Highbranch family starved, in the growing season, because their nesting places were cut down!” (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 120)

Flicker’s grief gives voice to an entire species’ suffering. By focusing on a named, emotionally expressive individual, Pierce resists the abstraction common in discussions of environmental loss. The devastation is no longer generalized deforestation—it is starvation, displacement, and death on a personal scale. Daine’s sympathy for Flicker exemplifies the narrative’s ethical stance, aligning with a posthuman commitment to foster actions that enhance both environmental and human potential while mitigating harm. The function of Flicker’s story is twofold. First, it builds empathy toward animals as individuals with emotional worlds. Second, it reveals the systemic scale of destruction. Flicker is not an isolated victim but one node in a chain of loss that affects countless species. The interconnection between personal tragedy and global degradation aligns with Sylvia Wynter’s claim that these crises—social, political, environmental—cannot be solved in isolation (qtd McKittrick 25). The fantasy setting again enables immediacy: what occurs over generations in our world happens within pages in Tortall. The speed of destruction dramatizes its urgency, and the reader experiences its scope through Daine’s eyes.

By changing the name, from Agent Orange to bloodrain, Pierce utilizes a safe, removed fantasy space to address these environmental concerns, thereby circumventing potential censorship of these texts and retaining the unique worldbuilding elements in the Tortall Universe that are fantasy. Using Bloodrain as the main threat and weapon of the antagonists in *Wolf-*

*Speaker* allows Pierce to engage with exploring why and how these efforts lead to environmental destruction within a narrative framework. The characters' discussion of the weapon emphasizes its horror:

“By sunrise of the next day, there won't be a living soul in that camp.”

“Or anywhere else for ten miles,” Gardiner said.

[...]

“Bloodrain will kill anything that uses moisture from the river.” The cold, metallic voice was Alamid's. “Animals, plants—it doesn't matter. The zone of destruction will extend nearly five miles on each side of the river, and ten miles downstream.” All the hair on the cat's—Daine's—back stood up.

“For how long?” Belden finished his second cup of wine and poured a third.

“The effects begin to fade after seven years or so,” Gissa replied softly. (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 152–153)

The sheer scope of annihilation described here is chilling: all life, regardless of species, indiscriminately wiped out over miles of land. The narrative explicitly frames bloodrain not as a tactical innovation but as ecological genocide. Tristan attempts to justify its use by appealing to necessity, but the emotional and physical responses from Daine and her companions mark such reasoning as bankrupt. The humans who defend bloodrain are portrayed as cold and detached; Gissa's “soft” voice and Belden's casual refilling of his wine illustrate their inhumanity and presumption of superiority. They are indifferent to suffering because they do not perceive nonhuman life as worthy of protection. The comparison to Agent Orange reinforces this indictment. As David Zierler notes, public reckoning with Agent Orange's effects emerged only after returning soldiers testified to its devastating long-term consequences, both environmental

and physiological (10–11, 21). In *Wolf-Speaker*, Pierce allows readers to witness this horror through Daine’s immediate, embodied fear. Her magic amplifies her sensitivity to animal suffering, making her a conduit through which the reader can viscerally experience the scale of violence. Pierce’s decision for Daine to prevent the use of bloodrain is a fantasy of inaction or alternate action. It is hopeful Feminist Revision of agent orange that is the fantasy of doing the right thing ethically, empathetically, and environmentally rather than the reality of America’s decision to use Agent Orange in the Vietnam war.

Ultimately, it is precisely because Daine operates on the borders of society that she is able to combat such destruction. The Badger God reveals that she has not arrived at Dunlath by accident; she was brought there by design—specifically by the Long Lake pack—because she is uniquely positioned to communicate with and understand both humans and nonhumans. It is therefore her responsibility to use that position to protect the environment from human destruction (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 127). When the Badger God prompts Daine to describe Dunlath, she identifies its abundance and potential as a shared home, not only for humans and The People, but for all beings, including immortals:

“Dunlath is almost perfect, not only for the People, but two-leggers. [...] Maybe even immortals, too, if they wanted to just live here and raise families.”

—*Now you see the shape of our plan. You were brought here to help all of Dunlath, not just wolves.* (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 127, italics in original).

The Badger’s speech explicitly reframes Daine’s task: she is not simply defending a specific species or ecosystem but attempting to protect the conditions for shared existence. Her ability to move between worlds—animal and human, mortal and divine—makes her a necessary figure for such a collective effort. Crucially, Daine’s aim is not to purge humans from the valley but to

create a society built on equity. In the final battle of *Wild*, Onua reminds her that her task is not to eliminate but to equalize—to remake relations between humans and nonhumans, not sever them. The fantasy world’s stakes are literal, but the metaphor is broad: Daine is fighting not for domination, but for coexistence. This vision of interspecies mutuality resonates with Donna Haraway’s assertion that “by the late twentieth century in U.S. scientific culture, the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached [...] language, tool use, social behavior, mental events, nothing really convincingly settles the separation of human and animal” (293). Daine’s experience dramatizes this breach. Her body, her power, and her perspective are already hybrid. She erodes categorical separations not just through theory but through embodiment, offering a radical model of posthuman coexistence. The conclusion of *Wolf-Speaker* reinforces this reimagined future. Daine remains in contact with Maura, who becomes the human leader of Dunlath. In *Page*, the second book of The Protector series, Kel visits Dunlath with her page class and witnesses wolves and humans collaborating. The wolves help Maura recount the battle by moving stones on a map, literally reshaping the human memory of history (Pierce, *Page* 165–166). Their cooperative act of storytelling signals a future where knowledge is constructed across species boundaries.

This is the clearest representation in Pierce’s work of a posthuman environmental ethic: one that includes not only humans and animals but also immortals—the ultimate “Other”. Daine’s project is not simply to speak for the environment, but to dismantle structures of dominance that make such advocacy necessary in the first place. As Phillips argues, “the series is concerned with undoing assumptions, especially honing in on women, animals, magic, power, language, divinity and the real. It is also about an interrogation of the structural inequalities barring folks from power, personal and political” (*Female* 113). Pierce’s ecological vision is thus

inherently political. It does not ask for minor reform or simple preservation. It demands solidarity across differences in order to prevent irreversible harm. In this way, *The Immortals* functions as a Revisionist Feminist text—explicitly engaging not only with environmentalism but with the gendered and racialized ideologies that structure domination itself. The insistence on aligning ecological justice with political liberation affirms that environmental degradation cannot be understood outside systems of social inequality; Pierce’s world demands we read its fantasy through the lens of real-world revolution.

When Pirate’s Swoop is attacked at the end of *Wild*, Daine deliberately prevents nearby animals from joining the defense. She views the conflict as a human affair and chooses to shield her animal companions from risking their lives for her, “Her animal friends wanted to rescue her, but she refused to let them” (Pierce, *Wild* 183). This moment highlights a contradiction in Daine’s ethical framework. Although she constructs her relationships with animals around mutual respect and voluntary collaboration, here she imposes her will unilaterally. Her decision, though made out of care, reflects the same control she critiques in others. It exposes the tensions between intent and impact—between protecting others and denying them agency. Furthermore, Daine’s exertion of magical control is not without consequence. The energy required to override the animals’ instincts drains her both physically and magically, suggesting that such imposition is not only morally questionable but also physically unsustainable. Her actions echo the very hierarchies she resists, in which human judgment supersedes nonhuman will.

Onua, Daine’s mentor, and one of the few characters who consistently recognizes animals as autonomous beings rather than instruments, intervenes to reframe the situation. Her perspective invokes a posthumanist ethic based on mutual interdependence:

“We share this world, Daine. We can’t hold apart from each other—humans and animals are meant to be partners. Aren’t we, Tahoi?” The dog wagged his tail. “He knows. He saved my life, when my husband left me to die. I’ve saved his life since. He can’t cook or sing, and I can’t chase rabbits, but we’re partners all the same”. (Pierce, *Wild* 193)

Onua resists an anthropocentric model in which value is derived from utility or resemblance to human traits. Instead, she offers a vision of cross-species solidarity, where beings rely on one another precisely because of, not despite, their differences. This framing centers survival and care as collective, rather than hierarchical. Pierce, through the character Onua, doesn’t fully engage with the long-term implications of a world where technological advancements might eliminate human reliance on nonhuman animals. Her argument assumes a reciprocal partnership grounded in shared labor and survival—guard dogs, horses, and similar relationships that meet both human and nonhuman needs. Instead, they control and extract from the environment within their domains, establishing and perpetuating a hierarchy in which elite humans occupy the top tier, followed by other humans, while animals, immortals, and the environment form the lowest and most exploited strata. Here, the fantasy setting frames survival from a subaltern perspective, where cross-species cooperation is not idealism but necessity. For the majority of people and creatures in Tortall, environmental threats and political instability are ongoing and inescapable. The mounting climate crisis in our own world lends this fantasy resonance: increasingly, survival is predicated not on individualism or dominance, but on networks of mutual support that cross human and nonhuman boundaries.

Often, children’s literature romanticizes animals and the environment as possessing a simpler or purer mode of life—concerned only with instinctual drives or imagined as free from

human corruption. The Immortals rejects this binary. Daine, because of her deep ties to both the natural world and human society, sees that animal life is neither innocent nor idyllic:

She did not like raids on nests for eggs and nestlings, but her squirrel, crow, and snake friends did just that. Wolves chose scapegoats to bully, hurt, even reject completely from the pack. 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. (Pierce, *Realms* 192)

Rather than upholding a sanitized vision of nature, Pierce presents a complex and morally ambivalent ecosystem. Daine neither condemns these behaviors nor idealizes them. She accepts them as intrinsic to the natural world, recognizing that morality as constructed by humans does not map cleanly onto nonhuman behavior. Still, Daine grapples with the ethics of her own role within this world.

Daine's capacity to shift between human and animal form intensifies these questions. Although she never judges predation in animals, she must continually confront the implications of her power as both participant in and observer of these worlds. In *Wild*, she insists on continuing to eat meat, justifying it within her own ethical framework:

“Some of my best friends are hunters. I'm a hunter. You eat what you're made to eat. I just make sure I don't use any of my power to bring game to me, and I stop listening for animal voices with my magic [...] otherwise my hunting would be—dirty. Vile”. (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 32)

Here, Daine draws a distinction between natural predation and magical coercion. What she seeks to avoid is not hunting itself, but the abuse of power—the imposition of magical control over

animals for her own gain. However, by *Emperor*, her relationship to meat consumption has shifted. After spending time in animal forms, she is no longer able to eat most wild game, though she still consumes domesticated animals (Pierce, *Emperor* 119). This is again revised in *Realms* when Daine discusses her diet with her father, the God of the Hunt, where Daine does not eat wild game either (Pierce, *Realms* 37).

This change is not framed as a political decision, but as an embodied response to her experience of nonhuman life. The implication is clear: having literally occupied the bodies of animals, Daine can no longer engage in certain forms of consumption without violating her own sense of bodily memory and empathy. This shift aligns with broader social changes in the 1990s, as public discourse around meat consumption began to change. In 1991, the U.S. Department of Agriculture replaced its meat-centric food groups with the food pyramid, which emphasized grains, vegetables, and fruits. By 1997, the American Dietetic Association formally recognized vegetarianism as a nutritionally valid choice (Craig and Mangels 3, Nestle 1). Daine's evolution mirrors a growing cultural awareness of ethical consumption and its entanglements with power. Her discomfort is not rooted in ideology but in experience: she has lived as the Other. As Curry writes, "This crisis is reflected in the contentious relationships between the young protagonists of the novels and their social and ecological surroundings, relationships that are enacted on the discursive site of their own bodies" (15). Daine's body becomes the location where ideology is challenged and reformed. By moving across species boundaries, she becomes incapable of maintaining the same logic of consumption, control, and detachment that structures the dominant human worldview. Her transformation—physical, magical, and ethical—offers a model for rethinking human exceptionalism and creating a more just, posthuman ecology.

Through identification with Daine as a protagonist, readers are likewise drawn into the natural world—not as an object of passive admiration, but as a system in which the boundaries between human and nonhuman collapse. As Curry writes, “Identification with the natural world [...] serves to allow humanity to perceive no boundaries between the human and nonhuman worlds, and thus to treat defence of the environment as self-defence” (161). Daine’s body becomes the primary site of this identification. Her wild magic inadvertently, or intentionally as in *Lady*, bestows enhanced intelligence and communication abilities on animals in her vicinity (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 10), demonstrating how proximity to her disrupts the assumed distinction between human and animal cognition. This transformation is not portrayed as an imposition or violation, but as an expansion of potential—an ecological entanglement that draws animals into new capacities while leaving their autonomy intact. Daine does not force evolution or control these creatures through magical dominance; rather, she coexists in a liminal space that enables others’ growth. It is through her presence, not her commands, that change occurs.

In *Wolf-Speaker*, she is summoned by the Long Lake wolf pack to confront the environmental degradation of the Dunlath valley. The wolves’ claim to the valley, rooted in ancestral memory and moral reasoning, directly challenges the anthropocentric logic of human dominion. By centering the wolves’ perspective and aligning Daine with them, the narrative not only grants legitimacy to nonhuman agency but also challenges readers to question property, hierarchy, and resource exploitation. Daine’s story thus functions not merely as fantasy, but as an intervention—one that exposes the systems of control at the heart of environmental degradation and insists that any path toward justice must include all beings. The political urgency of this vision is what gives Pierce’s ecology its force. It is not enough for Daine to sympathize with animals; she must live as they do, suffer as they suffer, and translate that experience into action.

Her wild magic renders the nonhuman legible—not by assimilating animals into human categories, but by destabilizing those categories altogether. In doing so, the narrative enacts what Curry defines as the ecofeminist imperative:

By investing agency in the natural world, ecofeminists argue for the necessity of transformative social and political action to re-conceptualise humanity's relationship with nonhuman others, as a relationship based not on degrees of separation [sic] but on mutually agential cohabitation. (45)

Daine's transformation is not only magical, but a reorientation of identity, ethics, and politics—toward a future where survival depends on solidarity and shared vulnerability rather than dominance and division. Daine's deep entanglement with the nonhuman is further complicated by Pierce's introduction of immortal creatures, whose presence destabilizes the boundaries between human and nonhuman and extends the narrative's interrogation of agency, ethics, and political responsibility.

## IMMORTALS AND MYTHOLOGY

The following section examines two key examples in which Pierce draws on the myth of harpies to create her own hybrid creatures—stormwings—while significantly reimagining their form and function as inspired from the classical Greek harpy. As Pierce explains:

I gave them a different purpose in my world: that of defiling the battlefield dead. [...] And I made them both sexes, because it made no sense to me that any creature would be only one sex. Daine finds them horrifying and disgusting, as any creature that is a combination

of metal and flesh and lives on carrion would be to a girl who is completely woven into the natural world. (Pierce, *Realms* 224)

By rewriting the myth of the harpy—traditionally depicted as a female-coded creature of vengeance and defilement—Pierce engages in an act of mythic revision that challenges both the gendered legacy of monstrosity and the anthropocentric binaries that shape human-nonhuman relations (Zimmerman 83-84). This kind of myth-making, particularly in children’s and YA Fantasy literature, is not merely decorative. As Wood notes, “The myths surrounding these creatures are mutable, changing and developing over time, but they continue to shape our perception of reality and impose meaning on the ways we interpret the world” (*Fantastic* 169). Pierce’s reworking of harpy mythology functions in this exact way: it not only contributes to the internal logic of *Tortall* but also encourages readers to interrogate how imagined creatures reflect and reinforce real-world ideologies. Stormwings are not simply enemies to be defeated; their existence provokes uncomfortable questions about war, memory, and the boundaries of the natural.

Boria Sax’s assertion that “every real animal is imaginary” and “every imaginary animal is real” (Ch. 3, Sec. 5, pars. 3–4) further clarifies the conceptual weight of creatures like stormwings. Nonhuman animals in YA Female Fantasy are fully real within the worlds of their narratives, yet in our reality, our understanding of them is always shaped and limited by human imagination, narrative perspective, and characterization. This tension underscores the ways literature mediates our engagement with nonhuman experience, allowing us to apprehend it indirectly rather than directly. Sax argues that imaginary animals serve as “a sort of ‘second self’ for an individual human being, an association of people or even the entire human race” (Ch. 3, Sec. 5, par. 4). In this sense, stormwings are not just monsters—they are mirrors. They expose

the violence that human society attempts to bury, both literally and symbolically. As figures composed of flesh and metal, living on carrion, they refuse to allow heroes to cleanly separate the glory of battle from its carnage.

Pierce's engagement with myth is thus both narrative and ideological. Her decision to reimagine harpies as gender-diverse creatures with a morally ambiguous purpose reflects a broader Revisionist Feminist project that recurs across her work. In destabilizing the gendered assumptions embedded in classical mythology, Pierce simultaneously disrupts the alignment of monstrosity with femininity and reconfigures Otherness in more complex terms. These mythic revisions position the Tortall Universe—as argued throughout this thesis—as a deliberately constructed imaginative space. It is a world that is wondrous and familiar, but also capable of staging difficult encounters with violence, monstrosity, and the limits of human-centered ethics. While in contrast, Pierce does, however, leave the Minotaurs/Tauros all male, but she does so precisely because Daine points out the absurdity in creating a species of fantastic creature without a natural mate (Pierce, *Realms* 56). This is made explicit in *Spy's* through Daine's description of their species:

These are only male. They were born from women's fear of rape. I told my da it was wrong that they were without women of their own kind. He told the Great Gods, who said there was nothing they could do. According to Mithros, it's against the nature of tauroses' being for females of their kind to exist, because of why they came to be. (Pierce, *Spy's* 192)

This explanation positions tauroses, like stormwings, as mythological hybrids born from human fear. But whereas stormwings emerge as a commentary on war and industrial violence, Tauroses are framed as a static reflection of sexual violence—specifically, a gendered fear of rape. This

framing is troubling. While their origins are meant to represent “women’s fear”, the violence enacted by Tauroses is itself gendered in problematic ways: they only target women, reinforcing the reductive association of female bodies with sexual victimhood. The mythology not only erases male and nonbinary experiences of sexual violence, but also essentializes rape as a biologically heterosexual act, despite the Tauros’ capacity for brutal assault being anatomically indiscriminate.

In *Wolf-Speaker*, when Daine witnesses an ogre being punished, the narrative refuses to reduce the creature to an object of justified violence. Instead, it presents the scene as one of cruelty and injustice, “The ogre who had fallen was on his feet again, blue liquid – his blood – coursing down his back in stripes. ‘I don’t care if they are ogres [...] That’s slavery down there, and we aren’t a slave country’” (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker*31). This moment makes explicit the series’ refusal to frame even its monstrous figures as outside the scope of ethical concern. The ogre’s suffering is visible, and Daine’s moral stance is clear: this is not discipline or battle, but slavery. Although *The Immortals* does not explicitly include orcs, it engages with the same fantasy conventions that construct the orc as a racialized, unassimilable Other. In much of traditional fantasy, orcs are not merely enemies—they are biologically villainous figures whose destruction requires no reflection. As Mariana Rios Maldonado writes:

The orc has long functioned as a vessel for Western fears of racial and cultural otherness. It is not simply an enemy—it is the racialized fantasy of the unassimilable, the irredeemable outsider whose destruction is both justified and narratively satisfying. (78)

Additionally, Young foundationally argues that “Orcs embody racial Otherness which is always subject to fantasies of control either by extermination or imminent, albeit always unachieved, assimilation” (*Habits* 108). These tropes position the “Other” outside of moral complexity. Their

function is to be killed, not understood. The Immortals challenges this framing. Its monstrous beings—immortals like ogres, stormwings, tauros, and spidrens—are not symbols of evil, but socially constructed threats. The ogres in *Wolf-Speaker* echo the familiar imagery of traditional fantasy monsters—grotesque, powerful—but Pierce refuses to render them morally expendable. When the wolves speak of ogres, it is not with mythic horror but pragmatic caution: they are neighbors, not monsters (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 31). Rather than using these creatures to reaffirm human moral superiority, Pierce insists on their ambiguity. They are not assimilated into human society, but neither are they satisfying enemies whose destruction resolves narrative tension.

In contrast, stormwings function not as a passive embodiment of fear, but as an active ethical revision of myth. They are designed not to reflect human anxieties back at the reader but to interrogate the systems—ritual, war, purity, and human exceptionalism—that perpetuate violence. They rewrite the myth of the harpy to include a code of ethics, as is later revealed that stormwings only desecrate the bodies of those who fall in battle (Pierce, *Lady* 202). They violate the sanctity of human death not to indulge in chaos, but to undermine the moral hierarchies that humans have built to justify killing. Their hybrid bodies—metal, flesh, carrion, and flight—exist as a rejection of fixed categories. They defy human narratives of naturalness and monstrosity alike.

As Attebery writes, “Myths are not timeless; like the individuals who perform them, they reflect historical processes, and they change over time as the cultures that maintain them change. They are not universal, for the full significance of a myth depends on a web of associations and social interactions shared by storyteller and listeners” (*Stories* 50). Pierce intentionally subverts the myth of harpies to reflect growing concerns over technological warfare and anthropocentrism. Stormwings evoke deep discomfort with the collapse of boundaries between

the natural and industrial world: they are grotesque mixtures of metal and flesh. They are also the only fantasy creature in the Tortall Universe to be part metal, underscoring their origins in *human* myth since refining metals largescale is, after all, the underpinning to human technological progress. Daine perceives them as a jarring hybrid of machine, animal, and human.<sup>16</sup> As the series progresses, Daine begins to question why the immortals returned to the mortal world—whether they were always meant to be there—and whether it was humans, not nature, who separated them. Among all the immortals, stormwings are particularly troubling. They are intelligent but foul; their purpose is to prey not on bodies, but on symbols of human suffering:

He says they live for destruction and the fear that destruction provides. They eat only the products of war, famine, and disease—the bodies of the dead. They drink only the energy of human suffering and fury. They’ve had a long fast—four hundred years’ worth, in the Divine Realms. (Pierce, *Wild* 15)

The fact that within the Tortall Universe, stormwings go from legend, to existing only in the divine realms, and then to finally appearing in the mortal realms is a revisionist act that explores the shifting perception of myths throughout time and society. Through her connection to animals, Daine recognizes that the absence of a predator for humans may itself be unnatural. As disturbing as they are, stormwings might represent a necessary counterbalance to human destructiveness. While they do not literally consume human flesh, the language Pierce uses—“eat” and “drink”—suggests reading them through the register of predator and prey. Daine’s shift in perspective is slow and uneasy; she continues to struggle with feelings of disgust, and even

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<sup>16</sup> While metals predate a period of history that most scholars define as the start of the Anthropocene, as Pierce is writing in the 1990s, metal is generally symbolic of technology.

characters like Kel and Aly use “Stormwing” as a slur (Pierce, *Choice* 134). For most humans in the Tortall Universe, stormwings remain figures of repulsion and threat.

Pierce reflects directly on this tension in the afterword to *Wolf-Speaker*, recounting how her husband tells her that Daine’s reactions to stormwings are racially coded. As he told Pierce:

Daine comes off as a racist. She’s snarling about how Stormwings are unnatural and they shouldn’t exist. [...] It was okay for her to be angry with Stormwings in the first book [...] But if you’re going to keep writing Daine and Stormwings, she has to find some way to like them. You’re going to have to make them people, or she’s going to stay a racist.

(Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 208)

This exchange reveals a central ethical dilemma in the narrative: there is a distinction between being angry at specific actions and essentializing an entire species as evil. Rikash, a stormwing who becomes central to Daine’s moral reckoning, forces her to confront this, “You are quick to judge us, stormwing killer [...] Too quick, for a human. You come from a race that spends more time murdering your own kind than do all the immortals put together, yet you insist you are better than us” (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 103). The Tortall Universe again functions as “removed” and therefore “safe” place to explore divisive topics, such as prejudice while remaining firmly relevant despite its fantasy aspects.

Eventually, Daine defends the stormwings before the gods themselves. She insists that beings should not be punished for the way they were created: “Stormwings aren’t humans. They aren’t gods. They are what they were made to be. If you punish them for that, you may as well punish yourselves for what you are. [...] You’ll forgive me for saying so, but you don’t look like you’d care to punish yourselves” (Pierce, *Realms* 192). If gods mold beings for a purpose, they

cannot condemn them for fulfilling it. Her argument is met not with punishment but pride from the Badger, telling her “*That’s my Kit*”—her stance validated by divine approval, not human norms (Pierce, *Realms* 192-193).

Daine’s drawing for the entry of stormwings in her guide to immortals included in *Spy’s* is one of the most beautiful and detailed illustrations in the collection (Pierce, *Spy’s* 189).



Fig. 2. (Pierce, *Spy’s* 189)

While there is a faint image of blood on the metal wings, there is no hint of gore, exposed genitalia, or bone charms. Rather, the image reflects Daine’s respect for Rikash and for stormwings more generally. It deliberately leans into the awe and reverence of their existence, positioning stormwings not as grotesque, but as majestic and narratively essential beings. Her notes are free of sarcasm or judgment. The entry is meant to be read by young palace students learning about Immortals, suggesting not only tolerance but the kind of full social integration of

posthumanist thinking Daine now embraces. In her new role as Tortall's expert on immortal behavior, Daine revises the prevailing myth of stormwings in the official guide, portraying them not as inherently evil but as beings not dominated by humans. In doing so, she enacts a Feminist Revision that challenges and reshapes their representation within Tortallan society.

Feelings of hatred, prejudice, and fear are not abstract to Pierce's readers. They are lived experiences. But Pierce refuses to allow her narrative or her protagonist to rest there. The horror that Daine and the reader feel must be worked through. Stormwings, like religion, are not simply part of fantasy world-building, they are deliberate interventions—mythic embodiments of violence, monstrosity, and ethical reckoning. Pierce's in-universe response to human violence is not retributive justice but to confront the reader with disgust: stormwings defile sacred burial rites, which, though diverse across cultures, are nearly universal to all human cultures. The horror they evoke is not from biological hybridity alone—as in the case of Uusoae—but from their fusion of flesh and metal. Pierce emphasizes that their metallicity marks them not just as part-animal or part-human, but as part-human-construction. They are hybrids of the industrial, the historical, and the embodied—a challenge to anthropocentric purity. Finally, by returning to the issue of stormwings across *Wild* and *Wolf-Speaker*, Pierce underscores that these creatures are not static moral symbols like Tolkien's orcs, but dynamic, morally ambiguous beings. They are mythic but not mythologized as evil. In doing so, Pierce compels her readers to reconsider the limits of empathy, the meaning of monstrosity, and the possibility of a posthuman ethics rooted not in purity or hierarchy, but in coexistence.

## CONCLUSION

Daine also becomes legendary after her series, but unlike the Tortallan's public reaction to Alanna as either heroic or scandalous, many people in Tortall are terrified of Daine (Pierce, *Test* 138). It seems that Alanna's transgression of the gender binary is more socially acceptable than Daine's embodiment of the nonhuman animal, as seen in the refugee's reactions to Daine versus Kel, another socially controversial female knight (Pierce, *Lady* 134). However, through Neal and Kel's own exceptional respect for animals and humans, Kel does befriend Daine, who reappears as a mythic figure in *The Protector* series. While Alanna is depicted in *The Immortals* as happily existing both as mother and King's Champion, Daine is still very much happy and in love with Numair, but also seems more world-weary, flitting frantically across the kingdom in attempt to fulfill the King's wishes and her own, unspecified missions (Pierce, *Squire* 137). Alanna's disagreements against Jonathan as a King are not revealed until Kel's story, and still they are muted by her removal from court.

Daine's effect on Tortall at large is potentially even more transformative than Alanna's, as Daine is slowly causing all of the animals in Tortall to become more intelligent and better able to articulate their individual will through her "leaking" of magic. When Kel and Raoul meet a group of centaurs, led by the male centaur Greystreak, they call horses their "slaves" (Pierce, *Squire* 45). However, Peachblossom and Raoul's horse, who are geldings, express their distaste of the centaurs of their own volition:

But they're geldings, Kel thought, flabbergasted. Geldings don't face down stallions!

"Get these Slaves out of my way," snarled Greystreak.

"That's the interesting thing about having the Wildmage about." Raoul was relaxed and

cheery. “Palace animals are changing. Soon most will work for us only if they want to”.  
(Pierce, *Squire* 46-47)

Projecting another fifty years into the future of Tortall from the end of *The Protector* is to imagine a radically new posthuman society where all creatures can communicate despite species and where nonhuman animals gain enough intelligence to understand how to disrupt human structures. While there is no direct answer to replicating this in our world, this magic underlies the growing ideology that, in order to address anthropocentrism, something beyond our current methods of imagining what it means to be human must take place. Ecofeminism and Daine’s role as a beyond-human protector, in addition to her own personal journey, model an alternative form of relationality—one rooted in empathy, hybridity, and accountability. As Thomas et al. write, “The era of a single-savior, top-down, siloed approach to change is over. The old way of thinking about environmentalism as a single, distinct issue is long gone, because people are seeing that the solutions to our problems come from within ourselves, and from within our communities” (*The Intersectional* 7). The *Immortals* series is an act of Revisionist Feminism, one that returns to its own world to critique and expand it. With the introduction of the immortals, Pierce reimagines a world no longer governed by anthropocentric order; with the re-characterization of the stormwings, she revises the monstrous to hold complexity and political voice; and in *Daine*, she offers a revision to *Alanna*—where *Alanna*’s journey reshaped gender roles within human institutions, *Daine*’s power challenges the very boundaries of species, nation, and the human itself. Her magic is not an allegory of control but of cohabitation. *Daine* also exemplifies the strength and power in community and empathy, regardless of the object of her compassion and respect.

Through fantasy that engages critically with its own tropes, Pierce invites readers to imagine new ways of being in the world—ways that refuse hierarchy, embrace ambiguity, and prioritize the interconnectedness of all life. Daine remains consistent in her posthumanist ideology in the later series and throughout the Tortall Universe. She helps Kel to befriend the temperamental Peachblossom after Kel promises not to abuse him, hearing Peachblossom’s positive opinion on Kel, and after learning that Kel does not want Daine to alter Peachblossom’s personhood with magic (Pierce, *Test* 78). More complicated are Daine’s actions at Haven, where she changes the animals to be more “human” and intelligent, an action she knows will not lead to greater happiness, but she justifies as the animals’ own desires to help Kel:

I did them no favours, changing them, but they wanted it. I made sure of that. They want to help you, those animals who know you. They want to keep you and most of them that live here safe. [...] And the wild birds said it would be interesting, to see how two-leggers think. I wonder if they’ll feel that way in a year. I hope they like it, because I can’t undo what I’ve done. (Pierce, *Lady* 137)

Daine’s refusal to change Peachblossom’s nature aligns with her broader posthumanist belief in respecting the intrinsic qualities of nonhuman beings, recognizing that scars and temperament are part of who they are. But this is complicated somewhat because Daine justifies the change at Haven by ensuring it is what the animals wanted, her uncertainty about their future satisfaction highlights the tension between consent and consequence. Daine struggles to balance her ideals with the practical demands of her world, showing that even with good intentions, altering the natural state of beings can have unforeseen, possibly regrettable, outcomes.

Finally, Daine, is pregnant by the time of *Choice*, and her baby constantly shapeshifts while in the womb (Pierce, *Choice* 16) and after birth, even between sexes:

Sarra walked over and reached into the hammock blanket, pulling out a wolf puppy. It turned instantly into a young giraffe, then a gosling. [...] “Now see here, youngster [...] You’ll exhaust yourself before you’re ten. Enough. Choose a shape and a sex and stick to it [...] Five years at least. Learn the limits of one body”. (Pierce, *Choice* 229)

There are suggestive queer readings in Sarra’s choice of words as “right now” even which suggests a relation to sex and gender seemingly opposed to those explored in Chapter 1 in *The Song and Provost’s Dog*. Beyond Daine’s role as a translator and conduit for wild magic, the inclusion of immortals in the Tortall Universe, and her unintentional leakage of that magic, her eventual pregnancy—though it occurs outside the narrative—marks a radical revision in the worldbuilding of Tortall. While Alanna’s legacy is shaped through her children, her legendary status, and the community of female heroism she helps establish, Daine’s legacy is biological and transformative. Her descendants carry a generational magic that surpasses her own. Since Sarra never mentions Daine shifting while pregnant, readers can infer that her children possess even greater wild magic. When Daine is elderly and her magic has permeated Tortall for decades—possibly over half a century—her legacy suggests a radically reimagined future: one in which immortals are fully integrated into both human society and the natural world. This radical transformation is not fully realized within the text. Daine remains preoccupied with world-altering events and the reemergence of immortals, leaving her largely disconnected from the everyday lives of Tortall’s people. Reading the Tortall Universe as Revisionist Feminist perspective focuses on Hume’s definition as asking the readers to imagine into the future at the end of the narrative. In contrast, Kel’s story represents a major departure—not only from the magical exceptionalism of Alanna and Daine but from all of Pierce’s Tortall protagonists—as she is the only one without any magical ability. The Protector is grounded in the ordinary: it

focuses on daily life in Tortall and stands as the most directly critical of systemic structures within any of the Tortall series.

# Chapter 3:

## Bullying, Allyship, & Heroism in The Protector of the Small

### INTRODUCTION

This Chapter primarily focuses on analyzing *The Protector* as a series and its function as a continuation of Pierce's Feminist Revision in the Tortall Universe. In this chapter, I draw especially on texts from across the Tortall Universe, more so than in the previous chapters because Kel's series revisits and revises the theme of female knighthood. *The Protector* also expands the social and political issues that Pierce explores throughout the Tortall Universe, including masculinity, heroism, the body, and the connections between neomedievalism and the U.S. This Introduction explores Kel's qualities that distinguish her from Alanna and Diane and from Female Fantasy heroes more broadly. The following section, *Return to World*, examines the significance of Pierce's decision to return to the world of the Tortall Universe for a third time and how *The Protector* reflects the more an increasing attention to critical aspects in Revisionist Feminism.

The section *Girl, From Start to Finish* examines how Kel's experience of her body and knighthood training differs significantly from Alanna's cross-dressing experience, highlighting the heightened scrutiny and bullying Kel faces because she trains openly as a girl. *Masculinity* explores how Pierce crafts and challenges both toxic and transformative examples of masculinity through characterization and narrative actions. The section *Heroism* examines the function of Tortallan Chivalry and how it is representative of American constructions of the Medieval past. The subsequent section, *Body*, examines how Kel's gender is understood through her physical

appearance and capabilities and Kel's own relationship with her (female) body. The final section before the chapter's conclusion, *Neomedievalism Realism*, builds on the Introduction, Chapter 1, and the preceding sections to examine how Pierce engages with Female Fantasy by incorporating depictions of realistic sexual violence against women in the series. Finally, the Conclusion of this chapter reviews how *The Protector* exemplifies Pierce's Revisionist Feminist practices.

The *Protector* quartet marks a shift in Pierce's Tortall Universe by emphasizing that sustained political engagement is essential to prevent feminist progress from stagnating. Unlike *The Immortals*, which broadens the scope of political engagement by introducing new issues, *The Protector* focuses not only on expanding the representation of realistic YA concerns and the cultural structures shaping Western ideals of humanity, but also on directly critiquing and revising earlier political efforts and feminist advancements within Tortall itself. Through ostracization, fear, and social pressure, no girl has tried, or more accurately, has been allowed to try, to become a knight in ten long years since Alanna won her shield, showing that while the law may have changed, social change has not followed. Kel, who is lesser nobility than Alanna and who lacks Daine's powerful magic, sees much more of the social divisions still plaguing Tortallan society than either of the previous protagonists. Alanna, while facing the difficulty of hiding her sex, benefits from keeping her gender hidden from her fellow pages, who treat her as an equal because they are either unaware or one of the few accepting friends who know the truth.

Alanna is an incredibly powerful mage, a close friend and previous lover of the King, and god-chosen. Daine is a demi-god with a relationship to every living nonhuman animal, married to the most powerful mage in the world, and best friends with the Queen, King, and Alanna. Kel does not have such extreme privilege: she is an outsider and "the girl" from the moment she begins her page training, without magical ability, substantial wealth, or powerful friends. Not

only does *The Protector* as a series expand the critical issues Pierce explores within the Tortall Universe, Kel as a character also more directly engages with criticizing injustice—either by her actions or her internal narration—but her perspective directly challenges characters from previous series. *The Protector* considers progressive leaders who cannot make changes as quickly as younger generations desire. It is a story about the political struggle behind change, considering ingrained bigotry, classism, privilege, and the slow and painstaking process of progress. May recognizes both this shift within the narrative and the metatextual changes that affect our reading of the series. May writes, “within the books and beyond them, Kel’s decentralization reevaluates Alanna’s hyperindividualism” in the same way previous feminist scholarship was limited in its intersectionality—white, and middle class (73). Reading Kel’s story when it was published or within its in-universe chronology does not diminish the series’ effect backwards through to the other texts in the Tortall Universe. Kel, as a character, actively demonstrates critical engagement with the past in a way that both recognizes accomplishments in their historical context while critiquing its limitations in thought. As Wolf writes,

Additional stories [in an imaginary world] can also recontextualize the works that appear before them: new information can change our frame of reference; characters can be revealed to have different motivations or even to be lying; and different points of view can change how we understand characters and story events. (*Building* 285)

*The Protector* as a whole serves as a meaningful, funny, realistic, and serious engagement with previous feminist movements—and their relative successes and failures from Kel’s point of view, but it also demonstrates Pierce’s growing and shifting relationship to her own texts and the Tortall Universe, her willingness to engage with her own previous limitations, and a reflection of the world as Pierce was experiencing and writing the series. Kel’s dedication to fighting

inequality and recognizing her own prejudices, explored more fully through class hierarchies in the proceeding chapter, exemplifies Revisionist Feminism.

Young adults who had read Alanna's series when it was published would be entering into adulthood and becoming further engaged in politics by the time of Kel. Young adult readers new to Pierce's Tortall Universe were coming into adulthood during a transformative period of American history. American culture shifted drastically in the time between *Test* (1999) and *Lady* (2002). 1999 saw an economic boom in America as the result of then-president Bill Clinton's neoliberal economics and the explosion of new technologies (LaFeber 436,443, 434). *Test* was published in an era of unprecedented growth and hope for America's future as a nation. There was also a movement to expand rights in the wake of increased marginalization of Americans by Reagan-era government policies and economics because of their race, class, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, and/or sexuality. However, the political and cultural landscape when *Lady* was published had shifted drastically to a post 9/11 America. The very structure of American democracy was shaken by the Bush v Gore court case, the anthrax attacks demonstrated the vulnerability of average Americans to deadly bioweapon attacks (an almost magic-spell powder in its danger), the bankruptcy of U.S. airways revealed the instability of economics and money with a rise of conservative regressionist ideologies and the beginning of the "War on Terror", which would entangle the U.S. for decades and to this day remains a cultural shift in America to greater fear of the foreign Other (LaFeber 417, 449-451).

By the end of the series, Kel is managing a refugee camp on the border between warring nations. The views of Alanna, Daine, and Kel about Jonathan as a person and ruler reflect their social positions and the cultural values of their respective series. Alanna sees him as a charming and familiar friend; Daine views him as a noble symbol of progressive government. But for Kel,

Jonathan represents the failure of that promise—an aloof and compromised ruler who allows systemic inequality to persist, embodying the older generation’s betrayal of the young. The Protector also introduces the series’ more complex moral ecology within which everyone will have to make difficult decisions about what they are willing to compromise on. It is a publicly known rumor that Jonathan prevented his daughter from becoming the first female knight after Alanna (Pierce, “Tortall Universe”, *Squire* 133). Kel’s father tells Kel that leadership and power are incompatible with uncompromising dedication to equality; consequently, Kel thinks at one point that “Maybe her father was right, and good kings weren’t always good men” (Pierce, *Squire* 133). This relativism represents a drastic shift in Jonathan’s characterization from the previous series. In *The Protector*, heroes of the previous two series have become people of power in Tortallan society and now find themselves in the position of upholding unjust systems rather than heroically dismantling them. Additionally, May writes that “Just as *The Song of the Lioness* reflects the incarnation of feminism at work during its historical moment, *The Protector of the Small* typifies feminism’s more recent contours” (65). She further characterizes the series as “revisionary” and an effort to expand accountability and “implicitly or explicitly ask the question, ‘what now?’” (May 65). The Protector series is an attempt to understand, or at least to ask, “what now” not only of Tortall, but how revolutionary feminism within a specific time can become less revolutionary throughout time. Kel’s narrative journey is a feminist revision of Alanna’s and Daine’s journeys, and *The Protector*, as a piece of literature, functions as Pierce’s own revisions to the structure of the Tortall Universe. Revisionist Feminism is fundamentally an expansion of the perspectives considered in feminism.

Meanwhile other adult characters who return in this series, such as Buri, Roaul, and Daine, have changed with the times too and often find themselves at odds with these new,

relatively progressive leaders of Tortallan society such as Jonathan. The divide between characters such as Raoul and Jonathan, previously childhood friends, are examples that adults either stay stuck in the politics of their youth or grow alongside the issues. They demonstrate that it is possible to carry Revisionist Feminist ideals into adulthood, even when those ideals take on more complex and sometimes opaque forms. Pierce's representation of Tortall in this series marks a shift in tone from the previous two series that is much less fantastical and feels more stark and somber—the inclusion of sexual violence against women and the villainy of Blayce, the antagonist in *Lady*, are two examples of this. I also examine class hierarches in *The Protector* in the context of the wider revisions of specific themes throughout the Tortall Universe closely in Chapter 4. As I expand on the conversation on heroism begun in Chapter 1 in the section on Heroism. Kel is the least fantastical of the three main Tortall protagonists, and her enemies are not covert noble rebellions or extremely powerful mages intent on Tortall's destruction as with the previous series, but rather her enemies are more systematic, such as poverty (desperate bandits), bigotry (Joren), systems of injustice (Lalasa), classism (Tobe), war (Scanra), and personal fear (heights).

Finally, revising previous feminist movements does not diminish their relative progress in history, but use these previous strides for equality as the basis to fight for greater inclusivity. Kel is not in competition with Alanna or Daine but rather looks up to them and hopes to use their example and inroads into being accepted by a portion of Tortallan society to address the issues Kel currently identifies as negatively affecting equality. All feminists should be lucky enough to grow old and find the ideas of their youth outdated. It means that feminism as a critical framework has continued evolving to broaden its perspective and expand the complexity and intersection of issues considered. Moreover, Kel's characterization as a relatively normal,

nonmagical, non-divine, protagonist offers a more realistic, and, therefore, radical example of female heroism in Pierce's Tortall Universe. Aisenberg's associations with the "new ordinary heroine" seems to better fit Kel rather than either the exceptional Alanna or Daine.<sup>17</sup>

## RETURN TO WORLD

The Protector marks not just the return to Tortall for a third time, but a return to the female knight, a direct revision and comparison to Alanna's knight journey. Kel's narrative often embraces the messy with Kel taking strong moral stances against evil, but also having to make personal concessions or compromises to embody the "ideal" girl page. Kel is acutely aware of her perception amongst the public and holds herself to an incredibly high standard in her behavior. This is a result of her childhood in the Yamani islands but is solidified into her personality because she is aware that the future success of female knighthood in Tortall may depend on her.<sup>18</sup> A 2002 article notes that even though women of the previous two generations had entered traditionally masculine professions in greater numbers, these inclusions did not result in a higher percentage of women in positions of power at the turn of the century (Goldin and Katz 731-732). As Rory Dicker et al. wrote in 2016, "the fact remains that women are dramatically underrepresented in decision-making, power-brokering positions" (4). So, while women may be breaking into previously dominated-male fields during this period of history, their representation among leadership positions in the workforce has not increased significantly in response to this. There may be the appearance of greater access to opportunity and equality,

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<sup>17</sup> See my YA framework in Chapter 2 for the friction between real young adult experiences and adult fears about transformative children and young adult fiction.

<sup>18</sup> I am in the midst of editing an article for publication on interrogating Pierce's use and inspiration of Japanese culture in the construction of Yamanis.

but the lack of actual equality in representation suggests that there are other systems in place that prevent women from accessing these spaces.

Women in leadership roles, receiving equal pay, obtaining legal equality, expressing their individual identities without fear, and access to sexual freedom both socially and medically were still (and still are) incredibly divisive and unresolved feminist issues (Rhode 27). Kel's story is also Pierce's attempt to more directly engage with worldbuilding elements that identify and challenge existing power structures on a more systemic level. The depiction of war is much more in-depth in *The Protector* than in either *The Song*, where Alanna is not on the front line in *Hand*, or *The Immortals*, where most of the battles happen between the books. This series appears at a pivotal moment in American history with the rise of new conservative politics in the first Bush administration and the September 9/11 attacks that occurred while Pierce was writing *Lady*. Even more striking, Pierce was actually in New York city during the 9/11 attacks:

I was in New York on September 11, 2001, working on *Lady Knight*. I'd actually stopped work on September 10 right before Kel gets the news that her refugee camp has been raided and destroyed (a segment I had planned for three or four years for this book). By the time I had a chance to write again, I had forgotten where I stopped work. It was a horrible shock, opening the file, to realize where I was, and to see what I would have to write, and what Kel had to face. We did it, but it was the hardest twenty pages of my career, as Kel searched the rubble for the dead and my city struggled to make sense of what was going on. I could only feed that into *Lady Knight*. (Kunzel and Fichtelberg 261)

9/11 is often characterized as a turning point in contemporary American politics that led to greater hatred in political rhetoric (Kaplan 1). As a cultural event, it is especially significant to view depictions of 9/11 in YA literature: "Because 9/11 is often read as a moment when the U.S.

lost its innocence, the prevalence of coming-of-age stories in 9/11 fiction makes inherent sense” (Lampert 111). Jo Lampert additionally notes that despite the political reaction to 9/11, YA literature uses depictions of the event to urge for greater kindness and community (117). Pierce echoes the impact of community rather than hatred in the foreword to *Lady*: “To the people of New York City, I always knew the great sacrifice and kindness my neighbours are capable of, but now the rest of the country knows, too” (Pierce, *Lady* Dedication).

Kel’s description of discovering the dead refugees in Haven poignantly mirrors the searches conducted in New York City in the days that followed. As she observes, “Haven was in ruins. Every building showed signs of attack. Doors were gone or hung crazily from their hinges. Shutters had been chopped off windows. Smoke streaked every opening”, and continues, “Others on the walkway had lost their heads or an arm or both legs. Blood had dried everywhere on the wall and on the planks under Kel’s feet. [...] The stench coated her tongue, throat, and nostrils” (Pierce, *Lady* 199, 201). However, when Kel crosses the border immediately after this attack, she recognizes the similarities across the border rather than being struck by any differences. The landscape and environment are unaffected by arbitrary human separations. In fact, she rescues Scanrans who are likewise the victim of Blayce, the antagonist of the fourth book, and his murdering and exploitative practices (Pierce, *Lady* 307). Through Kel, Pierce challenges the divisive narratives that arose in American politics after the 9/11 attacks. This focus on communal responsibility reflects a longstanding trend in feminist and YA literature, which often resists individualism and emphasizes collective solidarity in response to violence and injustice.

## GIRL, FROM START TO FINISH

At the start of *The Protector*, Alanna is excited that the public will be able to see a girl train to become a knight: “Keladry of Mindelan would not have to hide her sex for eight years as Alanna had done. Keladry would prove to the world that girls could be knights” (Pierce, *Test 1*). As Day argues, Alanna only ever had to prove her gender to herself, but Kel proves that women actually can become knights by training openly as a female: “In many ways, Kel will be the one to prove to the world that girls can actually achieve knighthood, since she will do so openly as a female and un-Gifted person. She also faces overtly gendered-schemata and scripts in ways that Alanna never did” (*Girls* 101). However, Alanna’s hopes that she will be able to help the girl, showing her ways to practice and how to handle public pressure, are dashed by Wyldon, who argues that this would be unfair to the boy pages, whom she has never helped previously (Pierce, *Test 1*). While Wyldon is technically trying to treat everyone equally here by insisting that all the pages receive the same treatment, it ignores the real inequalities in play. Kel will be taught by an almost all-male staff, with the exclusion of the Shang Wildcat, and Wyldon himself manipulates the system in order to place undue pressure on Kel under the guise of equal treatment. It is not unreasonable for a training program that will last from the time she is 10 until the time she is 18 to include instruction by someone of the same gender, especially as these years are when most young adults experience puberty.

Wyldon is shocked that any family would allow their daughter to train as a page, using the anti-feminist argument that men should “protect” the women in their lives by not allowing them to do dangerous things: “In all honesty [...] I had thought that our noble parents loved their daughters too much to place them in so hard a life” (Pierce, *Test 3*). This places girls and women in a supposedly protected position within society, but, in reality, this is another method

of controlling women in a patriarchal society. When Kel first dreams of becoming a knight, she does so precisely because she has seen her mother and heard of Alanna acting as warrior women (Pierce, *Test* 19). There is a direct connection for Kel between seeing female warriors and wanting to become one herself. She is inspired by these women, and their fighting skills not only legally pave the way for Kel's knighthood training but also are representation that proves to Kel—before she even begins her studies—that women can be skillful fighters and famous warriors.<sup>19</sup>

Despite Wyldon's mostly successful attempts to keep Alanna away from Kel, Kel meets several women from previous series that serve as reminders women have proven capable leaders and fighters, despite hardships similar to the ones Kel faces. Kel meets Lady Maura, from Daine's series, still leading Dunlath with a knight-guardian and the female ogre Iakoju (Pierce, *Page* 166). Kel also works closely with Buri and Thayet, who were Alanna's previous companions, and whom Kel reveres. She describes her in awe the first time they meet:

Buriram Tourakom—Buri, as she was known—was as famed as Lord Raoul or the Lioness. She'd been made full commander during the Immortals War, when Queen Thayet, the previous commander, had seen she was too busy as queen to serve the force she had created. Buri had been Thayet's guard before she was queen; she had been co-commander since the Riders' creation, and had done most of the everyday work in the company. She was a ferocious fighter, armed or unarmed. (Pierce, *Squire* 53)

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<sup>19</sup> The legality of Kel's training for knighthood is secured by both of these women. Alanna directly by becoming a knight and forcing the King to change the law and Kel's mother by ingratiating the Mindelan family with the Yamani family, which eventually earns her family a nobility rank and makes them an influential family in Tortall that even Lord Wyldon would not want to publicly cross.

Kel's descriptions of these women as legends reinforces the importance of female role models, but also their scarcity. Additionally, it demonstrates to readers that women do not disappear from Tortall as they age: they find other roles, they move up the military chain of command, and they pass along their knowledge and change with time. This suggests that the need for positive role models does not diminish throughout a girl's lifetime, but is a necessary part in creating strong women's communities and inclusions in traditionally male-dominated spaces. It also demonstrates how Kel typifies the creation of new female heroism, as I explored in the Introduction chapter.

One of the most emotional moments of the series comes when Kel receives her shield at the end of *Squire* and learns that the person who has been anonymously supporting her with expensive and useful gifts throughout her eight years of training was Alanna. Due to Alanna being ordered by Jonathan and Wyldon to stay away from Kel, Kel had previously worried that Alanna disliked her or thought Kel was stealing her glory as the only female knight. Neal tells Alanna about Kel's fears when Alanna is his knightmaster, which Alanna later refutes to Kel:

“Neal mentioned there were times when you thought I didn't care [...] I wanted to tell you, it was the opposite. And you went so far beyond what I hoped, for the next girl page, and squire, and knight. All those tournaments, and those girls in the stands, right down by the field, watching you hungrily”. (Pierce, *Squire* 321)

A “wiser”, older Alanna understands that Kel can be a role model for other girls in a way Alanna never could be—both as the second female knight and as “a person of the people” through Kel's leadership abilities. Alanna's praise of Kel is more profound for Kel than any other person's, even Lord Wyldon's, because Alanna knows better than most how difficult it was for Kel to

achieve her knighthood. Other people's comments throughout the series prove that Alanna is right. Many people attempt to undermine Alanna's accomplishments and to argue that no other woman would be capable of following in her footsteps of becoming a knight for the realm (Pierce, *Test 5*; *Squire* 207). Additionally, Alanna's gifts, the "Goddess Bless" gifts as Kel refers to them in her head (since she doesn't know before earning her shield that they are from Alanna), beyond being high-quality are exactly what Kel needs at each stage of her journey (Pierce, *Test 69-70*). They are a material connection between women—even when the patriarchy attempts to prevent their companionship—and a constant signifier to Kel that she is accepted and supported as a knight from the very beginning of her training.

Throughout the series, Kel frequently questions how gender shapes her identity and behavior. These introspective moments often focus on seemingly trivial stereotypes rather than the overt misogyny of figures like Joren, Wyldon, or the conservative nobles who are their friends and contemporaries in noble society. Still, they prompt Kel to challenge her own assumptions and examine how society imposes expectations based on gender, race, and class. After killing her first man in a battle she leads, Kel is struck by the irony that it's her birthday. Her emotional response unsettles her: "Hysterics — that's all I need for them to think I've gone completely female" (Pierce, *Page 99*). The term "hysteria", as Pragya Agarwal writes, is gendered and rooted in Ancient Greek ideas about a "'wandering' uterus" causing irrational behavior in women (11). Kel momentarily accepts this bias, but quickly critiques it: "What's wrong with being hysterical, if no one is hurt by it and it makes you feel better? I'll just wait and have my hysterics where no one will see or hear me" (Pierce, *Page 99*). This internal debate reflects how Kel has been conditioned to equate emotion with femininity and weakness. Though

she appears to reject noble expectations around gender and sexuality, her position as an outsider doesn't free her from societal scrutiny. That perceived freedom is ultimately an illusion.

## MASCULINITY

Underlying this thesis is an American fascination with a fantasy version of the Middle Ages. In the section on Feminist Magic in Chapter 1, I explored the contemporary justification of conservative political parties in the U.S. justifying restrictive contraception laws with a yearning for a (fictitious) European Middle Ages. In *The Protector*, Kel often relies on the Code of Tortallan Chivalry to give her moral direction and fortitude; however, it is Kel's own interpretation of chivalry. Chivalry both in the world of Tortall and in America has come to represent a wholly masculine form of identity that relies on physical strength, fighting ability, courtly manners, and bravery.

One Contemporary American man, D. Joseph Jacques, explicitly urges American men to form their identity from various models of European codes of chivalry. Jacques writes, of an erosion of the "particularly masculine" American identity and encourages men to find pride in the military and to return to supposedly medieval constructions of masculinity through chivalric codes "as a warrior ethic, chivalry required truth, mercy to one's enemies, service to women, protection of the weak, and defense of the good – all encompassed by a sense of justice, loyalty, courtesy, humility, generosity, and brotherhood among the knightly caste" and finishing by arguing that knights and chivalry were "above all [...] admirably masculine" (5). This is one example, but it is representative of current and ongoing issues related to patriarchal identity formation in the U.S. that prizes traditionally masculine traits, such as strength, individualism (as

opposed to community), and segregation of roles by gender. Chivalry in Tortall, however, is also deeply tied to the ideology supporting the feudal class hierarchy where Lords are meant to be morally obligated to commoners who live and work their lands (Pierce, *Test* 66). Of course, these are ideals, not the reality for most people in Tortall. As I explore in the following chapter, in *Provost's Dog*, honor is portrayed by nobles as an inherent and distinctly high-class trait. If American culture replicates a neomedieval (often mistaken for truly medieval) ideal of masculinity—one defined by rigid gender binaries—then Kel's version of chivalry, centered on protecting the vulnerable and her role as a female knight, directly challenge both Tortallan and American constructions of masculinity.

The ambiguity of chivalry's tenets and the difficulties of modern masculinity are evident in both Tortall and contemporary American culture. While terms like "manosphere" or "incel" were not popularized during Pierce's writing of *The Protector*, the series illustrates a long-standing tension in the U.S. over defining masculinity through selectively borrowed medieval ideals. Pierce's depiction demonstrates how neomedievalism can be mobilized to justify certain behaviors or hierarchies, even when historical accuracy is not present. Contemporary American discourse similarly draws on medieval models of masculinity in conflicting ways. On one hand, figures such as Andrew Tate have promoted a return to a hyper-masculine and combative ideal, valorizing strength, dominance, and control over women as aspirational traits; on the other hand, some commentators advocate for a modernized interpretation of chivalry that emphasizes honor, service, and protection, distancing from toxic behaviors.

Megan Maldonado observes this cyclical engagement with medievalism, noting that "for some reason, a lot of online advice about how to be a man today aspires backward toward the medieval" (Maldonado 1). She connects this contemporary interest to earlier historical

precedents, writing, “Even in the later English Middle Ages, some viewed medieval chivalric romance—works of fiction—as inspiration for real-world social ethics” (Maldonado 2). In the twentieth century, fantasy literature, particularly the work of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, further cemented popular fascination with medieval ideals, reinforcing their ongoing cultural influence (Maldonado 2). As Milan Zafirovski notes, this phenomenon is closely tied to American neo-conservatism and the recreation of hierarchical social structures in modern guise: “To wit, American conservatism, including ‘neo-conservatism,’ is redefined and re-conceptualized substantively, though not necessarily formally, as a sort of neo-feudalism, so neo-medievalism overall [...] dressed in the all-American ‘signs of modernity’” (394). These historical and cultural patterns illustrate the persistent allure of medieval frameworks for American identity, highlighting the tension between idealized codes of honor and their real-world application. In this context, Pierce’s neomedieval fantasy becomes more than imaginative world-building: it serves as a lens through which readers can critically examine the cultural construction of masculinity and the ways in which historical myths are repurposed to justify or challenge contemporary social hierarchies.

While Kel may use chivalry to justify not abandoning her people to death in Scanra, Joren believes that he is being honorable by attempting to bully Kel to leave knight training (Pierce, *Lady* 239, *Test* 155) this contradiction reveals that the Code of Chivalry is too ambiguous to serve as a strict moral guideline. As Kunzel and Fichtelberg argue in Pierce’s biography, “Characters in fantasy define themselves by what is honorable, a concept that idealistic teenagers (and adults who still cherish that part of themselves) recognize and value. In fantasy honor and dishonor are examined in all their facets” (Kunzel and Fichtelberg 265). For contemporary American children and young adults, there is the cultural idea of “honor” that is

ill-defined on a national level. Pierce's literature explicitly engages with defining and enacting honor, propagated through Kel whose version of chivalry and warrior heroism emphasizes honesty, fairness, kindness, and community. While Wyldon is able to use the Code of Chivalry to represent fairness, Joren's death after entering the Chamber demonstrates not that Wyldon was ineffective in his instruction, but that Wyldon's practice of Chivalry is one that men like Joren have internalized through their page training (Pierce, *Squire* 312-313). As Kel is the protagonist of *The Protector* and readers experience her point of view, the narrative supports Kel's interpretation of chivalry, at least morally, but there is danger in the application of equality ultimately relying on the good (or bad) judgement of individuals. For example, the decision to legalize abortion in America, *Roe v Wade* was in part not codified into law because people believed that good-faith practices of the American judicial system would be upheld (Becker pars. 6-7). What Kel interprets as chivalry is really Kel's own moral dedication to protecting others and fighting for equality; she does save a litter of kittens from neighborhood bullies and spiders before ever becoming a page (Pierce, *Test* 11-12). Pierce's portrayal of Kel navigating the ambiguities of chivalry, the historical and ongoing American fascination with a selectively imagined medieval masculinity, and the contested cultural constructions of honor and gender together demonstrate how YA Female Fantasy can critically interrogate inherited social codes while offering models of ethical, inclusive heroism.

Still, while Kel's construction of this knightly masculinity drawn from elements of the Tortallan Code of Chivalry, it is clear that the same construction of identity has led to a culture of bullying, prejudice, and hatred towards women. Both Wyldon and Joren are major characters in the series, and their pointed bullying of Kel is *always* predicated on a toxic interpretation of chivalry. While Wyldon is able to overcome his prejudices, after doing his best to prevent Kel

from continuing training, Joren's inability to do this only underscores the moral ambiguity of the code and instead presents an alternate mode of ordinary heroism and exceptional leadership in Kel's character. One of the main underpinnings of chivalry reflected in both Alanna and Kel's narratives is the denial of any bullying to authority figures at the very insistence of the authority figures who create this structure. Wyldon's belief that knighthood should be "tough" in actuality encourages a behavior of violence among the pages.

This is especially damning considering Tortall already has the Chamber of the Ordeal—a magical and incorruptible test of a page's worthiness. The additional requirement of public examinations reveals that these measures are not about fairness or objectivity, but about appeasing societal bias. That these exams emerged only after a girl became a knight makes clear that they are not neutral tools, but institutionalized responses to bigotry. Bullying, then, becomes a narrative and structural symbol of systemic injustice. It is a frequent subject in YA and children's literature, as it's widely understood as a problem among school-aged children (Wolke et al. 978). The psychological toll of bullying is severe and often long-lasting. D. Wolke et al.'s 2013 study on bullying and its psychological effects underscores the dangers of long-term emotional trauma, including heightened risks of mental health disorders and suicide (879–880). Additionally, Dorothy Espelage and Susan Swearer write that bullying is likely underreported and often mishandled by adults who overestimate both student intervention and institutional support (8). Pierce's work also shows that bullying with elements of sexual harassment disproportionately targets girls and young women (Espelage and Swearer 20, 62, 63). Kel's determination to confront bullying and challenge its underlying systems becomes one of the defining features of her character and her knighthood. Rather than focusing only on individual

perpetrators, she challenges the cultural logic that excuses cruelty in the name of tradition or strength.

While knight training plays a significant role in both Alanna's and Kel's journeys, it looks markedly different in Kel's time. Since Alanna's training—and largely as a reaction to her “deception” in hiding her gender to earn her shield—knighthood training has evolved to resemble American public schools, complete with subject-specific teachers, scheduled classes, standardized exams, and structured field work. Within this more formalized structure, bullying becomes increasingly prominent. As I have previously argued, this tonal shift in *The Protector* signals a more critical examination of the social structures that produce sexism and bigotry. Because school is where children learn most of the behavioral codes of society, the series uses this setting to reflect how gender roles and power hierarchies are socially constructed and enforced—both by adult actions and by the systemic organization of identity-based separation and value. One of the most telling changes from Alanna's time is the introduction of public examinations for pages, which began as a direct response to Alanna's deception:

The examinations at the end of April had existed for only fourteen years. King Jonathan's father had introduced them after the discovery that a girl—Alanna the Lioness—had concealed her sex to become a knight [...] Now anyone could watch as a panel of nobles, mages, and teachers asked pages questions about their classwork and watched them show their physical skills in practice bouts of all kinds. (Pierce, *Test* 143)

The creation of these tests illustrates how the burden of blame was placed on Alanna for disrupting the system, rather than crediting her with exposing its flaws. Even more telling is how this prejudice extended to her entire training cohort. As Neal explains to Kel, “none of the knights from that generation are allowed to judge [...] even Duke Gareth the Elder—her training

master—has never served” (Pierce, *Test* 145). Kel is shocked that Alanna, after a decade of knightly service, saving the realm and acting as the King’s Champion, is still treated with suspicion. “‘How dare they say the Lioness cheated!’ she exclaims. ‘Great Goddess, she fights ogres and spidrens and armies all the time!’” (Pierce, *Test* 145). Neal, both with humor dry and sincerity, replies: “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” (ibid.). His humor underscores a central tension in Pierce’s feminist vision: individual excellence is not enough to dismantle structural prejudice. The opposition Kel and Alanna face is not based on merit, but on gender.

Joren, Kel’s peer, is the primary architect of the most sustained and dangerous bullying she faces throughout the first three books. Unlike Wyldon, whose prejudice manifests through exclusion and dismissiveness, Joren actively works to sabotage Kel’s training and endanger her safety. He begins with brute force—beating Kel whenever possible—but quickly escalates to more covert and malicious tactics. He orchestrates the kidnapping of Lalasa, encourages other knights to challenge Kel to dangerous duels, and weights her lance to undermine her confidence in her physical strength (Pierce, *Squire* 122, 198, *Test* 102). He humiliates her publicly by tripping her during the Midwinter festival (Pierce, *Page* 66-67), and he does so with calculated intent, not immature frustration. Joren’s bullying is also overtly misogynistic and violent. He repeatedly calls Kel a “bitch”—one of the few moments of profanity in all of Pierce’s Tortall Universe works and a gendered slur that reinforces his view of Kel not just as an opponent, but as a woman who needs to be punished (Pierce, *Squire* 221). His threats move from harassment to attempted murder, “You won’t live until the Ordeal [...] One of us will spear you through your bitch’s heart” (Pierce, *Squire* 195–196) and “Once I’m a knight, you’d best keep an eye behind you, bitch [...] I’ll be in your shadow, until one day you won’t cast one ever again” (Pierce,

*Squire* 221). These are not verbal threats for the sole purpose of intimidation, Joren has shown that he will use his wealth, male privilege, and upper-class connections to act on his ideologies as with the kidnapping of Lalasa. Unlike Kel's use of justified violence during wartime, Joren's aggression is deeply personal and unlawful—cold, vengeful, and rooted in entitlement. What makes this more disturbing is that Kel has never wronged him; she has even shown him leniency and grace earlier in their acquaintance (Pierce, *Page* 145). Yet Joren's behavior is tolerated by the institution until it becomes publicly indefensible after Joren's ordeal of knighthood.

Even after orchestrating a kidnapping and issuing death threats, Joren is still permitted to enter the Chamber of the Ordeal and would likely have become a knight had he succeeded. Wyldon and the King tacitly support him through their inaction, whether or not they approve in principle, as implied by their silence. As with the use of bloodrain I examined in the Ecology section of Chapter 2, the Chamber is a magical intervention, a Feminist Revision of reality that interrupts real harmful human action, which *did* use Agent Orange, and which *does* allow men, such as Joren to continue to have privileged positions in American society. This tolerance, if not outright celebration of men such as Joren in aspects of American culture, reflects a broader institutional failure. Unlike Alanna's bully, Ralon—who is quickly disgraced and disappears from the narrative—Joren remains entrenched in the social structure of Tortall before his trial but *after* the kidnapping goes to trial as well. His role isn't a deviation from the norm, but a product of it. The series uses Joren to reveal how violence is embedded in a cultural definition of masculinity and how institutions protect those who uphold that model, even at the expense of others. Despite Kel's public success in tournaments and the exposure of Vinson as a rapist during his Ordeal, both men's actions are deflected back onto Kel—she is blamed, resented, and held responsible (Pierce, *First* 103, *Squire* 221, 229). This refusal to see her as fully innocent or

separate from their crimes underscores how the system not only tolerates male violence but punishes those who resist it.

As I have stated, Wyldon is one of Kel's main bullies in addition to being her training master and the sole person who decides at the end of *Test* if Kel is allowed to continue her training. Wyldon publicly displays his disagreement and distaste of Kel's presence in training, calling her "Probationer" rather than her name, a not-so-subtle reminder that Kel does not truly belong there, while Joren calls her "Yamani Lump" and "The Girl" (Pierce, *Test* 48, 105, 29). Wyldon's character is remarkable both in the construction of his prejudice and his toxic masculinity that predicates the masculine as inherently opposed to the feminine, but also in his ability to overcome these prejudices. *Spy's* goes even further, including the series of letters between the King, Wyldon, and other powerful nobles regarding Wyldon taking the position of training master in which Wyldon writes to "Remic of Princehold" upon accepting the position of training master, noting that his friend may be surprised that Wyldon has agreed to the position due to his disagreement with girls and women becoming knights. Wyldon writes to Remic:

It is in part for that reason [stopping female knights] that I agreed to the post. Who better than the training master to protest, should the proclamation lead to a swarm of adventurous girls declaring themselves the revival of the woman knights of old? I know we discussed in brief the measures that might be taken to repeal or overturn the proclamation in court. I would like to extend the research of our options and begin to prepare documentation necessary to take the matter to the magistrates. (Pierce, *Spy's* 162-163)

This proves that Wyldon has secretly and actively worked within Tortallan politics to oppose the legal right of girls to seek their knighthood and additionally that he has taken the position of

training master in part to have power over those attending page training and to prevent young girls from entering training by all means at his disposal in such a privileged position. The unresolved debate between Kel and Joren at the interpretation and implications of Wyldon's action or inaction, depending on the circumstances, is finally revealed and proves that Joren was ultimately correct. Whatever Wyldon comes to believe later, he *did* work insidiously to prevent Kel's ability to prove herself in knighthood training with the same equal opportunity given to the boys automatically. However, by the end of Kel's squire years, Wyldon has drastically altered his opinion, thus entrusting only Kel to run a refugee camp in the compassionate and thorough method Wyldon himself would run it (Pierce, *Lady* 336). In this way, Wyldon represents how someone can acknowledge their previous errors and confront their own prejudices. Wyldon displays both how an individual's prejudices can be deeply harmful and gives hope that people have the capacity to change.

Wyldon does not treat Kel as the other trainees, oscillating between ignoring Kel completely and intensely and minutely criticizing her (Pierce, *Test* 48, 51). Wyldon pointedly ignores when Joren breaks a training routine to force Kel out of line with the other boys and then punishes Kel when she fights back, not Joren for instigating the fight or picking on Kel, a younger page (Pierce, *Test* 48-49). These moments are repeated throughout the series where Kel is set to fail either way, by either caving to pressure and quitting or by continuing forward and being ostracized and reprimanded, although eventually these prejudices are overcome by Kel's dedication to hard work and perseverance. While one of Kel's most individualistic qualities is keeping her face clear of expression, she refers to this as her "Yamni mask", a learned behavior from her childhood in the Yamani islands where emotions are considered rude (Pierce, *Test* 6). However, internally and to the reader, Kel talks back to Wyldon in her head and recognizes that

this treatment is unfair and refuses to give up because of his bullying, “[...] it wasn’t right—he wasn’t correcting the boys nearly as much as he did her— but she vowed she wouldn’t let him know she thought so. She would prove that she could take whatever he threw at her” (Pierce, *Test* 51). This is crucial narrative framing, as without this internal dialogue, Kel might appear unaffected by Wyldon’s treatment of her when she is often frustrated, disappointed, and angry. This internal dialogue is crucial in YA Fantasy, as it allows readers to witness Kel’s awareness of injustice and her active resistance, demonstrating both her agency and the emotional complexity of navigating a biased system.

When Kel fights back against Joren and his bullies who are picking physical fights with younger pages, Kel is blamed for causing trouble rather than Wyldon recognizing that Kel is not to blame, but the very system he is perpetuating is to blame instead. Wyldon tells Kel:

“There was never so much fighting before you came. It will end now.”

Maybe you just never heard about all the fights, Kel thought wearily. Big boys picking on little ones just to be mean. Maybe no one made enough of a fuss to bring it to your notice.

(Pierce, *Page* 24)

However, Kel’s internal correction of his assumption explicitly recognizes his harmful framing in order to blame Kel rather than any of the boys and Joren’s fate ultimately supports Kel’s position against the older pages routinely bullying the younger ones.

Two of the more insidious traits of toxic masculinity that Wyldon betrays are his constant reduction of Kel to a sexual object and his refusal to accept that women more generally are capable of being knights rather than only individual women who are exceptional becoming knights as outliers for their sex. In their first meeting, Wyldon does not see Kel as a person or

potential knight but as a potential sexual distraction (Pierce, *Test* 21-22). Throughout The Protector series, bullying shapes Kel's experience, always marked by two traits: she is targeted because she is a girl and she is blamed for others' actions toward her. This pattern reflects broader social structures—both in Tortall and the real world—that excuse male behavior while constraining and policing girls. Rouhollah Aghasaleh, for instance, points to school dress codes in the U.S. as representative of a culture that sexualizes all young girls and frame girls' bodies as distractions, holding them responsible for boys' reactions rather than addressing the behavior of boys and men themselves (101). Wyldon echoes this logic, imposing restrictive rules on Kel that preemptively blame her for any impropriety, "I will not tolerate flirtations. If there is a girl in a boy's room, the door must be open [...] Should you disobey, you will be sent home immediately" (Pierce, *Test* 22).

When Kel's father, Piers, objects by arguing "My daughter is only ten", Wyldon's response elucidates that girls are sexual at any age, "My experience with females is that they begin early" (ibid.). Piers' discomfort underscores the disturbing nature of Wyldon's assumptions, yet he does not refute the underlying assumptions that "females" are deviant and sexual even when children, a threat to boys, and the *cause* of men's deviancy or violence. This exchange mirrors a wider cultural pattern that sexualizes girls from a young age, reduces them to objects of male desire, and undermines their autonomy. It also casts suspicion on Kel's platonic friendships and enforces heteronormative and homophobic assumptions by implying that a girl in a boy's room is inherently suspect, while boys together are presumed innocent. Wyldon's prejudices run deep. Rather than acknowledging the bullying Kel endures, he reinforces it by pushing her harder than the boys—seeking to validate his belief that girls are weaker. That Kel

endures and thrives despite this pressure is a testament to her resilience, but also to the support of fair-minded allies like her father, who challenges Wyldon's gendered assumptions from the start.

Wyldon also believes that Kel will eventually and “naturally” (in this instance meaning biologically) become disinterested in knight training as she goes through puberty. Even when Wyldon surprises everyone and lifts the probation at the end of Kel's first year, he warns her, “What if you fall in love? What if you come to grief, or cause others to do so, because your thoughts are on your heart and not combat? This year was the easiest” and Kel responds humorously in her mind that Wyldon was not the one who actually had to live the year (*Test* 179). Wyldon does not ask the male pages these questions, and he does not warn them about potentially gaining scars and disfigurements because he inherently believes that women are valued for their appearance in contrast to men who can be desirable and scarred, as Wyldon himself proves because he is described as handsome despite a scar running across his face (Pierce, *Test* 21). His progression—from ignoring her to over-criticizing her and then to begrudgingly praising her as he wars between genuine respect and an inability to see women as equal—spans the entirety of the series. Even his compliments are barbed; in *Page*, he tells her, “Gods, Mindelan [...] I would you had been born a boy” (Pierce, *Page* 204). Kel's silent response, “But I like being a girl”, underscores the ongoing tension and her refusal to internalize Wyldon's sexism (*ibid.*). While Wyldon has come to admire Kel as an individual, he still clings to the belief that true strength and knightly potential are innately male. His approval affirms Kel's abilities but stops short of challenging the gendered assumptions that shaped his initial opposition to her.

The most significant shift in Wyldon's thinking comes after the Chamber of the Ordeal exposes the full extent of Joren and Vinson's violence. Joren—already revealed as the

mastermind behind the kidnapping of Kel's maid Lalasa and her dog—is killed in the Chamber, while Vinson is exposed as a rapist (Pierce, *Squire* 126, 230, 218). Joren's family blames Kel for his death, claiming he had been Wyldon's favorite before her arrival (Pierce, *Squire* 230).

Wyldon, however, does not deflect having responsibility not in just Joren's fate, but in instilling or ignoring the type of thinking that led to his actions and eventual death. Instead, he resigns as training master, stating plainly to Kel, "Two failures in one year—it's never happened. I think my training, my approach, is flawed. Maybe I've done this for too long—fifteen years, after all. It's time for someone new" (Pierce, *Squire* 234). Kel instinctively moves to defend him, then falters; she has long suspected that Wyldon's leniency toward bullying and his emphasis on physical toughness created a culture that excused aggression and normalized misogyny. Joren and Vinson thrived under that system—and Kel realizes she can't excuse it even while she retains individual respect and liking towards Wyldon.

Wyldon's resignation marks a rare moment of institutional accountability, even if it's self-imposed. He acknowledges that his own prejudices—his preference for boys, his dismissal of Kel, his tolerance of violence—enabled deeper harm. It's a moment of growth, but it is also telling that no one else, not even King Jonathan, holds him accountable. Wyldon's self-awareness is admirable, but the system remains unchanged. At the very end of *Lady*, Wyldon goes further, telling Kel that she may be the brightest point in his legacy and that he did everything in his power to prevent her knighthood (Pierce, *Lady* 336). Wyldon is an emotionally rich and complex character, but his journey towards progress is precarious. It depends on Wyldon's willingness to change, and even more on Kel's extraordinary resilience in the face of structural injustice. Where many others would have quit, Kel endures the bias, the violence, and the skepticism, ultimately proving that the system was wrong about her. Yet this victory remains

bittersweet. Wyldon may respect Kel, but he never fully unlearns the belief that knighthood is naturally masculine. His words reveal a lingering essentialism: Kel is the exception, not the new rule. The Chamber may serve as a magical equalizer, but in the absence of real institutional change, the burden remains on girls like Kel to justify their presence, over and over again.

Neal stands in sharp contrast to Joren and Wyldon, acting as Kel's first and most consistent male ally. When no older boy volunteers to sponsor her, Neal—a first-year himself—steps up, fully aware of the social risk (Pierce, *First* 29). He explains that his views have been shaped by exposure to strong women in positions of power:

“I’ve watched Lady Alanna fight for the crown. I saw Her Majesty and some of her ladies fight in the Immortals War. I know women can be warriors. If that’s the life you want, then you ought to have the same chance to get it as anyone else who’s here”. (Pierce, *Test* 32).

Neal's openness is tied to his broader education and court experience, and he frequently critiques those in power, such as Wyldon. Unlike many male characters, he is never threatened by Kel's competence, leadership, or success. His humor also plays a crucial role, offering both emotional support and subtle protest. Humor is particularly significant in YA novels as engaging young readers and relieving narrative tension and as another method to engage serious topics in a less explicit or didactic authorial voice (Hogan xii-xiii). On their first night when other pages avoid sitting with them during dinner, Neal jokes that “Usually it’s impossible to get a bit of elbow room here” (Pierce, *Test* 33). His wit reframes exclusion into camaraderie and models how to challenge bigotry without aggression. Throughout the series, Neal continues to stand beside Kel—literally and figuratively. He comforts her when she is mocked for her fear of heights and offers public validation in moments when Kel might otherwise feel isolated (Pierce, *First* 140,

133, *Page* 38). His visible loyalty encourages others to follow suit. As a physically imposing older student, Neal protects Kel socially and physically when he is present, particularly early on.

Neal also helps dismantle harmful ideas about masculinity. When he is sickened after battle, it mirrors earlier confessions from Jonathan in *Hand*, pushing back on the myth that boys are naturally predisposed to violence (Pierce, *Test* 176). Eventually, Neal becomes Alanna's squire, and a seer foretells that his daughter will become a page herself (Pierce, *Lady* 341), reinforcing his long-term commitment to equality. By consistently using his privilege to support Kel and speak out, Neal models responsible, relational allyship. As Ben Almassi argues, real allyship involves "putting privilege to work for justice" through action, not performance (93–94). Neal exemplifies a "loving masculinity" rooted in friendship, empathy, and respect—one that resists the arrogance and self-congratulation that often distort ally culture (Almassi 6). Pierce uses Neal's character to show how boys and men can be active, supportive allies, not by taking over, but by standing alongside.

Kel's stand against bullying marks a pivotal moment of moral clarity in *Page*. When Neal questions why she didn't enlist his help, Kel reveals her isolation: "I figured I was the only one here who thought it was all wrong. I thought maybe I saw it different because I'm a girl" (Pierce, *Test* 131). Her experience of gendered prejudice gives her a perspective her peers, sheltered by privilege, don't share. Unlike the boys, she sees bullying not as harmless tradition but as a moral failing with long-term consequences. This scene unpacks the core of Kel's ethics: tradition does not justify harm. Cleon, defending hazing, insists "you can't go setting tradition on its ear" (Pierce, *Test* 131), but Kel draws a direct line between normalized bullying and future cruelty: "If we take this as pages [...] do we do as we learned when we were pages?" (Pierce, *Test* 131). Her insistence that "when I see anyone big pick on someone small, well, there's going to be a

fight” frames empathy not as a weakness, but a code of action rooted in justice (Pierce, *Test* 132). Pierce makes explicit the connection between childhood bullying and adult violence. As studies show, bullying is often underreported, can have long-lasting emotional effects, and disproportionately targets girls through gendered or sexualized harassment (Espelage and Swearer 8, 20). Kel’s belief that learned cruelty escalates without intervention mirrors these findings. Her resistance is proactive, not reactive; she does not wait for others to act but instead becomes a moral catalyst.

Importantly, Kel’s actions ripple outward. Though initially dismissed as “a silly girl”, her persistence inspires solidarity. Neal and other boys ultimately join her, and their collective refusal to tolerate bullying ends the hazing culture—an arc that shows how principled resistance can generate meaningful change (Pierce, *Test* 132–135). Kel also distinguishes between toxic and non-toxic traditions. While she finds Cleon’s teasing problematic, she notes it lacks Joren’s cruelty: “He wasn’t a bully like Joren [...] that had been about bullies, not about a silly custom” (Pierce, *Test* 117). Even so, she understands how normalized behaviors mask gendered power dynamics—especially when excused as flirtation or hierarchy enforcement. Her patrols of the halls to confront bullies reveal a sustained commitment to protecting others (Pierce, *Test* 129). In recognizing that traditions are not neutral, Kel positions herself as a challenge to systemic prejudice. Scholarly analysis of methods for preventing bullying elucidate that portrayals of bullying in children’s literature that focus on the victims resisting abuse in turn positively influence young readers’ real-world attitudes on bullying (Nansel et al. 63). Pierce uses Kel to model not just opposition to injustice, but to the internal clarity and courage required to resist systemic harm.

## HEROISM

When a newly arrived refugee to Haven is angry at his situation with Kel being the female commander of the camp, he claims this is “impossible” and insults Kel in a gender-specific way, “I will not be governed by a, a shameless girl, a chit who’s no better than she ought to be” (Pierce, *Lady* 129). Kel’s response is both memorable and pointed:

Have you ever noticed that when we disagree with a male [...], the first comment they make is always about our reputations or our monthlies? [...] If I disagree with you, should I place blame on the misworkings of your manhood? Or do I refrain from so serious an insult [...] far more serious, of course, than your hint that I am a whore.

Because my mother taught me courtesy, I only suggest that my monthlies will come long after your hair has escaped your head completely. (Pierce, *Lady* 130)

Kel’s humor and precision underscore Michael Moorcock’s claim that “what genuine humor can do [...] is to emphasise the implications of its subject matter, to humanise its heroes, clarify its issues and intensify its narrative” (18). Moreover, a female character with a sense of humor is crucial to women’s ability to critique or undermine societal norms in socially acceptable ways (Merrill 272-273). Kel’s humanity, her humor and her fairness, ultimately wins over those who are initially prejudiced towards her. Her leadership grows out of empathy, a trait often coded as feminine. Kel is mocked for being “soft-hearted” when she rescues Jump (*Page* 6), but her empathy becomes her greatest strength—allowing her to work collaboratively, inspire trust, and think laterally. Determination, by contrast, is coded as masculine—a refusal to show emotion under stress. Kel demonstrates both, revealing that girls and women must be tougher than men to make a place for themselves in a patriarchal society (Pierce, *Squire* 257).

However, Kel's ability to stay unemotional is complicated. It protects her from male bullies but also mutes women's justified rage, requiring other characters, especially Neal, to speak on her behalf. Still, Kel's refusal to be beaten—literally or emotionally—is what makes her a hero. Unlike Alanna or Daine, whose powers set them apart, Kel's heroism is grounded in her sheer perseverance. Kel, more than any of Pierce's other protagonists, could be described as tough, though the qualities of toughness are often subjective. Kel must be tough to survive sustained bullying and physically excel to become a knight. Though she is tall and strong, her toughness is not just physical. As Sherrie Inness writes, toughness for girls is “much more involved, including self-presentation, attire, setting, and attitude” (12). Kel is not abrasive or hostile. Her toughness is internal—emotional maturity, focus, and consistency. Inness argues that:

Tough women challenge the assumption that toughness is an attribute associated with men. Tough women also show that masculine characteristics, such as toughness, are not biologically defined but are instead a carefully choreographed performance that either a man or a woman might engage in. (179)

Pierce's narratives consistently distinguish between biology and gender performance based on learned behavior. Kel's toughness, above all, lies in her character. She is neither hyper-feminized nor desexualized—she engages with gender but is not reduced by it. Kel's strength lies in resisting the need to “man up”. Even when Kel loses, particularly in her weak area—jousting—it only strengthens her as a role model because it humanizes her. “She hated to lose, but knew that if she won every time, people would whisper that someone used magic on her behalf” (Pierce, *Squire* 207). Her modesty and grit mirror the core values of female heroism in *Tortall*: humility, perseverance, and moral clarity. Unlike Alanna's more traditional hero's journey, Kel's narrative

is rooted in realism and community, positioning her as an accessible, emulatable figure for young readers.

Kel's leadership style emphasizes teaching and shared growth. She insists on teaching others what she knows—refugees, commoners, even other pages (Pierce, *Page* 136). Instruction becomes a form of leadership: patient, humble, and inclusive. A powerful example of her ethics is her stance on capital punishment. When bandits are executed, Kel is disturbed by the crowd's bloodlust: "She wondered if something was wrong with her. Many people acted as if this were a party [...] Did they not care that lives were ending?" (Pierce, *Squire* 78-79). The spectacle of state violence repulses her. Violence is more central in *The Protector* than in Pierce's earlier series, but Kel and her allies maintain ethical reflection even in wartime. Buri also voices discomfort with executions: "Death, even for someone just plain bad, solves nothing. [...] It sows bitterness in the surviving family and friends" (ibid.). Kel's leadership is not predicated on her gender but on her strategic thinking, empathy, and earned authority. Her first major leadership test occurs during a bandit attack on the pages' summer trip. The older boys freeze while Kel takes charge and saves the group (Pierce, *Page* 90). This moment earns her the trust of her peers and foreshadows her command at Haven (Pierce, *Lady* 67-68). Combat leadership becomes the space where Kel proves herself—not by divine right or magic, but by sound decision-making under pressure.<sup>20</sup>

The atrocities Kel faces in *Lady* further highlight how ordinary human cruelty—not magic—is the true source of horror in Tortall. The killing devices built by Blayce are powered

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<sup>20</sup>At multiple academic conferences, I have explored the role of toughness, militarism, heroism, gender, and America in Kel's character and story. The U.S. has a "paradoxical" political and cultural relationship to women in combat that is the result of America's particular relationship to militarism, patriarchy, and national identity (Greener 306). *Squire* and *Lady* are significantly concerned with the morality of violence, and Kel epitomizes both America's relationship to national militarism and challenges the representation of women in combat.

by the souls of murdered children, described by Kel as made by “human monsters” (Pierce, *Lady* 331). While stormwings are grotesque in their unnatural fusion of flesh and metal, their monstrosity is aesthetic rather than moral. In contrast, the Killing Devices, entirely mechanical and human-made, are instruments of deliberate violence, morally malevolent even if less physically monstrous as being wholly non-organic. Kel insists the evil beyond the Killing Devices is human in origin: “The bloody triangle made by Blayce, Stenmun, and Maggur was sheer, clumsy, human bad luck” (Pierce, *Lady* 331). Pierce based Blayce on Gilles de Rais, a real 15th-century noble and child-murderer. John Lennard notes that Pierce “used Blayce to purge the horror from her imagination” (168–169). Blayce bathes, feeds, and pampers his victims—rituals not required by magic, but by his perverse enjoyment. “He does it because he likes it,” one of the villagers who live in the same village as Blayce, tells Kel (Pierce, *Lady* 299). Neal, horrified, asks what these rituals contribute to the spell. The answer: nothing. Blayce prefers “pretty” children “around ten”, but eventually takes even “the ugly ones, the crippled ones, the babes in their crib” (Pierce, *Lady* 298–299). He industrializes his violence, trafficking children across borders. Kel captures him. He offers to work for Tortall. She kills him instantly. Even the Chamber warns not of a threat to the kingdom, but “a threat to life itself” (Pierce, *Lady* 15–16). The terror of Blayce is not that he is magical—but that he is entirely, recognizably human. Through Kel, *Protector* lays bare the ordinary systems that permit cruelty—bullying, misogyny, military hierarchy, and political expedience. Her response is equally ordinary: empathy, discipline, leadership. She does not ask for divine guidance or magical protection. She leads, teaches, protects, and refuses to back down. Kel’s heroism is not that of a chosen one but of a young girl who insists on doing what’s right, no matter the cost.

## BODY

As explored in Chapters 2 and 3, the body functions as a crucial site of meaning in Pierce's work—shaping not only how heroines are perceived by others but also how they understand themselves. While Alanna's body is famously smaller in stature, often read as facilitating her initial disguise and later her unthreatening from strict femininity, Kel's large physicality stands in direct contrast to Alanna's body. Exceptionally tall and broad, Kel's body is not one that can be forgotten or softened (Pierce, *Squire* 3). This section turns to Kel's embodiment as a deliberate departure from earlier heroines, examining how her physical form both challenges conventional femininity and becomes a key component of her Revisionist Feminist identity. Kel's relationship to her body is more confident than Alanna's, though she does, at times, express internal doubt over her attractiveness to her brief romantic partner and friend Cleon, Kel is largely unconcerned with being found attractive to a male audience. Kel works hard and knows what her body is capable of as a warrior. She does not faint throughout her series as Alanna does, despite her fear of heights being a key aspect of Kel's journey throughout the series. Though initially surprised by puberty changes, she is well-equipped to deal with them because of her alive and loving mother and endearing friendship with Lalasa. Kel's mother, Ilane, is a key figure in Kel's life and they are close with Kel coming to Ilane with concerns about relationships, sex, and marriage, as I explore further in this section.

Alanna's first period is one of the most famous, if not the most famous, moments in any of Pierce's works—depicting a dramatic coming-of-age moment where Alanna, the girl hidden as a boy with no mother figure in her life, escapes the palace at a gallop to find out what is wrong with her after finding blood. This is sharply contrasted with Kel's first period:

Blood was on her loincloth and inner thighs. She stared at it, thinking something dreadful was happening. Then she remembered several talks she'd had with her mother. This had to be her monthlies, the bleeding that told every girl she was ready to have babies if she wanted them. (Pierce, *Page 78*)

Kel is not alarmed or terrified by her own period, as her mother has both told her that it will happen and explained what to expect. Lalasa also serves as a teacher in this moment, much as Elani Cooper does to Alanna, describing the symptoms and frequency of menstruation. Kel does not have to put herself in danger, unlike Alanna who fled the castle to receive help, as Kel receives the information about her female body from those around her throughout her life rather than only in a moment of panic (Pierce, *Page 78*). The inclusion of specific language around puberty can be a political act in itself, as sexual education in the U.S. is not based on federal standards, and even adult men and women express confusion or repeat scientific inaccuracies about women's periods (Schmitt et al. 94). There has been an overall decline in the amount of sex education in American public schools, despite the fact that young girls overwhelmingly desire more information on their own bodily processes and sexuality (Schmitt et al. 95). Lalasa is there too when Kel develops breasts, a female friend in her very room available every day, which is what Alanna sorely lacks (Pierce, *Page 48*). Kel, too, does not have the anxiety of developing breasts and revealing her sex that Alanna does. Kel feels slight curiosity and apprehension at the teasing this could cause but is again much more prepared and informed about the changes she is going through than Alanna was. Lalasa first points out the growing breasts to her exhausted mistress, and Lalasa repeats the symbolic meaning of these biological changes:

“Most girls rejoice at this,” Lalasa pointed out softly. “They regard it—and their monthly bleeding—as signs they enter womanhood.”

“Most girls don’t have a covey of boys whacking them with sticks every morning. Most girls don’t want to be knights.” Kel plopped onto the bed. Jump wriggled until he could stick his blunt head under her hand. “If this keeps up, eventually I can stop wearing dresses to remind them I’m a girl. I hope it takes a while. A long while”. (Pierce, *Page* 48)

Kel takes all the changes with wry humor, noting that while this may give her bullies another way to attack her, it is ultimately a part of growing up, not a traumatic intrusion that threatens her ability to continue training. Kel’s mother also helps provide a supportive education, explaining the difference between love and lust and reassuring her daughter that neither are shameful, “Kissing may lead to more serious things, my darling...a girl may be carried away. It’s not always love. Lust may feel wonderful enough to be mistaken for love” (Pierce, *Squire* 187). Ilane offers caution and encourages Kel to seek out further sexual health and birth control if necessary. Ilane as a mother figure is realistic, understanding, and matter-of-fact, portraying sex and sexual feelings as natural and explaining social constructions of womanhood without forcing Kel to change herself or shaming her for feeling desire. These realistic elements of Kel’s experience as a woman are important in promoting a positive engagement between woman and their sexualities.

All of Pierce’s protagonists display self-consciousness about their appearance, often comparing themselves to smaller, slimmer girls or those with more conventionally attractive features, as I examined in the previous chapters. While this reflects a realistic adolescent anxiety—particularly for young girls—the fact that *all* of Pierce’s heroines share this trait suggests a deeper, recurring tension in her work around female embodiment and desirability.

When discussing her conception of Kel as a protagonist, Pierce explicitly stated in an interview that she wanted to represent a girl who was both strong and desirable in Kel:

I'd been watching the plight of tall broad girls who are not necessarily fat but they're big. People are always on them to lose weight, and the guys are looking at them and saying, "Well, she's a good bud, but she's a moose." I wanted a book for that kind of girl, to show her, "Yes, you can be beautiful and strong". (Pierce, "Tamora" par. 1)

In YA literature and American culture, female protagonists are frequently defined by their desirability and romantic relationships. As Melissa Ames and Sarah Burcon note, "positive depictions of girls' bodies and sexuality" are essential to counteract portrayals that reduce female characters to how men see them (40–41). Increasingly, scholars argue that contemporary YA must depict "adolescents negotiating the social and sexual standards of the dominant culture", offering teens "a safe learning environment" in which to explore questions of identity and embodiment (Ames and Burcon 41). Within this context, Pierce's depiction of Kel functions as a quiet subversion.

In Tortall, women outside the noble class are supposedly granted more sexual freedom while noblewomen are expected to uphold rigid standards of chastity and control. Or at least, this is how they are constructed socially. Alanna and Delia certainly didn't follow these limitations in refraining from pre-marital sex as nobles in *Hand* and *Rampant*. By refusing to conform to these expectations—rejecting the idea that chastity means virginity or that control means isolation—Kel positions herself outside both groups. Kel, as Alanna and Daine did before her, discovers that by entering a male-dominated space, her identity in society is no longer so rigidly constructed. When Kel tells Ilane about her developing feelings of attraction and desire for Cleon, Ilane encourages and supports her daughter:

“You don’t see that nonsense in the middle and lower classes. They know a woman’s body belongs to herself and the Goddess, and that’s the end of it.”

Kel was trying to remember if she’d ever heard the matter put in quite this fashion. She hadn’t.

Ilane leaned her chin on her hand.

“I’ve often thought the nobility’s handling of sex and marriage in their girls is the same as that of horse breeders who try to keep their mares from being mounted by the wrong stallions”. (Pierce, *Squire* 186)

While including a harmful stereotype about women of the lower classes—Lalasa’s attack alone resists the reality of this characterization, even while Vinson’s attack on her confirms that this is a common stereotype in Tortallan society—the overall message from mother to daughter is one of challenging the function of marriage within a patriarchy. Though specifically framed in terms of noble marriages, it is a very blunt and accepting conversation on sex and the final refrain that society *should* understand that “a woman’s body belongs to herself” even if this is not the reality. This scene echoes Alanna’s conversation with Mistress Cooper in which a girl’s first menstruation is shared with a trusted older woman. Both include a brief but practical sex education lesson—female desire, safety, and the use of a pregnancy charm—and is marked by an absence of shame. On the contrary, the older women actively encourage both girls to embrace their bodies and explore their changing emotions.

Kel’s asexuality, as confirmed by Pierce outside the narrative, fundamentally shifts the way her character can be read—but only if the reader knows where to look. In-text, Kel resists romantic and sexual entanglements without ever naming this resistance as identity-based. Her disinterest in relationships is persistent, consistent, and narratively meaningful, but never framed

in terms of orientation. Outside the books, however, Pierce's 2017 *FAQ* response makes Kel's identity more concrete, "Kel has come to a space in her life where she finds that she's not interested in romantic or physical relationships with anybody [...] romantic ones leave her feeling confused [...] the interest fades soon enough". This description clearly aligns with aromantic and asexual identity, yet its placement in the paratext places the burden of interpretation on the reader. As one queer arospec fan writes of this inclusion in *The Protector*:

A lot of this [Kel's sexuality] was fairly obvious, but much of it was subtext, and there's still a lot of parts of Kel's love life that required a bit of effort to see as part of her arospec experience, but I would say that she reads as pretty darn aromantic to me now. (arofili)

This acknowledgment reveals how queer readings are often constructed through attentive, interpretive labor—particularly when characters are queered by behavior rather than identification. As I explored in the discussion of queer readings in the Introduction, Pierce's evolving relationship to her character's sexuality exemplifies an expansive Revisionist Feminist practice.

Kel does not explicitly "come out", yet her consistent refusal of heterosexual scripts—romance, coupling, marriage—functions as a quiet but sustained rejection of normative femininity. In place of romantic development, the narrative foregrounds her ethical convictions, physical autonomy, and devotion to community care. In this way, Kel's character rewrites genre expectations: the virgin warrior not as prelude to eventual heterosexual romance, but as a complete subject whose identity is defined by what she does, not whom she desires. At the same time, Kel's sexuality exists across two narrative registers: the in-text version, where queerness is subtextual, behavioral, and unnamed, and the wider Tortall Universe, where Pierce's paratextual

confirmation makes that queerness explicit. These are not mutually exclusive readings but concurrent ones. Readers are asked to hold both: to see Kel as asexual and aromantic because of how she behaves in the narrative, and to also acknowledge that this queerness is only fully validated outside the text. This simultaneity—the ability to read Kel both within and beyond the book—is what gives the character her Revisionist Feminist power. She disrupts traditional narratives not just through what is said, but through what is left unsaid, through gaps that invite reinterpretation and projection.

By positioning Kel as aromantic and asexual outside the main text, Pierce opens the space for queer identification without forcing it into a didactic narrative arc. Yet this also leaves unresolved how the society of Tortall might respond to her identity. We are not shown Kel navigating visibility or social reaction, which limits the narrative's engagement with queerness as a lived and political reality. Still, the invitation to read Kel queerly—both in the text and beyond it—encourages readers to imagine a wider fantasy world in which asexual and aromantic identities exist, even if they are not always spoken aloud. Ultimately, Kel's sexuality, like her gender performance, functions as a challenge to the normative structures of YA Fantasy literature and U.S. culture. Through her, Pierce invites readers to participate in an act of Revisionist Feminist reading: to claim space for queerness even where it is only partially articulated and to understand that identity can be powerfully present even when it is not named. Kel stands not only as a warrior or protector, but as a figure who resists definition—her queerness held across narrative layers, where both silence and subtext become sites of resistance.

Unlike Alanna and Daine, whose stories end in committed heterosexual partnerships, Kel's romantic arc is minimal and ultimately unresolved. Her brief relationship with Cleon—though not central to the plot—serves a deliberate narrative purpose: to affirm that Kel is seen as

desirable. This echoes Radway's argument (discussed in Chapter 1) that a central appeal of romance fiction is the reader's dual desire to feel desired and to imagine an experience beyond the limits of their everyday life (12). Cleon's affection offers a counterpoint to Kel's own self-critical views of her body, suggesting that desirability is not exclusively determined by dominant cultural standards. Kel initially assumes that rejecting beauty norms will allow her to be perceived as neutral—unsexed, unthreatening, and unremarkable. Yet Cleon's interest affirms that even within Tortall's noble class, which often upholds rigid standards of femininity, there is space for broader recognition of female beauty and strength. This moment complicates the binary between rejection and acceptance of societal norms: Kel does not conform, but she is still wanted. Her arc highlights the difference between recognizing that one's body may not fit traditional ideals and internalizing that recognition as evidence of unworthiness. Early in the series, Kel does express self-doubt and assumes her body makes her undesirable—but her experience with Cleon proves that desirability is not monolithic, nor is it required for self-worth. Importantly, Kel does not derive long-term self-esteem from maintaining a romantic relationship. Her confidence grows from internal development and interpersonal respect, not romantic validation. When her relationship with Cleon ends, she does not return to earlier insecurities or resume comparing herself to other women. In this way, the narrative resists the trope of romantic resolution as a prerequisite for female self-acceptance.

Beyond Kel's relationship to her body and sex, Kel's body proves that ordinary girls—without magic or divine help—can excel in physically demanding, male-dominated roles, even while under intense public scrutiny. This is especially significant in patriarchal societies, both American and Tortallan, where masculinity often relies on the belief in men's biological superiority. In earlier chapters, I explored how gender and

sexuality are constructed and performed (Introduction and Chapter 1), and how the binary between human and nonhuman is similarly unstable (Chapter 2). Kel's success as a knight extends these ideas, aligning with contemporary scientific research that shows observed differences between male and female brains are shaped more by cultural conditioning and individual experience than by innate biological traits. A 2021 study that meta-synthesizes "3 decades of human brain sex difference findings" found that "male/female brain differences appear trivial and population-specific. The human brain is not 'sexually dimorphic'" (Eliot et al. 667). Pierce's depictions of female characters as individuals not predetermined or limited by their sex is supported by these findings of brain elasticity and the reversal of the perception that biology creates gender performance based on sex that considers instead that our biology can be effected by our actions and choices, which particularly exemplifies Wynter's view of gender as explored in the Introduction Chapter.

There is no evidence that Tortallans are biologically different from real-world humans, besides their ability to use magic. Supposed biological differences are used as justification for social hierarchies in arguments that ignore the possibility that biology can react to cultural patterns. For instance, if society perpetuates the idea of women as nurturers, then women who exist within these societies may develop more in the regions of empathy, not due to an inherent biological nature, but rather due to habit directed by society. As Ngaire Donaghue writes in "The 'Facts' of Life?", differences between the male and female brain have been emphasized and the similarities minimized (par. 5), which promotes evolutionary psychology, the idea that sex/gender differences are

“hardwired” in the brain (par. 3). By contrast, “plasticity” is applied to all other areas of neuropsychology but not gender/sex studies:

Within neuropsychology experience-dependent plasticity is a foundational concept that is heavily emphasised. Indeed, it is the increasing evidence that brains can and do change in response to experience (including therapeutic intervention) that seems to hold much of the excitement around the possibilities of neuropsychology [...] Yet despite the enthusiasm for plasticity in almost every aspect of neuropsychology, as Fine and colleagues have noted, when it comes to gender, plasticity is replaced by rigidity. (Donaghue par. 4)

Pierce’s narratives consistently challenge essentialist views of gender by depicting strong, competent female characters who defy traditional roles and inhabit spaces, such as knighthood or warfare, that are often coded as masculine. This reflects Gordon’s analysis of the interplay between birth control and progressive cultural attitudes, as discussed in the Feminist Magic section of Chapter 1. Donaghue further observes that scientific claims often mirror prevailing social assumptions rather than purely objective truth. If no researcher is examining the elasticity of the brain in relation to sex, gender, and identity formation, then there will, accordingly, be little to no research proving such a thing even if it did exist. Technologies, science, and magic are all reflections of what a society prioritizes in the stories it tells itself about itself in Wynter’s language. If the men and women in Tortallan society had their brains scanned, it would make sense that the majority of men’s brains would show increased aggression and reading ability in comparison to women’s, because Tortallan society dictates, either culturally or legally, that men

learn to defend themselves and are given access to education.<sup>21</sup> Applying plasticity to gender differences as Tortallan men grow up, their brain will learn what from what they do and increase neural pathways in the portions of their brain they use. Given this, it seems likely that Kel's brain would presumably be more similar to a fellow male knight's than to one of her noble sister-in-law's. Pierce's work further deconstructs the supposed limitations of biological sex within our conception of gendered human identity.

## NEOMEDIEVAL REALISM

This section draws upon the relationship between medievalism, neomedievalism, and American culture that I outlined in the Neomedievalism and America section of the Introduction Chapter and applies this approach specifically to *The Protector* series. During Kel's squire years, her presence subtly disrupts Tortallan gender norms. While the series primarily emphasizes male resistance to her knighthood, Kel's public role inspires admiration and emulation among girls and women across Tortall. Raoul tells her, "Your coming was a fine thing, for the realm, for all those girls who come to watch you tilt" (Pierce, *Squire* 232), which underscores the importance of Kel's role as a public and attainable model of alternate female existence in contrast to Alanna and Daine as examples. During an intense period of lance training and griffin care, Kel visits a women's bathhouse where the other women respond supportively:

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<sup>21</sup> It's not clear if this gender divide would be true within the lowest class in Tortall since Thayet not only introduces education to girls in Tortall, but makes it free and public, which allows even the poorest boys to attend school as well. However, before Thayet's decree, and potentially afterwards, men at large in Tortall would have a much higher level of education than women of the same class.

“Your back is covered with bruises,” the older woman said as her companion touched Kel’s shoulder. “They look painful, and recent. And your arms and hands are scarred.” [...]

“The Moon of Truth Temple will take you in. They’ll protect you.”

“They’ll get the man who did it,” the older woman said. The younger one and the attendant nodded. “Even if it’s a noble. After the rapes last winter, they have a new commander for their troops. She’s very aggressive.”[...] They thought a man had beaten her. (Pierce, *Squire* 93)

Though Kel is amused by the misunderstanding, the scene carries deeper tragedy. This scene takes place before Vinson and Joren take the Chamber of the Ordeal and are subsequently exposed for their individual crimes, which means that Kel doesn’t realize that the crimes these women are referencing with “the rapes last winter” were committed by Vinson. It’s an allusion that would most likely be lost on a younger reader, but for an older reader who realizes the implications, it further emphasizes the horror of the situation. This allusion also provides a glimpse into the wider world outside the palace—where women are aware that there is a sexual predator who has not been caught active in Corus and reveals that the Goddess’ temple is attempting to find justice for the victims, both within the judicial system of Tortall and physically with their own private female warriors out in the city. In a way, the reader is almost complicit with Kel for not seeing the signs earlier, noting the odd behavior at the women at the bath house or Vinson’s more alarming *pattern* of behavior with Lalasa.

This scene additionally reveals the structural and systemic dynamics at play in Pierce’s world. The women assume that Kel is the victim of domestic or gender-based violence and that

she was beaten by a man, which reveals a society where this violence is common. Furthermore, the Temple's willingness to act "even if it's a noble" hints at recent institutional change, yet it also implies that class privilege has historically shielded perpetrators from consequences.

Though I previously explored the limitations of Pipher's perception of girlhood in America, Pipher does note that the representation of sexuality in media in America has altered girlhood:

"They are coming of age in a more dangerous, sexualized and media-saturated culture. They face incredible pressures to be beautiful and sophisticated" (Pipher 12). Even if the form of media that sends the message to young girls changes in this period of America history, the actual message is a continuation of the Madonna/virgin and slut/whore dichotomy integrated into patriarchal characterizations of gender (Armstrong et al. 101).

As Kel argues to her friends, bullying can lead to violence against vulnerable people, especially women, in society. "Rape culture" is a way of recognizing and understanding structures of American society that are predicated on sexist reductions of women to sexual objects who exist for the pleasure of men. As Patricia Searles and Ronald Berger write, "Rape myths are presumptions that women are tempting seductresses who invite sexual encounters, that women secretly want to be raped, that women eventually relax and enjoy rape, and that men have urgent sexual needs that prevent them from controlling their behavior" (1). Though there is a difference in class, with Lalasa being Kel's servant even though Kel is younger than Lalasa, and despite Lalasa's initial shyness, the women form a very close friendship and are bonded further by shared experiences of trauma.

Gower, the general palace servant previously in charge of Kel's room and Lalasa's uncle, asks Kel to hire Lalasa because she is facing harassment and assaults from men, who maliciously interpret her shyness as flirtation. Kel is initially unsure about hiring Lalasa when she sees that

the harassment has included physical assault: “Kel saw a handspan of bruise under her left ear. [...] Gently she took Lalasa’s right arm and drew it toward her, pushing the sleeve back. Bruises like fingerprints marked the inside of her forearm” (Pierce, *Page 8*). The 2022 study “Young People’s Constructions of Gender Norms and Attitudes Towards Violence Against Women” uses qualitative data to examine how young adults’ adherence to strict gender norms is linked to attitudes that support violence against women (Edwards et al. 101–102). The researchers found that these gender norms frame men as “dominant, sexually aggressive, and physically strong”, while portraying women as “weak”, “vulnerable”, overly emotional, and subordinate within heterosexual relationships (Edwards et al. 102). This, they argue, leads to justifying violence against women “as ‘naturally’ something that men do” (ibid.).

When Kel urges Gower and Lalasa to report the abuse, he explains the impossibility of escaping harassment when the majority of people will either ignore her to maintain the status quo or blame her for her own sexual harassment (Pierce, *Page 8*). Even when Kel offers the support of powerful allies, Gower explains eventually and in some unforeseen way people will make Lalasa’s life “a misery” and that, in the end, Lalasa’s word against higher-class men will not be enough for people to believe her story or support her (Pierce, *Page 8-9*). The hopelessness of the situation is further demonstrated when Lalasa herself excuses the men’s actions, as she has come to expect violence from men (Pierce, *Page 9*, 155). In the end Kel cannot help but offer what protection she can by hiring Lalasa and ensuring that she at least has the patronage of a noble, albeit one not particularly popular at court. The normalization of violence and the silencing of victims depicted by Lalasa’s experience reveal how deeply systemic these gendered power structures are, functioning not just through individual actions but through collective social complicity. By portraying a world where even well-meaning men like Gower or even Raoul feel

powerless to intervene, Pierce underscores the idea that true change requires structural transformation, not just individual acts of protection. Kel is able to personally protect Lalasa from further harm, but without legal intervention, Kel is unable to stop Vinson from sexually assaulting several other women.

As Lalasa begins working for Kel, Kel becomes more aware of the harassment common-born women endure. While Kel is partially insulated by her noble status and combat skills, her relationship with Lalasa exposes her to the systemic inequities faced by lower-class women in Tortall. Shortly after hiring her, Kel witnesses a palace servant harassing Lalasa, manipulating her fear and implying that she has invited his attention: “Don’t be shy. If you’re nice, I’ll get you a better place than working for that crazy Mindelan girl” (Pierce, *Page 50*). The threat is subtle but unmistakable—his words make it clear that resistance could jeopardize her employment or safety. Only Kel’s social rank forces the man to back down, revealing how class, more than justice or right, determines whose voice is respected. Recognizing that Lalasa will likely face continued threats, Kel insists she learn self-defense:

“I don’t care if you don’t like it,” Kel told Lalasa sternly. “We’re going to show you holds that will help you, um, discourage someone from bothering you.”

Lalasa stared at Neal, who rubbed the delighted Jump on his belly, as if he were an ogre.

“At the very least you’ll convince them that you meant no when you said no”. (Pierce, *Page 52*)

This scene directly recalls the 1990s “no means no” campaign and a broader cultural push encouraging women to arm themselves against assault. As Jessica Wright similarly describes, “[...] consent talk gained popularity largely through the efforts of student activists, and the concept of consent appeared in women’s circles and self-defense workshops where feminists

asserted what became a popular slogan by the 1990s: “No means no!” (442). This is then another example of Pierce revising real American cultural language within the Tortall Universe. Yet Pierce’s portrayal suggests more than personal safety—it gestures toward the structural potential of self-defense as resistance. As Martha McCaughey argues, self-defense instruction offers not only physical tools but an ideological critique of patriarchal gender construction:

Women who take self-defense instruction, with whatever motivations and ideological perspectives, are offered an implicit or explicit critique of the ways in which gender is constructed in a culture of male privilege which rests on the abuse of women.

(McCaughey 7)

Pierce’s depiction of Kel training Lalasa reflects this ideology. By physically teaching Lalasa, and by extension the reader, how to fight back, Kel confronts gendered assumptions about female passivity and male control. In McCaughey’s terms, self-defense embodies “social values”, challenging the idea that women’s bodies are naturally weaker or submissive. Empowerment, in this context, becomes a lived and enacted challenge to systemic inequality.

McCaughey further emphasizes how this kind of training can “interrupt the vicious cycle of vulnerability” by disrupting narratives of male ownership over female bodies (McCaughey 9). Kel’s instruction focuses not on idealized heroism but on small, precise, practical strategies—targeting pressure points, twisting out of holds—actions that recognize violence as an everyday threat for many women. Her approach reflects a larger message: survival should not depend on exceptional strength or nobility, but on shared knowledge and collective empowerment. The text includes detailed strategies on self-defense:

She bent Neal's finger back, dug her nail into the crescent at the base of one of his fingernails, pinched the web between his thumb and forefinger with her nails, thrust a fingernail between the veins and tendons of his wrist, and gripped his hand with both of hers, forcing the thumb or little finger against his palm [...] They showed Lalasa how to turn an attacker's arm until she forced it up behind his back [...] Next, they demonstrated how to stamp on an enemy's instep when she was seized from behind, as well as eye gouges, nose and throat punches, and even the simple knee to the groin. (Pierce, *Page* 52–53)

These techniques could easily appear in a nonfiction guide, offering real-world strategies within a fantasy context. Pierce not only challenges gender norms but surreptitiously equips young readers—many of them girls—with material tools for navigating violence. As argued earlier, YA literature must balance depictions of resistance with adult gatekeeping. By embedding real techniques into a fantasy narrative, Pierce suggests that survival skills are essential knowledge, not exceptional attributes. This reframing positions resistance in YA literature as not merely symbolic, but tangible and instructive. McCaughey cites studies showing that survivors of rape often experience reduced self-efficacy, but after taking self-defense classes, their confidence is restored to levels comparable to those who have not been assaulted (McCaughey 9). Physical self-defense not only destabilizes gender binaries but also may empower survivors to reclaim agency. Pierce's inclusion of these techniques illustrates how regaining physical power can counteract the internalized helplessness produced by systemic violence.

This moment is both triumphant and tragic: Lalasa later uses what Kel taught her to resist Vinson's assault. After Kel rescues Lalasa from Vinson, Kel can see Lalasa using her techniques to attempt to free herself, "Now he fought to keep a hand over her mouth while her fingers

scrabbled over his arm, looking for tender places to pinch” (Pierce, *Page* 152, 155). When Kel confronts Vinson, he immediately resorts to victim-blaming, ““You’re wrong, Mindelan,’ he said, licking his lips nervously. ‘The wench has been eyeing me for weeks. They all do it — bed men to earn extra coin over their wages’” (Pierce, *Page* 153). Vinson’s response exemplifies a foundational contradiction within rape culture: he simultaneously attributes his actions to Lalasa’s supposed sexual availability while condemning her for it. By claiming that she has “been eyeing me for weeks” and suggesting that “they all do it — bed men to earn extra coin”, he positions Lalasa as both the instigator of his desire and as morally corrupt for eliciting it. This double standard characterizes women as responsible for male sexual behavior while punishing them for the very sexuality they are accused of wielding. In doing so, Vinson reduces Lalasa to a common misogynistic stereotype—the sexually manipulative lower-class woman—who is both tempting and disposable.

Vinson’s language reflects a broader system that legitimizes violence by constructing women as inherently suspect: seductive when passive, deceptive when assertive, and culpable regardless of their choices. Such logic shifts responsibility away from the perpetrator and onto the victim, preserving male dominance by weaponizing shame, class bias, and presumed promiscuity. Vinson is chastised by Kel but generally left unpunished after this encounter, though the reasons why are complex and address intersectional feminist concerns. Lalasa refuses to report Vinson, echoing earlier arguments made by both her and Gower that change cannot come from an individual’s actions but must happen more broadly, or the person, in this instance Lalasa, will never be safe, “They’ll talk until I’ve no reputation, that’s how things are in servants’ hall” (Pierce, *Page* 154). Kel acknowledges the limits of her power—she cannot protect Lalasa indefinitely or guarantee her acceptance by others. Ultimately, she defers to

Lalasa's decision, recognizing that the consequences will fall most heavily on her. Lalasa articulates the systemic nature of retaliation:

You'll get me in trouble. His kind can make it hard for servants. He speaks to his mother, who speaks to the chamberlain, who speaks to a steward, who puts my uncle out of work. How will you know it was done? How will you know it even came because of this? In two years you'll be gone, and Uncle and I will still be here. (Pierce, *Page* 154)

This exchange reflects the untenable choices sexual assault survivors often face in which the victim is subjected to retaliation and disbelief by reporting the assault or knowing the perpetrator may harm others if they remain silent to protect themselves. Pierce portrays these structural barriers without romanticizing individual courage, emphasizing instead the institutional complicity that sustains rape culture. Though American society is not based on such a rigorous class system as Lalasa refers to in this situation, cultural attitudes towards sexual violence against women in the U.S. perpetuates rape culture in similar ways by silencing, dismissing, and undervaluing women who accuse men of sexual violence, especially if the man accused is in a position of power (Walton 697; Khau 283, 285).

When Vinson undergoes his vigil in the Chamber of the Ordeal, his injuries manifest and disappear with each evasion or lie, forcing him to publicly admit his crimes (Pierce, *Squire* 219-220). Each time he attempts to justify his actions with victim-blaming language, the Chamber inflicts pain. His defenses are familiar: the survivor was promiscuous, led him on, or provoked him by refusing sexual advances—rationalizations that imply women should always be sexually available and that commoner women are inherently violable. As Ford writes, rape culture is not taught explicitly but rather embedded in societal norms: “It [American rape culture] very carefully provides an array of caveats and explanations for why the ordinary boys and men who

comprise the majority of sexual violence [...] are not really to blame for their actions” (*Boys* 287). Vinson and Joren are not taught to hate women explicitly, but Tortallan society supplies the cultural excuses and entitlements that enable their violence. The Chamber as a fantasy device is the truly neutral arbiter of justice, doing what Lalasa, Kel, Wyldon, and law enforcement could not do by forcing Vinson to suffer for his crimes.

Although Lalasa is relieved that Vinson is punished, Kel is haunted by guilt over their decision not to report him sooner. As Kel explains to Buri:

She didn't want me to report it. I should have [...] She said it was her word against his. She said he'd say she led him on, then struggled when she saw me so I wouldn't blame her for dallying. I could have reported it at the Goddess' temple, too, but I didn't. And he went after three more girls. (Pierce, *Squire* 222)

Buri agrees that Kel should have reported him and emphasizes the importance of leaving a record, “Next time, report it. Even if nothing is done because the one reported is too powerful, a record will be made. When he does it again, the record will show that he won't stop” (Pierce, *Squire* 224). In theory, Tortall—like early 2000s America—has legal structures designed to address sexual violence, but, as this exchange illustrates, these structures fail to address the social systems that permit such violence to persist. As Eric Janus argues, the prevailing narrative of the “predator archetype” distorts public understanding of sexual violence:

It is not simply that these new laws haven't been able to solve the problem of sexual violence. It is that our way of thinking about sexual violence is increasingly distorted ‘by the “predator archetype” of sexual violence. (3–4)

Janus explains that framing perpetrators as deviant strangers allows society to displace responsibility without addressing the conditions that enable abuse, “[It] encourages us to think that by exiling this monster we have acquitted our responsibility, yet as a larger society we will not have changed the circumstances that allow sexual violence to flourish” (Janus 4). Vinson is not a lurking stranger but a wealthy peer of Kel’s—privileged, entitled, and socially protected. His presence underscores how rape culture is upheld not by deviants on the margins but by those firmly embedded within accepted social institutions.

When Kel expresses anger over her failure to report Vinson, the narrative underscores the necessity of continuing to fight for equality, even when that fight does not guarantee justice. Buri responds to Kel:

“You’re an idealist Kel, I’ve noticed that about you. See, I try to beat idealism out of Rider trainees. It just ruins their ability to give a fair report. So long as there are nobles and commoners, the wealthy and the poor, those with power will be heard, and those without ignored. That’s the world.”

“I don’t accept that,” Kel said firmly [...]

“I didn’t say you should,” Buri replied. (Pierce, *Squire* 223–224)

Buri acknowledges inequality as an inherent feature of human society, where justice is inevitably shaped by power, wealth, and influence. The American legal system reflects a similar reality. Despite the efforts of Third and Fourth Wave feminism to raise awareness of sexual violence, justice remains elusive: “There appears to be a consistently widening gap between the numbers of reports versus arrests for forcible rape, which differs markedly from the pattern seen with other violent crimes” (Lonsway and Archambault 149). Kel’s conversation with Buri illustrates how entrenched hierarchies—between nobles and commoners, or the powerful and the

marginalized—perpetuate injustice. While Kel’s refusal to accept systemic inequality marks her moral stance, Buri emphasizes its pervasiveness. Together, these moments depict a world in which gender-based violence is sustained by broader social structures that excuse and enable male dominance. This theme resonates beyond the text, reflecting real-world struggles for justice within institutions designed to protect the powerful.

After Lalasa is assaulted by Vinson, she reveals that her brother has also abused her, implying both physical and, given the context, sexual violence: “He would’ve got to hitting sooner or later — they all do [...] My dad, my brothers all hit their women.’ Kel realized she was hearing bleak truth” (Pierce, *Page* 155). Lalasa’s later comments suggest ongoing abuse, and Kel is horrified to learn that Lalasa’s parents dismissed her claims simply because she is a girl—reinforcing the belief that male lives hold greater value regardless of their actions. Lalasa tells Kel, “When my bro – a man, a man hurt me, when I was little, and my parents said I lied. He was more important to them” (Pierce, *Page* 157). This distortion of Lalasa’s reality leads her to view violence as a natural and deserved part of male behavior. When women are disbelieved, their experiences are invalidated, other victims are discouraged from coming forward, and perpetrators are implicitly permitted to continue abusing with impunity. A key finding in the study on adolescent attitudes toward gender and violence against women is the urgent need for institutions to challenge the perception that women “provoke” the supposedly uncontrollable urges of men (Edwards et al. 103). Lalasa’s internalization of abuse as an expected consequence of male behavior reflects the insidious power of gender norms in convincing women they are responsible for their own mistreatment. When society consistently dismisses or undermines reports of violence, it signals to men that abuse will not be punished (ibid.). Disrupting these beliefs—especially the notion that male violence is biologically inevitable or justified—is

essential to ending cycles of harm. Pierce's depiction of these dynamics highlights the need to educate young people in recognizing and resisting normalized violence. Literature aimed at adolescents and women plays a critical role in this work. Through Kel's perspective, readers are prompted to recognize that victim-blaming and violence are not only socially tolerated but profoundly damaging—and must be actively opposed.

The series presents one further depiction of sexual violence during the refugee crisis, when Peliwin, a young woman, is raped by a Scanran soldier:

Peliwin Archer hacked at a dead guard, chopping his body repeatedly with a longsword she could barely swing.

[...]

Peliwin looked at Kel, despair in her eyes. There was a long, purpling bruise on the side of her lovely face and bruises around her neck as well. "He hurt me," she replied, her voice a croak. (Pierce, *Lady* 27)

Peliwin struggles with both the trauma of the assault and the violence of her response. As Manuela Colombini notes, "Although there has been an increase in studies on sexual and gender-based violence in armed conflicts, bringing greater visibility to the problem, literature is quite sparse. Most of the available material focuses either on health consequences or on legal issues" (168–169). Colombini further explains, "Sexual violence has become a weapon of war, very often used to destabilise national and cultural identity of civilians. Often it is women and young girls who are targeted first" and that "male coercion and sexual violence are the result of powerful constraints on women's freedom and men's attempt to control them", reflecting "the patriarchal structure of society where the female body is seen as a 'territory' to be owned and

controlled by the male” (Colombini, 168, 169). Kel’s inability to comfort Peliwin demonstrates another layer of realism—even allies may respond imperfectly to survivors' trauma.

Moreover, Pierce’s choice to recreate this conversation between Kel and Peliwin while choosing not to depict the actual assault within the narrative works against Martin’s arguments I examine following this argument, that realism in fantasy must be violent and explicit. Including this conversation between the two women frames the narrative of sexual violence in a way that honors Peliwin’s experience, avoids glorifying or normalizing the assault, and instead highlights the reparative and supportive relationships women can build in response to men’s sexual violence. Recognizing her mistake in their conversation, Kel immediately tries to amend her words:

“You’ve fixed it so he’ll never hurt anyone else. You can forget about him.” She winced, knowing she’d just said a very foolish thing.

“I mean, you can live your life. I guess you won’t be able to forget him.” She took her arm away.

“No,” Peliwin admitted, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“No, I don’t think I will.” She took a deep breath and squared her shoulders.

“I’m going [...] to wash”. (Pierce, *Lady* 272)

Although the perpetrator is dead and no formal justice is possible, the narrative clearly communicates that Peliwin’s suffering remains. In the absence of formal rape resources in Tortall, emotional support from other women, like Olka as the woman who comforts Peliwin when Kel struggles to, becomes vital. Given the prevalence of sexual violence, it is likely that many women in the refugee camps—mirroring real-world statistics—have experienced similar trauma. According to RAINN, someone in the United States is sexually assaulted “every 68

seconds” with 82% of juvenile victims and 90% of adult rape victims being female (par. 2). The majority of victims are between the ages of 12 and 34, placing young girls and women at greatest risk (ibid.). Given the prevalence of sexual violence, it is likely that many of Pierce’s readers have either experienced or will experience it. Her empathetic, realistic portrayal of trauma avoids romanticizing or exploiting these experiences, instead acknowledging their emotional complexity and long-term impact. Peliwin’s story resists spectacle or easy resolution, presenting survival not as triumph, but as the ongoing negotiation of pain. Kel’s response to Peliwin models a nonjudgmental recognition of assault—she never questions Peliwin’s actions or appearance, unlike figures such as Wyldon or Joren’s father who embody victim-blaming attitudes. Across these depictions, Pierce rejects the narrative ease of closure, emphasizing the enduring realities of trauma and systemic failure. In doing so, she offers young readers rare validation of their lived or potential experiences, while challenging the cultural narratives that silence survivors. Her work insists that empathy, endurance, and communal care are vital forms of resistance—even as the possibility of legal justice remains uncertain.

As I discussed in the Introduction Chapter, George R. R. Martin’s claim to “realism” positions his neomedieval world in direct opposition to the so-called “escapism” of Tolkien—yet this invocation of history as justification for sexual violence is itself a fantasy. It is not possible for a neomedieval text to be realistic, and the insistence that it is historically accurate perpetuates male fantasies and a constructed, romanticized version of the Middle Ages in which men are free to rape. The following section challenges both the critical praise for Martin’s character, Brienne of Tarth, also a female knight in a male-dominated profession, and the broader literary framing of sexual violence in his work as “realistic”. Martin’s world-building relies heavily on the assumption that rape is a natural feature of “realistic” fantasy, and that his

depiction of gendered violence is both historically grounded and politically meaningful. However, this approach overlooks the historical reality of male rape, simplifies the complexities of medieval law, and perpetuates the notion that women must always live under threat. It highlights the distinction between genuinely addressing historical injustice and merely including it without critical reflection, which risks reproducing the same power dynamics rather than challenging them. In contrast, Pierce's depictions of sexual violence are more peripheral but also more emotionally nuanced. Her work relies on the hope that justice—however imperfect—is still possible, and her introduction of the Chamber of the Ordeal as a magical and incorruptible punisher of Vinson's violence toward women offers a striking counterpoint to Martin's grim fatalism.

Martin's invocation of the medieval to justify rape, child marriage, and misogyny fails to account for the wide range of medieval gender roles, religious edicts, and legal contexts. Carroll challenges the contemporary violent portrayal of the Middle Ages as not taking "into account medieval laws, class systems, religious edicts, or gender roles—or, again, the vast differences in these between countries and spans of time within the 1,000 years covered by the term 'Middle Ages'" (*Enchanting* 15). As Carroll explains, "although Martin is aware that he is writing fantasy and thus has complete control over his world and setting, he still relies heavily on his background reading of history and historical fiction to 'pass the buck'" (*Enchanting* 19). These historical justifications also obscure the reality that rape was not only committed against women and are a refusal to take accountability for how these elements are depicted in fantasy. Moreover, within the *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Martin's sexual violence as depicted in-text rather than

referenced depicts sexual violence almost exclusively towards women.<sup>22</sup> If Martin was aiming for true historic realism rather than the view of history predicated by those in power who kept records, he would portray sexual violence towards men as well since “Sexual violence against men during war has occurred throughout history, yet remains largely invisible” (Vojdik 923). And while there is historical evidence of a persistent male rape culture in the Middle Ages, scholars caution against drawing easy conclusions: “Given both the dearth and disparity of extant sexual assault cases across medieval Europe, it is impossible to offer statistics on the prevalence of rape” (Armstrong-Partida 130). As Anthony Musson warns, “existing perceptions of women’s violation in medieval England are distorted because of a failure to approach the legal records on their own terms and examine properly and thoroughly the whole legal context” (84). These oversights reveal that Martin’s realism is selective, relying on sensationalism rather than historical complexity. The authorial choices that an individual author makes when creating an imaginary world are a deliberate choice to reflect realistic elements or imagine alternate ones.

Despite this, Martin’s characters are often praised for subverting fantasy tropes. In *A Quest of Her Own*, John H. Cameron highlights Brienne of Tarth as a heroic exception. “It is through her negotiation of knighthood [...] that Brienne of Tarth truly emerges as a new kind of hero, and one that helps to redefine the parameters, challenge old stereotypes, and expand the development of the female hero in modern fantasy in innovative ways” (Cameron 189). Scholars celebrate her compassion, loyalty, and determination, often in contrast to male figures like Jaime Lannister (Cameron 193–203). However, her “exceptionalism” obscures the broader issues in Martin’s portrayal of gender. While Brienne is indeed a compelling figure, Pierce had already

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<sup>22</sup> This thesis does not have the space to analyze Martin’s texts, however, for further information on this phenomenon in media including in Martin’s work see Sophia McDougall’s 2013 article “The rape of James Bond: On Sexual Assault, and “Realism” in popular culture.

written three equally brave, complex, compassionate heroines who are each dedicated to protecting the vulnerable, often without requiring the constant threat of sexual violence to prove their worth. Pierce also challenges the trope that rape is necessary for narrative or moral growth. In *Squire*, Vinson's punishment is not carried out through state power or institutional justice but through the magical Chamber of the Ordeal. The Chamber resists all attempts at manipulation or denial, punishing Vinson only when he attempts to minimize or justify his crimes. Unlike Martin's world, where justice is arbitrary and often absent, Pierce offers a vision of accountability that, while fantastical, serves as an ethical aspiration rather than a cynical concession and operates outside the limitations of human justice systems.

Even within feminist fantasy, the use of rape as a character-defining experience is not uncommon. In *Earthsea Revisioned*, Le Guin reflects on Therru: "She has nothing left of the girl men want girls to be. It's all been burned away" (24). While this is often interpreted as a rejection of patriarchal gender norms, it also risks reinforcing the idea that a girl must be destroyed in order to be free. Pierce's heroines reject this framing. They are not made strong by trauma alone, but by the choices they make afterward, and by the communities that support them. As the above examples in Pierce's Tortall Universe demonstrate, the attitudes surrounding masculinity and female sexuality in a society have an effect on the way sexual violence against women is ignored, dismissed, or justified. Especially when men who are privileged and/or in a position of power perpetuate ideas of hypersexuality in girls and women and excuse male violence in a society constructed on the basis gender, class, wealth, and racial hierarchies. The patterns of gendered entitlement and dismissal of female autonomy depicted in Pierce's Tortall Universe mirror real-world dynamics, showing how societal attitudes toward masculinity and female sexuality shape responses to sexual violence. As contemporary examples, including

Donald Trump's public statements and the normalization of "boys will be boys" behavior, demonstrate these cultural scripts not only persist but are reinforced through media, politics, and social institutions, illustrating the ongoing impact of literature and culture on societal norms (Walton 699, Marron 10).

## CONCLUSION

The Protector series expands the feminist imagination of the Tortall Universe by reframing heroism as something grounded not in divine favor or mythic destiny but in perseverance, community, and social accountability. Kel's journey directly revises and responds to the narrative established by Alanna—not by replacing her, but by complicating and expanding the possibilities for female identity, power, and resistance in a patriarchal world. Pierce's work is deeply invested in the idea that gender is not biological but cultural and that institutions of justice, heroism, and leadership are all deeply entangled in patriarchal values that require active questioning. May observes that *The Protector* revisits the structure of *The Song* with the aim of correcting its individualist and divine-reliant logic. Additionally, May writes: "The result is a text that is distinctively aware of itself as an appraisal of an existing story", adding that this "metahonesty" enhances Pierce's early work while pushing her broader feminist paradigm forward (66). While May rightly highlights Pierce's narrative self-awareness, this thesis argues that such revisionary work is not merely textual—it is theoretical. Kel's story represents a key turn in Pierce's evolving depiction of female heroism: one that does not reject Alanna but moves beyond her, trading the fantasy of exceptionalism for the radical difficulty of structural change.

When viewed within the larger Tortall Universe, Kel's arc illustrates how Revisionist Feminism functions across the various series. Individual moments may fall short of progressivism by themselves, but Pierce's sustained return to her own narratives—to revise, reflect, and challenge earlier frameworks—demonstrates a feminist practice rooted in contradiction, multiplicity, and growth. The Protector shows Pierce grappling with the limits of her earlier portrayals and responding with a more socially embedded, collective, and intersectionality-conscious version of heroism. This is not a repudiation of earlier texts but an expansion—an acknowledgment that feminism, like the genre of fantasy itself, must be capacious enough to hold contradiction and revision. Even within the world of the books, Pierce embeds this tension. In *Spy's*, Alanna writes that she expects her successor as King's Champion to be male, as no immediate successors are available and “Lady Kel has made it clear that she is too sane for the work that I have done [as King's Champion], and the more recent girls have yet to obtain their shields” (Pierce, *Spy's* 3). That Kel declines to take up Alanna's position is not a retreat from heroism, but a statement about choosing different forms of power. It marks a shift from legendary status to lived resistance, from symbol to system. Ultimately, Pierce's feminist fantasy is not a singular vision but a process—one that evolves in conversation with her past work, with her readers, and with the shifting landscape of feminist discourse. It is precisely in the holding of contradiction, in the refusal to discard flawed beginnings, that her work models an ongoing, expansive Revisionist Feminist project.

# Chapter 4:

## Race, Slavery, & Class in the Tortall Universe

### INTRODUCTION

The following chapter focuses primarily on the reoccurring and interconnected depictions of the intersectionality of marginalized identities that Pierce revisits and seeks to revise throughout the Tortall Universe. Following this brief Introduction section, the section on Race outlines some previous scholarship on depictions of non-white characters in Pierce's works and focuses on previously under-recognized depictions of race in the Tortall Universe in order to investigate the complicated and often problematic relationship among feminism, American culture, and race. The following section on Face Veils expands the critical analysis of these depictions of race and feminism by examining two short stories set in the Tortall Universe that demonstrate a direct example of Pierce's self-critical revisionist practices. The following section on Slavery explores Pierce's revisitations to and revisions of slavery in the Tortall Universe, and I highlight the notable absence of racialized oppression as it exists in American history and experience. The two subsequent sections on Class and Justice explore Pierce's depiction of class hierarchies in the Tortall Universe and the failures of judicial systems that uphold inequality even when nominally protecting people within a society.

As I referenced in the Revisionist Feminism section of the Introduction and the Scholarship section of Chapter 1, Pierce's depictions of marginalized identities beyond cisnormative white women have often reflected reductive or prejudiced patterns rooted in white, Anglocentric norms. Rather than undermining her feminist project, I argue that these portrayals

reveal Pierce's Revisionist Feminist practices: they document her ongoing attempts to recognize and address the limitations of her earlier representations. While these revisions do not constitute a straightforward progression toward fully intersectional feminism, they do reflect a consistent movement toward greater diversity and complexity in the depiction of identity across the Tortall Universe and Pierce's continued dedication to self-critical feminist practices. As with other comparisons between the Tortall Universe and the U.S., shifts in Pierce's methods for depicting marginalized identities in the Tortall Universe can additionally be examined in order to explore how these depictions reflect the limitations and shortcomings of American feminism. The evolution of Pierce's depiction of marginalized identities, with its uneven but persistent movement toward greater diversity, can be understood in light of the observation that, "Understanding that male supremacy and white supremacy are, at very least, intertwined" does not imply a categorization of "any hierarchy regarding which form of oppression—if any—is 'worse,' 'more fundamental,' or deserving of greater attention than any other" (Starhawk 244). Pierce's Revisionist Feminist practices similarly navigate the intersection of multiple axes of oppression, and her explorations of individual female identity necessarily involve examining how expansive feminism is complicated by additional marginalization within a society. Pierce's depictions, even when limited by Anglocentric or cisnormative frameworks, demonstrate an iterative engagement with intersecting forms of marginalization, reflecting both the complexities of identity and the challenges of representing its complexities within the broader cultural context of American feminism.

## RACE

Within the context of the YA genre, the lack of characters of color and the often problematic depictions of these characters when they do appear in literary narratives represent an ongoing issue within the genre of authors and texts critically engaging with these intersectional aspects of femininity and adolescence. The crucial intersection of age and identity formation in young adults creates a particularly poignant place of identity formation and analysis. As Thomas writes, “Marginalization has been a persistent problem in literature for children and adolescents throughout history” (*The Dark* 7). Although Tamora Pierce’s early works primarily addressed gender inequality within fantasy narratives, such as *The Song* and *The Immortals*, her later series such as *Tricksters* and *Provost’s Dog* expanded to engage more wholly with race, class, slavery, and colonialism. Across the Tortall Universe, Pierce increasingly portrays oppression as a systemic and intersectional phenomenon shaped by overlapping hierarchies of power rather than based solely off a gender or sex binary. As I will explore briefly in this section, there are existing conversations on Pierce’s depictions of people of color and there is further analysis necessary of the Tortall Universe in order to fully critique the depiction of characters of color in the Tortall Universe. However, for the purposes of this thesis, my examination of race will focus on three examples of Pierce revising her ideas in relation to race that have been previously unexplored in scholarship: “TP Gate 2015”, which I use as a starting point to discuss race and Revisionist Feminism in this section, and then with a focus on two intersectional issues of race depicted in Pierce’s Tortall Universe of *Face Veils* and *Slavery* in their respective sections.

Due to *The Song* being Pierce’s oldest publication and her most popular, critical attention already exists on Alanna’s relationship with the Bazhir and the wider implications of Pierce’s literary representations of these non-white characters. For example, Sahn criticizes Pierce’s

depiction of colonist narratives by exploring the contradictions and limitations of Pierce's depiction of the Bazhir and Alanna's relationship with the Bloody Hawk tribe in *Rides*:

Alanna's time with the Bazhir may read as bringing these institutions—of knighthood, of monarchy, of Western civility—to the Bazhir, highlighting Alanna herself as an enlightened Western subject and civilising savior against the desert 'savages'; but we may also read as defining herself apart from these institutions by moving into a marginalized space where she can be recognized, and recognize others, on her and their own terms. (Pierce, *Rides* 154)

It is significant to recognize alongside Sahn that Pierce's portrayal of the Bazhir people is often problematic and reflective of 1970s and 80s white American attitudes towards people of color who look like people from the Bazhir tribes.<sup>23</sup> However, since several examinations exist of the characterization and depiction of the Bazhir as racially Other, both in scholarship, such as by Sahn (above), Jessica R. Dube, or Leah Phillips, and in online discussions, such as blogs (Angela), Tumblr (Berkely), and the archived Pierce Goldenlake forum ("The Ysandir"), this thesis will focus on other representations of race in the Tortall Universe beyond this established scholarship.<sup>24</sup> Much of this existing scholarship has accurately picked apart the problematic representations of the Bazhir and the "habits of whiteness" that Young suggests Pierce perpetuates by these representations (*Race* 1). Thomas questions the historical practice of fantasy providing imaginary worlds in which people of color can imagine themselves, and she also frames the conversation in a similar context to the ongoing work of feminist and imaginative revision as an iterative, open-ended process, which is "intended to be the opening of a

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<sup>23</sup> The 9<sup>th</sup> edition of MLA advises that either capitalization or all lower case is acceptable for descriptions of race, as long as consistency is maintained, but ethnic groups should always be capitalized.

<sup>24</sup> For more scholarship on Pierce and the Bazhir people see my section on Scholarship in Chapter 1.

conversation, not the culmination of it” (*The Dark* 13). This concept aligns closely with Revisionist Feminist practice, which values the continual expansion and reassessment of feminist possibilities rather than seeking a fixed or perfected model of liberation. Pierce’s narratives, in which characters repeatedly navigate and challenge intersecting forms of oppression, exemplify this ongoing project, creating spaces where gender, race, and class can be reconsidered, critiqued, and reimagined.

Cecire specifically critiques Pierce as part of this trend of medieval whiteness that Young and E. Thomas identify within the broader Fantasy genre. Cecire describes *The Song* as “proto-feminist” and while noting that Pierce’s *intention* may have been progressive, Cecire ultimately critiques Alanna’s relationship with and Pierce’s depiction of the Bazhir. Cecire writes:

Alanna mentors young Bazhir women and combats the culture’s restrictive gender norms. The novel clearly seeks to encourage understanding, friendship, and discourse across racial and cultural lines [...] But [...] such externally imposed liberation is often an imperialistic act. (202-203)

Although Cecire critiques Pierce’s reductive and biased portrayals of race in *The Song*, she acknowledges that Pierce’s intentions are inclusive, illustrating how both the ambitions and limitations of white feminists are central to the practice of Revisionist Feminism by both recognizing failures and encouraging self-critical revision.

In tracing the development of Pierce’s depictions of characters of color over time, both within the Tortall Universe and in chronological publication order, it becomes evident that she has *attempted* to revise and expand her treatment of race in a more inclusive direction with each subsequent series. Although these revisions do not represent a straightforward, linear progression

toward greater inclusivity, they demonstrate that Pierce remains attentive to and self-critical of racial representation within the Tortall Universe. Liz Walz further advocates for an expansive approach to white feminism that draws on Feminist Revisionist practices, emphasizing self-criticism, the willingness to seek out and internalize critiques from the intersectional perspectives of people of color, and the cultivation of compassion and understanding rather than striving for perfect comprehension. She writes:

In this journey of recognizing the ways I carry whiteness and the impacts of white privilege and white superiority today, I have discovered greater compassion [...]. This is the beginning of change. In this space of compassion, I have felt the false ego that white-socialization creates melt away into some identity that is more human. [...] Along with this has come a capacity to sit in the fire of criticism without either falling apart or lashing back. All of this contributes to a humility from which I am more readily able to apologize—when I recognize the impact of my words or actions or silence has contributed to the injury or diminishment of another”. (Walz 108)

As Walz demonstrates, silence on an issue can also be as problematic as reductive engagements with these topics. Examining the whiteness of previous feminism is, as Cecire notes, particularly important in the context of American Revisionist Feminism and its frequent failure to engage fully with questions of race in YA female fantasy. Cecire writes that fantasy has been a disappointment of infinite possibilities for people of color because “Despite these revisionist possibilities, fantasy identities have long remained overwhelmingly white” (25). Walz’s transparency models the kind of reflective accountability that underpins effective Revisionist Feminist practice, and Cecire echoes the importance of revisionism in U.S. feminism, with both

authors emphasizing that meaningful engagement requires both a recognition of harm and an openness to correction.

In 2015, Tamora Pierce made a comment on the newly released Marvel TV show series *Agent Carter* in response to criticism of the show as being too white by arguing that this was accurately representative of “the time”, referring to the U.S. in the 1940s, and that it was better than casting people of color to (only) play “black help and blacks in service” (Pierce, “On Exactitude”). As I previously explored in the Queer Readings section of Chapter 1, Pierce’s beyond-textual additions to the Tortall Universe do fit within Revisionist Feminist, as a self-critical and in-practice method of enacting feminism even though these revisions are at times reductive rather than progressive. Using this example of “TP Gate 2015”, which took place across Tumblr and Pierce’s blog in the same year, I explore Pierce’s Revisionist Feminism enacted across a space beyond the published texts while still within the Tortall Universe.

Pierce’s initial response to the criticisms of her statements on Agent Carter was defensive and angry. In an online post responding to the first wave of negative comments after Pierce’s first statement, she wrote:

Either the show is trying to give the audience an appreciation of the time—thus the thuggish treatment of women and the disabled—or it’s a fantasy show and should be all inclusive.

But you were looking for a racist and despite my apologies and attempts to clarify [sic] my views—this wasn’t my first post on this matter—you decided I was one. (Pierce, On Exactitude)

Several fans responded with disappointment and frustration, criticizing both Pierce’s initial prejudicial remarks and her subsequent attempts to justify or apologize for them; for example (minuiko), (lightspeedsound), and (Neuroatypically-speaking) all responded on Tumblr to

Pierce's first apology and critiqued her for refusing to take criticism and for becoming defensive instead. They serve as examples of some of the direct response that shaped Pierce's online conversation. In her third apology, Pierce acknowledges her errors more fully:

I apologize for pushing an error-filled non-version of history on people. I am deeply sorry that I did not use terms of respect for those who are not white correctly, something I should have gotten straight long before this. And lastly, beg your pardon for demanding that you respect opinions that I did not even bother to double-check, thereby disrespecting you. I claimed we were having a discussion, but I was only making declarations, for which I am very ashamed. (Pierce, "Third Apology")

While criticism of Pierce's depiction of race in the *Tortall* universe—particularly in *The Song and Tricksters*—has continued and remains justified, the so-called "TP Gate" incident has largely been forgiven or forgotten within her fanbase. I argue that Pierce's final apology reflects an important step in taking accountability, as it demonstrates a willingness to recognize her errors, step back, and reflect on the harm caused by her words that allows feminists who practice revisionism to accept mistakes without minimizing or erasing them.

Pierce's process of apologies aligns with Walz's personal observations in "Whiteness and Silence" written in 2008 and within the context of a discussion of race in the U.S., where Walz self-reflectively examines her own previous mistakes as a white person when responding to criticism from people of color. Walz explains that personally she had "to unlearn white assumptions and behaviors, making mistakes and being open to correction along the way" and, moreover, that it is more important to deal with racism rather than avoid it because of the topic's complexities: "It is the silence of white people that allows racism to injure people of color day in and day out—in personal and systemic ways" (Walz 105, 108). Pierce's initial defensiveness and

subsequent apologies illustrate both the harm that can arise from speaking from unexamined assumptions and the potential for growth when mistakes are acknowledged publicly rather than denied or erased. Pierce's willingness to engage, even imperfectly, with self-criticism demonstrates that unlearning entrenched biases is an ongoing process that requires both reflection and the courage to accept correction.

Finally, the fact that Pierce has kept the entirety of the conversation, including her initial response for which she has since expressed regret for, archived and available on her personal blog and website demonstrates this principal of revision. Pierce's mistake in this instance stems from a common criticism of the feminist movement in America which prioritizes the perspective and issues of white women at the expense of others. In their respective books, Ebony Thomas, Helen Young, and Maria Cecire all identify that this deficiency of American feminism is often replicated in YA Fantasy. As I refer to the works of these scholars throughout this chapter, they all identify the particular failure of YA Fantasy authors in choosing perpetuating these problematic and reductive modes of feminism in worlds that are imagined. Indeed, the justification Pierce initially gives for her statement also echoes Martin's characterization of realism in fantasy that I critiqued earlier in this thesis as choosing to perpetuate historical inequities, or *perceived* historical inequities, in fantasy worlds in order to be more realistic. However, unlike other authors in similar situations, such as J.K. Rowling, Pierce does not seem intent on erasing her mistake and, despite her initial poor response, did later acknowledge that she was being prejudiced. This does not erode Pierce's Revisionist Feminist legacy, but rather is part of the critical process of self-examination necessary to be undertaken by feminists, and especially white, privileged feminists, in order to challenge and change limitations of perception. A strength of Revisionist Feminism as a critical approach is its ability to praise the progressive

and influential dimensions of Pierce's female YA heroes and fantasy world-building without ignoring or attempting to justify her limitations and prejudices in writing characters of color or her previously problematic statements on complex identities.

The remainder of this chapter examines how Pierce's novels critique not only patriarchal norms but also racial and economic structures that marginalize groups based on class and ethnicity through characters, such as Alanna, Daine, Kel, Aly, and Beka. Through these series and revisions of the same topic, Pierce highlights how systems of privilege are maintained through legal institutions, religious ideology, and social norms—often revealing the ways reforms can be undermined by entrenched cultural prejudices. By analyzing depictions of slavery in Carthak, racial hierarchies in the Copper Isles, economic stratification in Tortall, and the manipulation of religious doctrine to control women, this chapter argues that Pierce's evolving body of work reflects a growing awareness of the complexities of intersectional injustice and the limitations of liberal feminist solutions within her imagined world. Thomas underscores the difficulty of imaginative engagement for marginalized audiences, writing, "Even the very act of dreaming of the worlds-that-never-were can be challenging when the world does not provide many liberating spaces" (*The Dark 2*). This observation situates Pierce's fantasy worlds as interventions within a genre that has historically limited who can see themselves reflected in these imagined spaces.

## FACE VEILS

This section will briefly examine Pierce's revision of face veils as they appear in The Song series and in two short stories in *Lands*. This section is not a comprehensive examination of

Pierce's portrayal of the Bazhir and non-white cultures in the Tortall Universe, but an example of different portrayals of face veils to demonstrate her ability to engage with these topics throughout Pierce's time writing about the Tortall world. Alanna dislikes the face veils of the Bazhir women when she joins the tribe and sees their use as a repressive practice imposed on girls when they reach womanhood around twelve years old (Pierce, *Rides* 11, 31-32). While Americans values are predicated on religious freedom from the First Amendment, post-9/11 Islamophobia highlights the struggle to integrate Muslim identities in American society. Pierce doesn't use terms like "Muslim" or "Islam", but depicts cultural practices resembling aspects of Islam. Characters in *Rides* and "Elder Brother" view face coverings as oppressive, while those in "The Hidden Girl" align more with feminist Muslim scholars who cite freedom of choice and refusal to operate within patriarchal society's ascribing of worth to beauty (Pierce *Lands* 347; Yasmin 113).

In the short story collection *Lands*, two interconnected stories, "Elder Brother" first published in 2001 and "The Hidden Girl" published in 2006 explore the perspectives of two young girls regarding the wearing of face veils. Both stories are set in an unspecified kingdom within the fantasy world of Tortall. "Elder Brother" follows Qiom, a tree transformed into a man by Numair's magic at the end of *Wolf-Speaker*. Struggling to navigate the human world, Qiom befriends Fadal, a young girl who disguises herself as a boy for increased freedom and safety (Pierce, *Lands* 347). In contrast to Alanna, Fadal dresses as a man under the direct threat of life rather than as an expansion of women's freedoms. Qiom's characterization in this context also echoes the way Pierce utilizes nonhuman perspectives to criticize ingrained human beliefs and systems, as I explored in the Wild Magic and Ecology sections of Chapter 2. Often confused by the complex social norms around him, Qiom relies on Fadal to explain the dangers of a young

girl traveling unveiled, including the threats of violence and the societal perception that “women of an age to bear children are a temptation to men” (Pierce, *Lands* 42). As with The Great Mother Goddess in the Provost’s Dog series, “Elder Brother” and “The Hidden Girl” explore how humans twist religion to justify social hierarchies. The god referenced here and appearing in both stories is the God in the Flame, a character used as justification to control and oppress women, just as humans twist The Goddess in *Mastiff* to promote the cult of the gentle mother. But it’s clear in “The Hidden Girl” that this society, in some land outside Tortall, has been suppressing other teachings of their country's gods that argue for equality and better rights for girls and women (Pierce, *Lands* 60-66).

Fadal’s concerns for safety are justified because when she is discovered as an unveiled girl, the male villagers capture her for “correction” and probable death (Pierce, *Lands* 46). As Qiom describes, “They would throw stones at Fadal’s human flesh. They would break her kindness, her patience, her stories, and her willingness to work hard [...] hurry, he must hurry, before they hurt Fadal beyond repair” (Pierce, *Lands* 46-47). This scene is suggestive of specific practices in contemporary cultures; Hamdid R. Kusha and Nawal H. Ammar write that some Islamic countries, with most reported cases happening in Iran in early 2000s, have used religion to justify the harm or killing of women by stoning as a punishment for perceived promiscuity (7). Sanaz Alasti notes that this practice is not limited to contemporary examples in Muslim countries, as there are historic examples in Judaism and Christianity of stonings (3). Stonings as a punishment for adultery have both historic and present examples, though the religion and countries where they take place have varied (Kusha and Nawal 7-8). Pierce’s inclusion of this element is evocative of the fear and control that this gender-based violence has on women in a society where it is practiced.

In “Elder Brother”, the townspeople intended to burn Fadal alive for the crime of acting as a boy (Pierce, *Lands* 56). Fadal and Qiom escape to Tortall with Numair’s distant help, where they both look forward to a world where Fadal does not have to be veiled (Pierce, *Lands* 49). The few descriptions of Qiom, or the kingdom west of Tortall, show the kingdom as populated by non-white people. Qiom describes himself as “his skin was a darker brown than Numair’s had been; his shaggy crown hair was black” (Pierce, *Lands* 28, 34). As a former tree, Qiom begins his human life with little concern for politics, unjust societies, or personal identity since they are irrelevant to his previous life. But he cares for Fadal and does not want her to face danger for trying to exist in the world. Fadal hates the veil and the harsh restrictions of women in her culture (Pierce, *Lands* 42). Fadal hates the face veil so much that she would rather risk being caught and dying for dressing without a veil, than living her life wearing one, so she asks Teky, “How do you stand it? [...] Doing all that draped in veils? A slave in chains has more freedom to move” (Pierce, *Lands* 53). Teky is unaware that Fadal is in fact a woman and laughs at Fadal’s failure to recognize the freedom the face veil provides for women. As such, Teky laughs off Fadal’s comments, believing her to be a man who has never worn a face veil and, therefore, cannot truly understand it. Yet for the reader, both Fadal and Teky offer distinctly female perspectives on the wearing of face veils, even as those perspectives conflict. Fadal’s use of cross-dressing, in contrast to Alanna’s, occurs within a genre framework that provides the character with a narrative “excuse” for her disguise. As Flanagan observes:

Children’s literature [...] regularly presents a slightly unbelievable model (in terms of the modern concept of transgender) in which young women dress themselves as boys, escape an oppressive regime, prove themselves the equals of their male counterparts, and then revert to their former feminine subject positions. (*Into the Closet* 48)

Ultimately, however, both Alanna and Fadal's actions resist this traditional trajectory. Their "transgression" is not merely a temporary plot device designed to ultimately restore them to prescriptive female roles; instead, it functions as a necessary intervention that reshapes their self-perception and influences how they reenter the world after their gendered identities are revealed (ibid.).

However, Pierce's returns to the issue of veiled women in "The Hidden Girl", which takes place in-universe immediately after the events of "Elder Brother", although Pierce wrote the story five years afterwards. This is an example of the most directly revisionist Tortall Universe texts. "The Hidden Girl" follows the story of Teky, a young girl around Fadal's age. Fadal, who's still posing as a boy at this point, and Teky have a conversation about the veil in which Fadal expresses surprise that Teky likes wearing a veil (Pierce, *Lands* 53). Teky continues, telling Fadal:

Before I put them on, I was a sheep on the market. My nose was longer than my cousin's, my skin not so fine as my mother's, my hair not so curly as my aunt's. My teeth, my weight, my length of bone—pick, pick, pick. Then I put on my veil. Poof! The gossips have my eyes, my hands, my voice, my feet. They must judge me on my value to my family, and my family values me for who I am and what I can do. (ibid.)

Here Pierce recognizes the veil for Teky is a way for her to act against their patriarchal society that predicates a woman's worth on their physical attractiveness in relation to men. In the story's conclusion, Teky is able to continue teaching precisely because of her veil, as it allows her both to pretend to be an elderly woman rather than a sixteen-year-old girl and to blend into groups of women wherever she travels, indistinguishable except by height and relative weight (Pierce,

*Lands* 60). The narrative would have been far more compelling and challenging if Teky's father had survived, as his presence would have maintained direct male authority over her life. In that context, Teky would have faced the same radical choice Fadal confronts—dressing as a man—not merely as a practical strategy, but as a necessary act to claim the life she desires and pursue her religious vocation.

Tekey also mitigates the danger to herself personally by “hiding” behind her veil and pretending to be an old woman, not an unmarried sixteen-year-old girl, but Pierce does not address in the narrative how these situations conveniently protect Teky's safety and not someone like Fadal's (Pierce, *Lands* 73-74). Pierce's narrative in this story is nuanced in its positive depiction of an individual girl's relationship with her face veil, but does lack an explicit engagement with how these individual freedoms function within the broader patriarchal structures. In response to western perceptions of the face veil as “oppressive”, a young British Muslim woman, Samra Mursaleen, defends the practice in a *Guardian* article:

The head veil with or without the face veil (which incidentally is not a religious requirement) is in fact a liberating and an empowering force rather than an oppressive one. [...] With their outer beauty hidden from view what is exposed instead is their mind and inner qualities and so in any interaction with men they are valued not just for how they look. (Mursaleen par. 4)

Tekey's views of her face veil echo Mursaleen's description while other Muslim women, such as Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, argue that “For many of us secular Muslims, hijabs concede that parts of a woman's body needs to be hidden, that females are a sexual menace or in perpetual danger from males, all of whom are presumed to be predatory” (112). Nor are views of all face or head coverings the same among women who choose to wear one or both—Faegheh Shirazi and

Smeeta Mishra note in their study of American perceptions of face veils among Muslim women that the reaction was markedly different towards the perception of wearing a *niqab*, full face and head covering, versus a *hijab*, only a head covering, with the former being viewed more negatively than the latter (52). Donna Gehrke-White also notes that while some Muslim majority countries do use the face veils and control of women's clothing as tools of control, the majority of Muslim women in the U.S. see wearing a face veil as a personal choice: "Despite the message of some leaders in the Muslim world who invoke Islam to suppress women, most Muslim women in the United States see their religion as a liberating force" (Gehrke-White 5). Pierce's inclusion of both short stories within the collection of *Lands* captures both opinions on face veils, allowing the views to co-exist without attempting to argue that one viewpoint is a superior representation of feminism. Both views existing simultaneously is a strength of Pierce's Revisionist Feminism. Pierce's return to the subject of face veils through these different perspectives is ultimately rather progressive, especially within an American context where these coverings are more often aligned with Alanna's views than Teky's. While Pierce's depictions of diverse racial and ethnic groups is limited in the ability to move outside the dominant white hegemonic, her works do intentionally and critically engage with depictions of race and ethnicity.

## SLAVERY

As Young writes, fantasy *can* be a productive and useful literary medium for engaging with alternate structures of race and Other:

Fantasy is a useful sub-set through which to explore popular culture not only because of its prominent position at the present historical moment, but because its inherently non-mimetic nature creates a space which is at least nominally not “the real world” and is therefore safer for cultural work around fraught issues such as – although by no means limited to – race. (*Race 2*)

The United States was founded on extensive injustices committed against people of color, beginning with colonial conquest and slavery and continuing through a legacy of systemic racism toward black and brown communities in various government policies throughout American history. In the 1980s and 1990s, many Americans attempted to deal with the country’s racist foundations by claiming they “didn’t see race” or in other words that they saw everyone as the same (Bonilla-Silva xiii, 11-12). Pierce’s first foray into depicting slavery mostly aligns with this movement by ignoring the racial implications. This ignores the very different reality that people of color face in America and reflects a continued unwillingness on the part of white Americans to examine their own privileges in society.

Pierce’s first depiction of slavery happens in the far away kingdom of Carthak in *Emperor*, which gives the Tortallans a chance to feel morally superior to their Carthaki counterparts for living in a country that has outlawed slavery (Pierce, *Emperor 5*). Native Carthakis allow slavery, and yet are brown and black-skinned, which was the skin color of the vast majority of the enslaved people in America. A leader of the Carthaki delegation warns Daine and her companions: “Do not speak of freedom to slaves. However we may dislike the practice, it would be unwise to show that dislike publicly” (Pierce, *Emperor 4-5*). It introduces a nuanced issue of balancing the use of disapproval or refusing to be silent in the face of unjust cultural practices versus respecting people and societies that are racially, ethnically, and

culturally distinct from your own. However, Daine is only brought along because of her connection to animals, as her magic gives her the ability to communicate with animals, though her role in the events of this book is far more disruptive.

This connection to animals makes Daine vegetarian (though she says some of her best friends eat meat), and forms her hatred for cages, oppression, and exploitation of any kind as discussed in Chapter 2. When asked what she thinks of slavery, Daine's life-long connection to animals, and the perspective this has given her towards human violence and oppression, causes her to take a strong moral position against enslavement (Pierce, *Emperor* 119). Kaddar, after becoming the emperor of Carthak at the end of *Emperor*, tells Daine that she can have anything in return for her help in overthrowing the previous emperor, so Daine requests the "slaves — to be freed" (Pierce, *Emperor* 221). Daine goes further than requesting an end to slavery in Carthak, she criticizes the ideological foundation of a country that is reliant on a slave economy: "If I were you, I'd think about your slaves. Animals endure cages if they must, but not two-leggers. If your slaves ever think to break out, it'll make what I did [destroying the palace] look like mud pies" and adds that oppressing humans will always eventually lead to revolt (ibid.). By situating slavery in a distant land populated by people of color, and through Daine's singular magical abilities, the narrative creates a "safe" distance—both geographically and ideologically—from the realities of slavery in Tortall or historical American contexts.

Pierce revisits slavery in the *Tricksters* series, which deals the most explicitly with race and oppression compared to other Tortallan narratives and suffers from an inability to adequately write characters of color struggling under oppression. If Daine's involvement in the government of Carthak lacks a nuanced approach to race and slavery, then depiction of race in *Tricksters* is overtly problematic. The series begins with Aly running away from home and being captured by

slaving pirates, who take her to the Copper Islands to be sold as a slave to the Balitang family. The Copper Isles are reminiscent of the Polynesian islands in culture, but society is strictly divided along racial lines with “luarin” used to describe people who are “white-skinned invaders from the Eastern Lands, now used in the Isles to indicate anyone with white skin” versus the description of the native population as “copper/brown skinned natives of the Copper Isles, under the lordship of the luarin arrivals from the Eastern Lands for nearly three hundred years” called “raka” (Pierce, *Choice* 418). Pierce does not capitalize the terms “luarin” and “raka”; therefore, I have not either. I believe this is an attempt to position these words similarly in use to the words “white”, “black” or “brown”, which have historically also not been capitalized in this context as descriptions of visible differences in skin color. However, this choice feels strange as the distinction between luarin and raka as groups of people is not merely race-based but also based on ethnic and cultural distinctions. This is an example of the messy and limited nature of the world-building in *Tricksters* that muddles the inclusivity of the narrative.

While Aly is a luarin kept as a slave to serve a mixed-race/raka royal family, this is a rarity in the Isles (Pierce, *Choice* 34). Aly has been sent to the Copper Isles by its patron god the Trickster or Kyprioth in order to serve the Batling family and overthrow the violent oppression of the native people (Pierce, *Choice* 46-47). Though Aly is captured as a slave, she is the daughter of Tortall’s Knight Champion and Spy Master, and with her protection from Kyprioth, her noble education, her whiteness, and her extensive spy training, Aly escapes all the true horrors of being kept captive with these heinous actions only mentioned nebulously in the duology. The series portrays Aly as a white savior, as she leads the native population to overthrow the current government and place on the throne the mixed-race Dove Balitang who, uniquely, has both luarin and raka noble blood. As Aly learns more about the islands, she finds

that the ideological justification for slavery on the islands is framed through the white luarins “saving” the native rakas, depicted as naturally more violent by the ruling luarins, and this racism is quite explicitly ingrained into their governmental structure and cultural attitudes (Pierce, *Queen* 175).

Colleen Murphy writes that whether done consciously or unconsciously, the “White savior myth” perpetuates the “underlying belief that they [white people] know best or that they have skills that BIPOC don’t have [...] they think they are somehow in the position that should enable them to have more power in terms of solving the problem than the people” who are actually impacted (*White* par. 3). It is problematic that Aly repeatedly lectures the rebellion on peaceful protest, ignoring the hundreds of years of violent and brutal oppression the native people have endured. As Aly justifies herself to Kyprioth:

“I *have* been trying to steer them away from a massacre,” Aly said, deliberately adopting the tone of an elderly aunt who had convinced the children to behave.

“And they have been listening. Even Ochobu, who hates the luarin more than the rest, sees there’s no profit in killing all the full-bloods, let alone anyone who’s a part-blood”. (Pierce, *Queen* 47-48)

While making an argument for pacifism is not inherently racist, the narrative does nothing to showcase the violence that the native population is living under and focuses instead on praising Aly for her ability to imagine peaceful alternatives when she has the privilege of choice and ignorance. This completely ignores the valid responses of raka or any people who are met with violent and racially motivated persecution and who are attempting not only to rise to power and reclaim their native lands but also to reconcile with three hundred years of violence perpetrated by the luarins. Although the story focuses on the overthrow of the current luarin/white ruling

government, which would seem to challenge racial inequity, the position of Aly as the protagonist complicates this. Aly is a white outsider who lectures the raka about peace with little to no understanding of their culture or history of oppression and her character is a gross failure to engage with the horrific experiences of people of color in systems of slavery and exploitation. It also exposes the importance of seeking diverse perspectives outside one's own identity, especially when engaging with depictions of race from a privileged white American viewpoint, as this failure results in perpetuating racial inequality, even if the author's intention is the opposite.

Aly is freed from slavery on page 102 of 403 of *Tricksters Choice*, which is conveniently quick within the narrative, and her safety was assured before she was kidnapped into slavery by the Trickster God. When Aly is freed, she refuses to take off her slave collar so that she can better pass as a spy as one of the members of the lowest class, yet this too is quickly reversed in the narrative when Aly is made a lady's maid (Pierce, *Choice* 391). Dove's white stepmother, Winnamine, muses that some slaves are happy to be owned as literal property. Winnamine and her husband argue over the happiness enslaved people feel in their position, as her husband argues "But every slave wants to be free" and Winnamine replying "Actually, some don't [...] I've overheard them [slaves] say that servants always risk finding themselves in the street with no money and no way to get proper work, while a slave is cared for all his days" (Pierce, *Choice* 104). This echoes white American sentiments famously used by Confederate General Robert E Lee as justification for the American Civil War, which painted most of slavery as a benevolent relationship of "good masters" taking care of the people they forcibly controlled (Cone 13). James H. Cone further explores the absurdity of this reasoning:

From the black perspective, the phrase “good” master is like speaking of “good” racists and “good” murderers. Who in their right minds could make such nonsensical distinctions, except those who deal in historical abstractions? Certainly not the victims! Indeed, it may be argued that the so-called good masters were in fact the worst, if we consider the dehumanizing effect of mental servitude. (14)

The suggestion that black and brown enslaved people prefer their status and that slavery is acceptable because the Balitangs are “good” owners reflects white Americans’ attempts to erase, excuse, or justify slavery. The presumptions represented in this duology are further complicated because the oppression the Copper Islanders face is due to their god losing a bet to the other gods, ensuring their subjugation and the subsequent colonialism by white easterners. The god Mithros and The Goddess became angry with Kyprioth and used the colonization of the local people to punish him:

The Mithran priests say that all the fighting among the raka weakened Kyprioth’s power, so when the invaders came from the east, Mithros and the Great Goddess came with them, and threw Kyprioth from his throne [...] the raka believe he’ll regain his throne one day, and return the rulership of the Isles to the raka. (*Choice* 123)

From the reader’s perspective, it’s additionally problematic to blame the gods for the raka oppression, as it mitigates the personal responsibility of the white lurians to be held accountable for their exploitation. Within the world of Tortall, it means the raka oppression is portrayed as divinely ordained and justified; the gods do not see an issue with violently oppressing humans along racial lines for the actions of another god. Mithros later appears and confirms this narrative, claiming that his colonizers brought peace to the islands (Pierce, *Choice* 346-347).

Pierce fails to hold the gods accountable in the narrative and removes the possibility of raising uncomfortable questions around the history of white oppression and colonialism in American history, which also echoes the ideology of colonizers that they have a god-given right to subjugate and exploit people, animals, or land.

As Asafa Jalata writes in the journal article “Revisiting the Black Struggle”, the anti-racist endeavors of the 20th century were a failure because white Americans refused to acknowledge the unjust larger societal structures that perpetuated oppression and exploitation. If Revisionist Feminism, particularly in an American context, is to address the feminist movement’s historical failure to make racial equality a central principle, then it must both acknowledge the limitations of earlier work and engage in ongoing revision. This approach moves toward a more nuanced, multifaceted feminism rather than stagnating into defensiveness or ignoring the specific racial history of the U.S. and its pervasive effect on current cultural constructions of American identity. Jalata continues, writing that “[white] conservatives ignore chains of external factors, such as the political economy of racism, institutional discrimination and so on, that have contributed to Black poverty and underdevelopment” (108). The narratives in both *Choice* and *Queen* connect slavery to the role of racism in the creation of institutions and societies more than the storyline of *Emperor* does, but Pierce’s portrayal of the connection between race and slavery is hollow, ultimately serving to alleviate white guilt about historically white systems of injustice. This reflects many Americans’ reexamination of the history of race at the start of the 21st century and their attempts to dismantle less overt forms of prejudice.

On one hand, white feminists who write YA Female Fantasy should include more representations of non-white characters, but when they do, these depictions can often be reductive, as in Pierce’s work. For example, centering the story on Dove in *Tricksters* rather than

Aly could have avoided the white savior trope; including the protagonist's internal dialogue challenging racism, as seen in Kel's narrative, could have deepened the critique and clarified the narrative's position on racial prejudice; and finally reconfiguring the relationship between the patron god and race, or more fully exploring how divine power intersects with oppression, would have allowed for a more rigorous engagement with inclusive feminism. These concerns are not solely historical: in contemporary American politics and society, questions of race, gender, sex, class, and equality remain urgent and continue to shape discussions of intersectional justice as I explored above through Walz's self-reflections.

Pierce again returns to the subject of slavery in the Provost's Dog trilogy published between 2006 and 2011. Beka's journey challenges the narrative best exemplified by Daine in *Emperor* that Tortall is morally superior because it has outlawed slavery. However, the Provost's Dog challenges this ascribed mortality. In Provost's Dog, Tortallan slavery is not divided along racial lines, and the narrative focuses on Beka's repulsion at the violence and horror of slavery that the Tricksters duology almost completely lacks. Beka is a commoner on the edge of poverty; she grew up in one of the most vulnerable populations in the capital of Tortall, where children are routinely kidnapped and sold into slavery (Pierce, *Terrier* 17, 203). *Mastiff* follows Beka as she attempts to recover the kidnapped crown prince, who is forced into slavery while a magic bond forces his parents to mirror his physical torture. This literally forces the white King and Queen to feel the brutal effects of slavery.

*Mastiff* contains several graphic descriptions of the violence that slavery is responsible for and the ways this violence is justified by the ruling class. A slave girl is brutally murdered and dumped in the trash just for talking to Beka, and the antagonists of the story sink three ships filled with enslaved crew members just to distract Beka and the other hunters (Pierce, *Mastiff*

332, 100-105). At the end of the novel, the nobles are horrified by the reveal of the crown prince in their midst, though Beka and the young boy remind the nobles that they only care now because the prince is revealed to be nobility (Pierce, *Mastiff* 515). Beka is proud of the prince, Gareth, for his wish to end slavery but ultimately has little faith in his determination to outlaw it. This exchange also underscores the importance of perception in forming society's morality. As Gareth explains to Beka, "I am going to help escaped slaves. And when you take me to papa, I will ask him to do so" (Pierce, *Mastiff* 532). Beka remains pessimistic about his society:

They would tell him that he did not understand how the world spun, that slavery had always been with us.

How would the work get done without slaves?

They would ask, and he did not want to make the great nobles angry, did he?

He would reach manhood believing those things, like all the rich. (ibid.)

However, Gareth surprises her by convincing his father to make a new law outlawing slavery in Tortall with Beka co-signing the law (Pierce, *Mastiff* 572-573). By traveling back in time in this series, Pierce recognizes the need for returning to the past to understand the present and for developing plans to combat prejudice for the future. Although Pierce's series does not address some critical aspects of American slavery—most notably the intersection of slavery and race—it does explore how historical events continue to shape contemporary society, particularly when government and cultural practices are rooted in racism and oppression. Additionally, this series demonstrates the power of changing unjust systems and is a study in the slow fight for justice over hundreds of years.

The Provost's Dog trilogy exists in two temporal frameworks: the in-universe past and the real-world time of its publication. For longtime readers familiar with Tortall and for Pierce

herself as she wrote each work, this series comes after her earlier, often limited depictions of slavery and engages more directly and critically with systemic injustice. It can be read as a revisionist attempt to confront those earlier limitations and reflect more interconnected, diverse perspectives. However, new readers might encounter the Tortall Universe chronologically—beginning with *Mastiff*, then *Emperor*, and finally the Tricksters duology. As Wolf writes, “the order in which the sequence elements that make up a world are encountered greatly affects the way that audience experiences them and the world in which they take place” (*Building* 292).

Wolf explains further:

There are two orderings that are perhaps most typically experienced by the audience of an imaginary world: the order in which individual sequence elements made their public appearance [...] or chronological order (an order that later audiences can assemble once all the elements of a sequence are available. (ibid.)

This alternate reading order complicates Pierce’s legacy: while *Mastiff* offers a relatively direct engagement with slavery’s systemic violence and ideological foundations, its position in the in-universe past risks framing this critique as historically distant, rather than ongoing. Even so, this second chronological journey through Pierce’s works reflects a Revisionist Feminist approach to social justice, which emphasize interconnection and the long arc of systemic oppression.

*Emperor* aligns with this perspective, depicting a world where slavery is outlawed in Tortall but persists in Carthak, expanding the critique to include ecological and nonhuman forms of exploitation.

Furthermore, reading the Tricksters duology as the final exploration of this theme in Pierce’s work unintentionally mirrors the resurgence of racialized ideologies in 21st-century American politics. Yet unlike earlier works, it lacks a clear moral framing: Aly, unlike Kel, does

not have an internal monologue that critiques prejudices echoed by others—for example, Kel’s internal dismissal of Wyldon’s racism contrasts with Aly’s silence at overhearing Winnamine’s suggestion that some enslaved people prefer their status. Both temporal readings demonstrate that progress is non-linear and emphasize the enduring relevance of a country’s history of slavery—whether Tortall’s or America’s—to the shaping of present-day institutions. Pierce’s shifting portrayals of slavery over the course of her career can thus be understood as a microcosm of the fantasy genre’s—and white American authors’—ongoing struggle to reckon with its Anglocentric roots and its often-contradictory treatment of race and historical injustice. As Young elucidates, “Fantasy formed habits of Whiteness early in the life of the genre-culture, and is, in the early decades of the twenty-first century, struggling to break them” (*Race* 10). At the time of this writing, Pierce’s current series is set in Carthak, again returning to the in-universe past. These ongoing revisions suggest a broader project: to revisit flawed representations and rework them in consideration of contemporary understandings of power, injustice, and identity. Yet, as the *Tricksters* duology reveals, revision alone is not sufficient. Lasting change requires continued, active engagement from privileged individuals and a constant dedication to broadening personal perspectives so as to self-critique, confront, and unlearn systemic prejudice as feminism continues to expand and revise itself.

## CLASS

Demystifying American class structures begins by recognizing that class distinctions only recently became less emphasized. As David Katzman notes in “Seven Days a Week”, the label “servant class” persisted but became less identifiable, shifting to “domestic workers” by the mid-20th century (177, 179-180). Marleen Barr emphasizes that America views itself as a primarily

capitalist society, rather than a country based on slavery economics and institutionalized racism and misogyny, when she writes:

Today America promotes a particular kind of low-road capitalism [...] a racist capitalism that ignores the fact that slavery didn't just deny black freedom but built white fortunes, originating the black-white wealth gap that annually grows wider—one reason is that American capitalism was founded on the lowest road there is. (Barr 309)

As Matthew Desmond writes in his influential *The New York Times* article “In Order to Understand the Brutality of American Capitalism, you have to Start on the Plantation” that “low-road capitalism” is a type of brutal capitalism practiced in America that originates from slavery economics and goes as low as possible for wages.<sup>25</sup> Desmond further explains that “In a capitalist society that goes low, wages are depressed as businesses compete over the price, not the quality, of goods; so-called unskilled workers are typically incentivized through punishments, not promotions; inequality reigns and poverty spreads” (par. 2). Desmond thoroughly traces back contemporary American capitalist economic practices of low-road capitalism to slavery, demonstrating once again that trying to parse apart class, economy, and capitalism from race, at least in the United States, is impossible. While capitalist economies exist in many other nations, America's economy is uniquely ruthless in its capitalist pursuit, the result of historically building a society and government literally on the backs of enslaved labor. As Desmond notes, the recognition between current American economics and slavery practices is a recent trend, as dominant American culture has consistently tried to ignore, soften, or erase its violent foundations (par. 4). When creating a capitalist society post-civil-war, America created a

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<sup>25</sup> As evidenced by the numerous references to this article in academic works, such as “Slavery and the Rise of the Nineteenth-Century American Economy” by Gavin Wright or “A Theory of Capitalist Slavery” by John Clegg.

form of low-road capitalism that constantly seeks to undermine workers' rights and profits and chooses to seek perpetual wealth growth at all costs: "given the choice between modernity and barbarism, prosperity and poverty, lawfulness and cruelty, democracy and totalitarianism, America chose all of the above" (Desmond par. 5). Tortall's neo-medieval monarchy, like modern America's capitalist economy, is built on systems of exploitation sustained by enslaved labor, although Tortallan hierarchies are not always explicitly racialized.

China Miéville argues that it's still useful to interrogate class in fantasy worlds, even if these worlds do not exactly reflect the "realism" of our world, due to the fact that labeling a text as fantasy does not mean that it cannot still accurately reflect social structures:

The notion that a putatively "realistic" novel about the bickerings of middle-class families that seem hermetically sealed off from wider social conflicts is less escapist [...] set in a fantasy world, involving discussions of racism, industrial conflict, sexual passion and so on [...] is unconvincing. "Realistic" books may pretend to be about the 'real world' but that does not mean they reverberate within it with more integrity and insight. (Miéville 42)

By embedding these brutal economic foundations within a fantasy setting, Pierce's work exemplifies Miéville's argument that fantasy can engage with real-world injustices as critically—if not more so—than so-called "realistic" fiction, exposing the persistence of systemic inequality across both imagined and historical societies. Pierce explicitly addresses class divisions based on employment and socioeconomic status, which Miéville notes that under capitalism, everyday relations of fairness are a type of fantasy: "the dreams, the 'grotesque ideas', of the commodities that rule" (42). Kel's journey in *The Protector* series reflects fantasy as an aspirational, rather than escapist, and although Kel is frequently dismissed as an idealist,

she maintains a belief that her lived reality can transcend the entrenched injustices of Tortall's capitalist and class hierarchies which otherwise force the poor into banditry and allow the wealthy to exploit their servants without consequence. Pierce's depiction of Kel's idealism within a flawed, hierarchical society exemplifies Miéville's argument that fantasy is not inherently more escapist than so-called "realistic" fiction. By embedding systemic critiques of class injustice, exploitation, and moral failure within a fantasy framework, Pierce demonstrates that imagined worlds can often expose real-world inequalities more directly than domestic "realism", challenging readers to envision alternative social structures rather than simply accepting the existing order as inevitable.

Class hierarchies in Tortall may initially appear distinct from those in the U.S. during Pierce's lifetime. However, although Tortall's monarchy and America's constitutional republic differ structurally, Pierce's choice to retain a royal system rather than imagine a more inclusive and democratic form of governance grounded in broadly accessible religious frameworks can be interpreted as conservative or regressive. This decision reinforces rigid social hierarchies and limits opportunities for systemic reform, complicating any reading of Tortall as a critique of American political structures. However, examining class hierarchies and economic structures reveals deeper parallels between Tortall's fantasy world and modern American society. While a monarchy, Tortall's government and political figures critique neoliberal economic ideologies, and Kel in particular interacts with progressive fiscal conservative capitalism. The Tortallan middle class consists of wealthy merchants, while the working class is made up of servants, and the lowest class includes indentured servants, farmers, bandits, and beggars, and these class distinctions also include the extremely wealthy royalty and nobility whose names appear in the "Book of Gold", with an upper-middle class of nobles listed in the "Books of Silver" or

"Copper", or like Kel's family, in no book at all. Alanna and Aly would both appear in the Book of Gold while all other of Pierce's protagonists would not appear in any. Interestingly, Myles' wealth, and therefore Alanna's inheritance one day, comes mostly from investing in Trade, "an un-noble-like interest" (Pierce, *Rides* 146).

Pierce's Tortall Universe features numerous instances of capitalist discourse, but this section argues that the monarchy in Tortall exhibits elements of Late Capitalism, reflecting recent public perceptions of American capitalism rather than those prevalent in 2002, when *Lady* was published. Late Capitalism, as defined here, refers to the "indignities and absurdities of our contemporary economy, with its yawning inequality and super-powered corporations" (Lowrey par. 3). This definition highlights the absurd accumulation of wealth and power by the top 1%, which hinders upward mobility and erodes the rights of the poorest. While Late Capitalism emphasizes class disparities, low-road capitalism focuses on the brutality of capitalism rooted in slave labor; both, however, describe aspects of American capitalism. This distinction allows Tortall's monarchy to be read not only as a feudal system, but also as a metaphor for the contemporary American state under Late Capitalism—where extreme wealth consolidation, limited social mobility, and structural inequality mirror the privileges of noble blood. This reframes Tortall as a fantasy monarchy that can be used in a critique of modern economic injustice rather than dismissing the issues covered as relevant exclusively to Medieval European society.

In *Wolf-Speaker*, Daine challenges the nobles of Dunlath, not to aid the oppressed commoners, but because their treason endangers the monarchy—reinforcing that preserving Tortall's hierarchy matters more than justice (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 160). The working-class of Dunlath are ultimately more loyal to the Tortallan class hierarchy and other humans, even if

those humans are nobles who have exploited the working-class and destroyed the land everyone survives on. When commoners hear of the rebellion, they refuse involvement despite their suffering, believing in noble blood-rights to rule (ibid.). Treason, consistently framed as the gravest offense in Tortall, justifies violent state responses, as seen when tenant fields are salted and homes destroyed—harm falling on those least responsible (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 106, *Mastiff*, 559). This aligns with Barbara Jensen’s critique of American classism: wealth is seen as earned, ignoring structural inequality (55). Tortall rationalizes disparity as biologically fixed—nobility by birth—mirroring how U.S. systems obscure systemic injustice. The nobles, not the poor, rebel in *Wolf-Speaker* and *Bloodhound* (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 117, *Bloodhound* 448), seeking wealth through forbidden mining. Daine views the monarchy as benevolent and only rogue nobles as corrupt.

Maura, unlike Yolane, is cast as a worthy ruler not because of title, but due to traits like compassion and intelligence—qualities the narrative validates (Pierce, *Wolf-Speaker* 114). This dynamic emphasizes how Tortall’s social hierarchy both mirrors and naturalizes real-world inequalities: by presenting nobility as inherently virtuous and the poor as largely powerless, the narrative reinforces the legitimacy of elite authority while limiting the scope for systemic challenge or meaningful resistance. Lacking access to education or power, their resistance is minimal and framed as ignorant, reinforcing elite dominance. Pierce’s work thus reveals the limits placed on working-class agency, showing how even in progressive fantasy, royalist structures remain intact. This parallels how elite conflict in U.S. politics often harms marginalized groups, whose struggles are dismissed as personal failings (Jensen 54). In *Choice*, class tensions surface again when Aly and Alanna argue over spying: “You’re trying to say spying is not a noble’s work” (Pierce, *Choice* 20). Kel, in contrast, challenges fantasy norms—

unmarried, non-magical, and community-driven, she's a radical figure precisely because she is ordinary and still heroic.

The Provost's Dog series, previously examined in this work in the context of slavery, is also concerned with explorations of classism. While Beka Cooper lives 100 years before Kel in the world of Tortall, the Provost Dog series (2006, 2009, and 2011), was published after The Protector series and seems even more critical of inherited wealth and upper-class arrogance. Beka begins life as the poorest of lower class urban Tortallans but is given the opportunity for upward class mobility through her patron and foster father, Lord Gershom, who takes her and her family from the Corus city slums to live with him in his household (Pierce, *Terrier* 17). Beka is born in the "cesspool" in a street actually called "Mutt Piddle Lane" (ibid.). Daine's childhood home is certainly not rich, but Beka's family lives in the lowest levels of poverty, so low that all worker protections are nonexistent. Even toddlers work to provide the family a meager existence eating scarce rotten food, and the children go without shoes or adequate clothing and are exposed to constant disease based on their circumstances (Pierce, *Terrier* 243). Kel, while deeply concerned with class inequality, is still a noble and never faced food insecurity with her family. Kel helps those less fortunate than herself within the safety of her social position and reasonable financial security, but she is never actually a commoner like Beka. In comparison, Beka works for the Lord Provost to enforce the law in Tortall, unlike her siblings who train as servants, which allows Beka (who remains a commoner) to achieve a greater amount of freedom and power in society than her siblings, whose daily lives are dictated by their upper-class masters.

Beka's family gains upwards class mobility from the protection of their patron and foster father, moving from unskilled labor at the bottom of the class hierarchy to skilled servants.

Beka's sisters, Diona and Lorine, learn acceptable trades for their gender and station: "She [the lady of the house] is training Diona as a lady's maid, which had been the dream of Mama's heart [...] Lorine, though only twelve, bids fair to be an excellent seamstress one day" (Pierce, *Terrier* 220). However, Beka and her siblings never transcend their original class position, despite being the foster children of a nobleman and Beka's service to the royal family. Lalasa, who begins as a servant, can rise to the status of merchant, and Kel's family, already engaged in trade, has the potential to attain nobility. In contrast, Beka, born into the lowest social class, has no possibility of reaching the highest ranks. Beka's friends—other "dogs" (law officers), rogues, thieves, rushers (mercenaries), doxies (prostitutes), entertainers, poor merchants, and hedgewitches—are lower-class commoners who also serve the upper class as servants but are less privileged socially due to the nature of their servitude.

Beka's law partner, longtime friend, and a main character in *Terrier* and *Bloodhound*, Matthias Tunstall, betrays the realm and Beka, whom he sees as a daughter, to attain nobility. Tunstall, a commoner, is in a relationship with Lady Sabine, an heiress from an old and wealthy Tortallan family. Tunstall pleads with Beka, "She says she don't want to wed [...] she says it to spare my feelings. But she would do it if I had a place at court. If I had money" (Pierce, *Mastiff* 537). Tunstall is willing to murder the crown prince, which would also kill the king and queen through magic, for a desperate, and most likely, impossible chance at becoming noble (Pierce, *Mastiff* 537). But even killing the royal family, Tunstall fears is not enough to transcend class boundaries, as he would, at best, be only recently elevated nobility with little personal wealth: "I'll tell *her* I saved money from old bribes and invested it in trade. I'll be almost good enough for her. We can marry" (Pierce, *Mastiff* 536-537). Tunstall serves as a poignant example in Pierce's work of an individual from the lower classes who is driven by his lack of freedom to

marry “above” his class to treason, betrayal, and child murder. Rather than depicting these actions as a commendable triumph of the established government over traitors, the narrative reveals a profound tragedy rooted in injustice. The true culpability lies not with the victims of this system, but with the unjust legal framework that drives them to such extremes. This is made clear within the narrative, as both Beka and Sabine mourn Tunstall despite his actions and feel great sadness and helplessness within the system rather than anger towards him as an individual. Tunstall’s betrayal and ultimate death is portrayed as one of the darkest and saddest moments in Pierce’s writing in contrast to Daine’s anger and ambivalence towards the fate of the traitors Yolane and Belden, who also betray the crown for personal reasons.

In the second book in the Provost’s Dog series, *Bloodhound*, Beka and her scent hound prevent a counterfeiter, Hanse Remy, from intentionally collapsing the Tortallan economic system (Pierce, *Bloodhound* 450-451). The counterfeiter wants to destroy the realm after years of faithful service in the military, a historic occupation for class and economic mobility, which ends in his blatantly unfair dismissal by a noble who was not qualified to be an officer in the view of entire squadron (Pierce, *Bloodhound* 450). The counterfeiter, Hans, laments that, regardless of his work ethic, community support, and upwards mobility in his career, he is unsuccessful due to the whim and privilege of a single nobleman saying, “I gave years to the army. Years to the realm. I’ve got bones that were never healed by fancy mages. They ache when rain or snow comes on. I’d earned myself a pension and a pouch full of medals. Then I make one mistake, and I’m out on my arse” (ibid.). This critique of Tortall is never addressed by Beka or the narrative. Even other innocent parties admit the truth of the story and the unfairness of the circumstances (Pierce, *Bloodhound* 370). Though Beka does not agree with his motives, it’s clear that inequality breeds dissent and anger in a population, wondering at the very end how she can both

“hate him and pity him at the same time” (Pierce, *Mastiff* 539). As a commoner, Beka often thinks derisively of nobility, particularly knights whom she meets most often through her work and friendship with Lady Sabine. Besides offering humor to the narrative, Beka’s internal monologue also reveal aspects of class that Kel, being a noble herself, is unaware of.

Though revealed that the rebellion was founded and carried out by nobles who are Sabine’s family relations, Sabine still expects that noble traitors have more capacity for loyalty than even the most loyal commoner, such as Beka, who is most personally responsible for ending the rebellion. Sabine discusses noble honor with her cousin, Nomalla, initially one of the traitors and a fellow knight:

“And what of honor? [...] What of the vows made to king and country? You are a *lady knight*, not some back alley Corus strumpet!” She glanced at me.

“Apologies, Beka.” She knew lots of my friends went by those names.

I shrugged. [...]

“I am my father’s daughter and a knight of generations of Halleburn knights,”

Nomalla replied steadily. (Pierce, *Mastiff* 475)

Sabine compares treason to sex work, in an attempt to devalue her cousin Nomalla who is also a lady knight. However, Beka is unimpressed by Sabine’s argument and counters the idea that a person’s profession or status in society decides moral fortitude or loyalty. When Beka replies, “I’ve seen plenty of great house strumpets”, she calls attention to the use of language to insult and devalue lower class people and the hypocrisy of publicly demonizing the lower class while the nobility privately engage in the same practices (ibid.).

Beka continues the conversation with Sabine, remarking that while the nobility like to claim they reached their position in society through fixed moral and inherited superiority, these class structures are performative and ultimately constructed:

“To me, that noble honor is a wonderful thing. I see folk put it on and take it off all the time, and no one ever notices how wrinkled it gets.”

Nomalla clenched her hands into fists. Sabine only smiled down on me.

“It might seem so to you, Beka.” Her mouth curled down bitterly. “In your boots, it would to me as well. But for some of us, it is a garment that is the same as our own skin, impossible to take off and live”. (Pierce, *Mastiff* 475-476)

Sabine again expresses skepticism, and Nomalla is offended though she is currently committing treason against the same government that provides her privileged protections and an economic system designed to increase her inherited wealth. Yet Beka internally is ultimately unmoved by their arguments. Nomalla and Sabine’s hypocrisy reveals that a noble traitor is still superior to any commoner, even while actively betraying the system that endows them with this privilege. Sabine is a noble character, who is often portrayed in the narrative as aware of her privilege and who is praised by Beka for treating people as individuals rather than defined by their status in society (Pierce, *Mastiff* 293). However, this exchange reveals that, despite her seemingly progressive attitudes, Sabine does not fully regard herself and Beka as equals. She continues to place greater value on noble blood, claiming that her nobility is “impossible to take off and live”, whereas Beka observes that this status is clearly not impossible to lose, as evidenced by Nomalla and the other noble traitors in her family who survive without it. Framing class conversations, such as these through Beka’s perspective as both a poor commoner and the hero of the prince’s rescue, is crucial in demonstrating to Pierce’s audience that they should be sympathetic to Beka’s

perspective rather than Sabine's. This character framework provides a more compelling critique of class hierarchies within the narrative than any of Pierce's other protagonists.

Kel seems more acutely aware of her status within Tortall's class system than either Alanna or Daine, as Kel seems to internalize the idea similar to many Americans who focus on individual privilege, identity, and wealth rather than class distinctions. Supposedly anyone can achieve success in the U.S., embodying the belief in a society that offers everyone a "chance at the American Dream". Crawford Sturm et al. argue that the American Dream manifests as a belief that "If a person worked hard enough and is 'of good character,' nothing should stop his or her socioeconomic ascent. Conversely, if people are not willing to work hard or are not 'of good character,' they and only they are responsible for their lot in life" (Sturm et al. 17). Moreover, the U.S. *does* have a tradition of the long-standing legacy of wealthy families and political dynasties that retain significant influence over generations. Examples include the Kennedys, one of whom currently serves in President Trump's cabinet, the Bush family, with both George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush having served as president, and the Trumps, several members of which assumed political roles following Donald Trump's election. Unlike Alanna, Kel often discusses funds throughout *The Protector*, such as when considering buying Peachblossom (whom Alanna actually purchases for Kel) (*Page* 167), taking on Tobe's servitude contract (Pierce, *Lady* 32), counting coins to see if she can afford to hire Lalasa (Pierce, *Page* 9), or noting the expense of Alanna's gifts (Pierce, *Test* 180-181). These instances are in contrast to Alanna's story where she never worries about funds for her clothes, buying a specially-bred horse, or equipment. The inclusion of these worries in Kel's story forces the reader to notice how expensive knight training is and generally draws attention to money, economy, and costs.

Kel attempts to use her privilege to combat inequality, but is not fully cognizant of her privilege despite her efforts. Kel holds the core beliefs of equality, kindness, and the defense of those less fortunate. Despite her fairness, Kel cannot truly understand the working-class experience since she, as a historic scholar of medievalism, argues that any relationship that separates individuals between “master” and “servant” is one of inequality and prejudice— this separation is not limited to the actual work they complete, but informs their entire life, because “as members of different social groups, they lived in different worlds” (Ward 2). Kel’s “new” nobility status limits her privilege compared to figures like Neal or Alanna, mirroring American class divisions around generational wealth. These divisions, though less emphasized today, were notably highlighted during Barack Obama’s presidential terms, the most well-known example being his Affordable Care Act, which created a separate health care system for Americans that did not depend on employment (Alcenat 12). When Beka is injured at the beginning of *Bloodhound* by two criminals taking revenge, an excellent healer is sent to tend her injuries and Beka initially panics at the idea of attempting to pay for the superior mage. However, the mage is employed privately by a knight, Sir Tulis, who oversees the judicial courts in Beka’s district (Pierce, *Bloodhound* 99). Additionally, Beka notes the vast improvement in abilities undertaken by the healer available to the wealthy and the typical healers she has access to (Pierce, *Bloodhound* 100). Though reimagined by magic in the Tortall Universe, the privileged access to health care reflects a similar disparity in American society. Tying health care to not only the ability to be employed, but also the quality of that care being dependent on the type and price of health care plans offered by an employer, delineates the availability of necessary health care along economic lines of who can afford the insurance and treatments and also along class stratifications. As I have previously demonstrated, the kind of work done by a person changes

not just their relative financial compensation but also impacts an individual's privilege and opportunity in American society, meaning that Obama's health care policy was fundamentally concerned with greater class equality in the U.S. (Gaffney and McCormick 1446). As with dominant American politics during the time it was published, *The Protector* series is deeply concerned with class because, at its core, Kel's series is deeply concerned with challenging cruelty, oppression, and bigotry and with questioning the various ways in which they are ingrained in human behavior and society.

Tobe represents a greater disparity of class and wealth in comparison to Kel than Lalasa. Lalasa is vulnerable and marginalized because she moves from the country to an urban area, as a young, attractive unmarried woman, and works as a servant in the palace, but she is still unable to clothe herself well, choose her occupation, or attain further education, even though she is afforded some rights by Tortall's legal system, they are not equal rights. Tobe, however, is without shoes, in soiled clothes, has no education, is beaten, lives in a rural place where he has no legal recourse, and is sold into indentured servitude as a minor with no freedom on his part to choose employment (Pierce, *Lady* 26). Even Kel, who must carefully manage her finances to hire Lalasa, purchase her horse Peachblossom, and outfit herself for page training, occupies a less privileged position among the nobility as a member of a newly elevated family. This highlights that Tobe's poverty and Kel's relative lack of wealth operate on fundamentally different scales, underscoring the incomparable nature of their social positions. When Tobe fears that Kel will abandon him, Kel recognizes the disparity in their positions socially and financially:

"I paid two copper nobles for your bond," Kel reminded him. "Not to mention what we laid out for the sewing and the cobbler."

Folk've given me nobles jus' for holdin' the stirrup when they mounted up," Tobe

informed her. ‘Some is so rich, a noble means as much to them as a copper bit to ol’ Alvik.’”

Kel sighed. ‘I’m not rich,’ she said, but it was for the sake of argument.

Compared with this mule-headed scrap of boyhood, she *was* rich. (Pierce, *Lady* 37)

This exchange demonstrates that an amount of money that is absolutely lifechanging for the lowest class of person in Tortall is pocket change to those in the middle to upper classes. It additionally highlights the disparity between Kel’s position in society and Tobe’s. Kel, through her exposure to wealth from other nobility and the monarchy, recognizes that her privilege is relative. Barr argues that perceptions of privilege are a cultural fantasy, a story that people tell themselves about their position in society:

Given that corporate or mass perception is a reality produced within systemic hierarchies largely determined by class, it is also given that those individuals who don’t identify as powerful more often than not look at reality in very different ways from those with privilege. (323)

Kel does not feel privileged relative to those in the same social class as herself but does recognize relative privilege across the class system as a whole. Another indicator of class is education, which is immediately recognizable in Tobe versus Lalasa. Tobe’s accent isn’t as strong or clearly marked as Corum’s during *The Song* series, but it is immediately indicative of a person’s class in Tortall.

Language is used as tool to separate the noble and royal classes from the working-class people. Daine has to be taught proper grammar when she begins studying and working under Numair and Onua, as Daine admonishes herself for reverting to her original dialect: “With a

frown, she corrected herself—she knew how to speak like cultured folk nowadays!” (Pierce, *Realms* 20). Daine’s use of language of the upper classes helps to distinguish her changing role in Tortall’s class system. Though Daine never becomes a noble, her incredible power and royal favor and protection allow her to travel between the class boundaries, though she often feels discomfort in doing so.

While Kel still sees people of different classes as individuals and avoids making common negative assumptions about people of a lower class than herself, she still upholds the distinction that certain work, like serving or cleaning, is not for people of a higher class. When Kel is infuriated by Joren’s bullying, part of her anger at Joren is that his acts force pages into lower-class labor: “This is servants’ work [...] It has nothing to do with being a page and fetching and carrying for people. It isn’t what’s meant by earning our way” (Pierce, *Test* 80). Kel views certain work as implying inherently more or less worth to the person as a human being and is angry at those of the same rank being forced to do work reserved for commoners working as servants. I identify this as one of Pierce’s strengths as a writer, by recognizing that there are limitations to how progressive a single person or character can be, which further emphasizes Kel’s realism as a character. If readers contrast this to Kel’s willingness to do any task, including cleaning toilets, in Camp Haven, it’s clear that this is a prejudice that Kel seems to revise as she gets older through her greater exposure to people of different classes in her Squire and Knight years.

Kel generally laughs off or kindly corrects any transgressions of class hierarchies made by Lalasa and Tobe, but their reactions to these transgressions demonstrate that Kel is an outlier among the nobility. After Kel has persisted in making Lalasa learn self-defense techniques, Lalasa successfully throws Kel across the room during one of their practice sessions. Lalasa,

rather than reacting with joy at being able to learn the lesson, is afraid of what Kel, as a noble, could legally and socially be allowed to do as a result:

“Some nobles would kill a servant for doing that. You know it’s so, my lady!”

“I do,” Kel said grimly. “Nobles like that aren’t worthy of the title. How could I punish you for doing what I want you to do? Only think how silly I would look”. (Pierce, *Page* 116)

In *Tortall*, a noble has the right to kill a servant if that servant does them bodily harm, even if that noble explicitly commanded the servant to do so, which is far from working towards a system of justice that applies the law equally to its citizens or an ideology the monarchs, the Code of Chivalry, and Kel personally claim to strive for. In this conversation, Kel ascribes “worth” to the social position of nobility in a way that implies not just that people who abuse power are unworthy of that power, but that people in the upper classes should “deserve” their position. Pierce is attempting to give an example of a character, Kel, that utilizes her privileged position for good, but these depictions sometimes serve to uphold the idea that wealth, class, and power disparities are acceptable in society if the upper-class position is held by a “good” person.

Although Kel is not as concerned with enacting immediate political change in a more public, general, or political level she is nevertheless effective in addressing inequality on a personal level. Kel sets aside the portion of Joren’s fine paid to her for Lalasa’s shop and does not take a percentage of her seamstress wages, which is her legal right in *Tortall* (Pierce, *Page* 126-127). This seems to fit well with Kel’s economic practices and ideologies. She supports private investments and personally promotes private sector employment while supporting expanded government protection of worker’s rights that use the wealthiest citizens to fund these social programs as evidenced by her employment and legal protection of both Lalasa and Tobe.

She also displays strong American middle-class values of private budgeting while accumulating slow-growth wealth (Pierce, *Lady* 36). However, most of her peers in the nobility are unconcerned with these ethical concerns within this hierarchy and seem much more focused on maintaining the status quo that allows them to exploit the lower classes in order to accumulate an ever-increasing amount of wealth. Even one of Kel's close friends, Merric, is dismissive of the concern Kel demonstrates towards people who are commoners (Pierce, *Lady* 182).

Lalasa moves from working as a servant and being in the second lowest class, the working class, to moving into the middle class because she owns her own clothing shop and is no longer employed by someone else (Pierce, *Page* 174). In doing so, Kel also combats specific negative stereotypes associated with people in the lower class who serve as servants. Her characterization serves to indirectly question assumptions based on class both within the world of Tortall and in the real world, like the stereotype that lower class people are inherently lazy or more prone to theft, attitudes that are persistent throughout Tortallan society. When Kel needs Lalasa to run errands for her that require purchasing, Kel opts to give Lalasa access to her entire pocket money rather than repeatedly writing notes for specific purchases (Pierce, *Page* 49). Lalasa is shocked and uncomfortable, echoing fears of reprisal for theft, real or imagined on the part of a noble master, but Kel treats Lalasa as an individual and recognizes that Lalasa has been loyal and honest with her since the hiring (Pierce, *Page* 49-50).

Kel's rejection of preconceived ideas based on a person's social class is explicit and direct. More nuanced than this, though, is Kel's admission that "people who believe servants will steal usually get servants that do", which indicates that these negative stereotypes are self-fulfilling prophecies—suggesting that, in fact, the noble's attitudes and behavior cause negative effects for working-class Tortallans (Pierce, *Page* 50). It is implied that by being cruel, cheap, or

without upward mobility, the nobility force people working for them as servants to theft by hopelessness or necessity. This stereotype thus negatively reflects on the person of higher class rather than the person of lower social class, and this language echoes older racist depictions of enslaved black- and brown-skinned people in the US, who were characterized as “lazy” and biologically predisposed to be “criminal” (Covington 1). Such language remained in popular American culture through Reconstruction and is still echoed in racist stereotypes today as evidenced by the government’s refusal to raise the minimum wage despite rising costs due to the belief that people who “flip burgers” for a living do not deserve a living wage due to the *type* of work (Covington 1-2). These constructions of identity along social hierarchies serve to demonize those with the least wealth and, thereby, perpetuate the myth and the justification of control, oppression, and exploitation.

The perception of a person’s own class affects how they interact in society and, while closely tied to economic wealth, relates more to the resources available to people of different classes and how others in society treat them rather than based on their immediate wealth. People have both an objective social class, reflected in way society treats them, and a subjective class, how they see themselves; as Karen Suyemoto writes, “Objective social class relates to concrete and material resources and capital, such as income, assets, or education. But social class also relates to how you see yourself and experience your own social class” (5). Kel may subjectively see herself as operating outside the class hierarchy in Tortall, if not in her privilege than in her treatment of other people, but objectively, others treat Kel as a noble, without recognizing the nuance within her position. Although Kel views herself as operating outside the class hierarchy through her behavior and values, others perceive her solely as a noble, revealing that social

identity in Tortall is imposed externally and largely resistant to individual merit or self-perception.

## JUSTICE

In *The Rich Get Rich and the Poor Get Poorer*, Jeffrey Reiman and Paul Leighton write that the American justice system is not a carefully constructed moral and logical system to reduce crime, but rather “a mirror in which a whole society can see the darker outlines of its face” (1). They also argue that the symbolic power of laws in codifying for a larger society what constitutes “good” and “evil”, even if the justification for these laws is more likely to be inheritance rather than intention (ibid.). When Lalasa’s kidnappers are tried in a court of law, the title of the chapter is literally “The Price of a Maid”, implying that everyone in society, with perhaps the exception of Kel after the kidnapping, only sees Lalasa’s worth as a person in terms of the monetary value she gives her noble employer (Pierce, *Squire* 119). Tortallan law dictates that the actual kidnappers, who are commoners, are arrested and sentenced to hard work in the quarries (which Kel notes, is often the same as a death sentence). Joren, a noble and the person who hired men to kidnap Lalasa, is given a fine, “the offending noble must pay recompense for the loss of that servant for that period of time” (Pierce, *Squire* 128). Kel is enraged and confronts the King and Queen over the fact that Joren—a privileged noble—only receives a fine for orchestrating a kidnapping (*Squire* 129). Joren’s comparative punishment, already unjust, further devalues Lalasa’s personhood since the fine is paid to *Kel rather than Lalasa*, as Kel, Lalasa’s “master”, is the person “inconvenienced” by Lalasa’s kidnapping (Pierce, *Squire* 128.). The judge in charge of the case also upholds the idea that a commoner is the legal property of a noble, regardless of an individual commoner’s access to wealth, privilege, property, or power.

He relies on the argument that tradition equates to objective moral correctness, something that all of Pierce's protagonists fight against, contesting laws that were established a long time ago and "worked out by men far wiser than you" (Pierce, *Squire* 130).

The use of fines in the criminal justice system disproportionately harms the poor, who are financially burdened by payments, while the wealthy experience only mild inconvenience. This mirrors the American judicial system, where, as with Joren, the privileged benefit from elite legal defense and connections, while monetary penalties deepen inequality. As Bing et al. note: "Analysis of criminal case records illustrates the disparate impact of monetary sanctions [...] [revealing] tensions between American ideals of equality [...] and [...] an increasingly unequal society" (par. 1). As Reiman and Leighton illustrate, the complexity of inequality in the justice system is the way punishments are multilayered in the American justice system to effect poor and lower-class people disproportionately in comparison to wealthier Americans:

[...] *for the same crimes*, the poor are more likely than the well-off to get arrested and, if arrested, more likely to be charged and, if charged, more likely to be convicted and, if convicted, more likely to be sentenced to prison, and if sentenced to prison, more likely to receive a long sentence. (xv)

To Kel's surprise when she points out the injustice of the law, the Queen and King agree with Kel that the law is unjust and even agree to change it (Pierce, *Squire* 132). However, this conversation with Jonathan also reveals to Kel that progress towards equality is not a matter of changing laws, but of affecting political, social, and cultural attitudes across all of Tortall. Jonathan tells her, "Any law Thayet and I propose offends someone. We must balance opposing forces. Our successes vary", and then Jonathon lists the various powers that each class has in society (Pierce, *Squire* 133-134). Jonathan argues that every class within Tortall, except for the

lowest and poorest commoners, enjoys a degree of privilege over the classes below them, and without addressing cultural attitudes of classism, changing the law will result in rebellion or anarchy. This passage includes a distinctly political perspective in a fantasy book ostensibly about a girl achieving her knighthood, yet this is a major plot point—Kel persistently grapples with complicated political issues that do not have an straightforward solution. What Jonathan identifies and Kel struggles to understand is the difference between idealism and realism. Pointing at the system and correctly identifying its inequality does not necessarily impact the realities of a situation. While Pierce addresses these issues directly, she does so in a way that ultimately argues that these issues should be addressed within the system, not without. In doing so, her work aligns with feminist ideals that emphasize incremental reform rather than transformative structural critique, potentially limiting her character’s abilities to cause radical change within the system. It’s unclear if true justice is possible within systems built on foundational inequality, or whether such narratives risk perpetuating the very hierarchies they seek to challenge by portraying systemic change as a matter of personal virtue rather than collective political resistance as demonstrated through Kel and Lalasa’s experiences with the justice system.

## CONCLUSION

Social class and inherited wealth have played an increasingly crucial role in determining individual success in U.S. society in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Pierce is concerned with issues of class—in part—because of her own experiences with poverty in America. Pierce explains in an interview: “Like Beka I was a poor kid. I’ve dealt with the prejudices our society has against the poor and against people who want to work their way out of being poor. I’ve seen

the way the poor are treated by this society” (Kunzel and Fichtelberg 260). Characters in poverty throughout Pierce’s Tortall Universe are treated with compassion and understanding, and the narratives make consistent efforts to explicitly interrogate *why* poverty exists and *how* it is constructed in society. When Kel confronts Stenmun and Blayce, she is horrified to discover that Stenmun has economic—not moral—motivations for his work:

“Why do you do this? You bring the children, you know what he does—why?”

Stenmun raised his eyebrows as if he were shocked by the question. “He pays me well,” he informed Kel.

“That’s *it*?” Kel demanded, shocked. “Just *money*? Are you mad?”

“Isn’t that just like a noble?” asked the Scanran.

“Only you rich folk think money doesn’t mean anything”. (Pierce, *Lady* 319)

Kel’s horror highlights a fundamental moral divide between those who prioritize wealth over human life and those who value the intrinsic worth of individuals, regardless of their social status. However, even while Kel is horrified, it does reveal that Kel, as empathetic as she is, cannot fully understand a life of constant need and little power to effect change. Stenmun’s response reveals his view of the harsh realities faced by the lower classes, suggesting that the death of “commoners’ brats” is inevitable, whether from famine, disease, or war. Stenmun represents the resignation of the poor to systemic neglect and suffering, while the wealthy (here represented by Kel, a noble) are often insulated from these harsh realities. Stenmun’s cynicism about money reflects a critique of capitalist systems, where people are forced through poverty to devalue human life, diminishing life to a mere economic transaction as this is how Stenmun’s life has, in turn, been commodified by capitalist society.

Miéville argues that fantasy reveals the absurdity of modern capitalist society, which preferences profit over ethical concerns:

The usual charge that fantasy is escapist, incoherent or nostalgic (if not downright reactionary), though perhaps true for great swathes of the literature, is contingent on content. Fantasy is a mode that, in constructing an internally coherent but actually impossible totality — constructed on the basis that the impossible is, for this work true – mimics the ‘absurdity’ of capitalist modernity. (Miéville 42)

The Tortall Universe does provide this content, using a fantasy world to, as Miéville writes, mimic the “absurdity” of capitalism while remaining true to the basis of capitalist critiques. Pierce balances an explicit critique of the capitalist ideology that justifies oppression and exploitation while examining the true desperation of the lower classes that are result of this constant dehumanization.

Pierce does not, and cannot within reason, articulate all the complexities of these overlapping issues. Perhaps, these issues are impossible to fully capture in any piece of fiction; however, though it may not be wholly possible to encapsulate every aspect of a complex issue, there are core aspects to these issues that, if absent, perpetuate reductive representation by their very absence. Pierce’s use of neomedievalism in the creation of the Tortall Universe is problematic at times. Young writes that this type of worldbuilding preserve myths about how our current systems are influenced and connected by the past:

Debates about mainstream Fantasy’s habit of Whiteness in literature [...] see participants deploy the ‘monochrome Middle Ages’ argument: that only White

people lived in Europe during the Middle Ages, and that since the Fantasy world is inspired by medieval Europe, it should be largely if not exclusively populated by Whites”. (*Race* 71)

Not perpetuating reductive myths related to race are avoidable through an author’s more explicit engagement with ways to combat systematic oppression rather than focusing on individual narrative problems for the protagonist. The depiction of Tortall and other neo-medieval fantasy worlds as predominantly white perpetuates the erasure of non-white people from actual history and normalizes the preference given to narratives centered on white characters within these worlds. Additionally, it remains crucially important to interrogate social attitudes and legal systems that construct and perpetuate poverty as the gap between the wealthiest Americans and the poorest continues to expand so that the differences of power, liberty, and equality in American social classes grows even more immense.

The difference in wealth and equality between the top 1% of Americans and the poorest population is not greatly different from the gulf in rights afforded by wealth between Tortallan nobility and commoners, as “in our [American] current socioeconomic landscape, the rich are no longer simply rich. They are preposterously rich, incomprehensibly rich, possibly even catastrophically rich” (Wiley par. 4). The Provost’s Dog series arguably best demonstrates this disparity as the narrative shows that Beka struggles to afford her washing even after her family’s upward social mobility; meanwhile by contrast, through her job, Beka visits noble houses where even the dogs are dressed in expensive and luxurious satins (*Terrier* 129, *Mastiff* 286-287). Meanwhile, a child slave in the same household as these riches is forced to work the roast spit with no hand protection, burning her hands perpetually (Pierce, *Mastiff* 276). These few examples demonstrate the importance of poverty in the role of Beka’s story and how Pierce’s

expansions of the Tortall Universe are Feminist Revisions that offer new character perspectives that complicate existing texts within the world.

Pierce's Tortall Universe grapples with intersecting issues of race, class, and slavery, offering a critical—if uneven—exploration of systemic injustice across Pierce's works. Kel and Beka most directly critique economic class stratification within Tortall throughout their series while earlier narratives involving Alanna and Daine reveal how racial and cultural hierarchies are embedded into both political and religious structures. Alanna's interactions with the Bazhir, though progressive in Pierce's *intent* to include more people of color in fantasy, ultimately often replicates colonial tropes of civilizing the racial Other rather than challenging them. Daine's experiences in Carthak contrast Tortall's self-image of moral superiority by confronting institutionalized slavery among people of color in *Emperor*, but by taking place in a removed kingdom from Tortall, the narrative never fully engages with the connection between slavery and race. Pierce's later works, particularly *Choice* and *Queen*, attempt a more direct engagement with race, colonialism, and the legacy of slavery, but are ultimately problematic as they rely on the white savior narrative trope.

Religious justifications for oppression, seen in both the theological foundations of slavery in Carthak and the violent regulation of women's bodies through face veiling in "The Hidden Girl", reveal how divine authority is repeatedly invoked to legitimize systems of control. Through characters, such as Beka who exposes the brutal class divisions in early Tortall and Kel who challenges the commodification of commoners within the legal system, Pierce critiques the persistent inequalities that likewise exist within her imagined societies. Pierce's evolving treatment of race, class, and slavery across the Tortall Universe reflects broader shifts in American cultural discourse—particularly an increasing awareness that justice requires not only

legal reform but also deeper systemic and cultural transformation. As Le Guin writes, “We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable – but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art. Very often in our art, the art of words” (“Ursula” 1). By interrogating how hegemonic norms—especially those perceived as biological or inevitable—are socially constructed and therefore subject to change, YA fiction aligns with Le Guin’s belief in literature’s capacity to resist and reshape dominant power structures. The increasing intersectionality of contemporary YA Female Fantasy, including Pierce’s work, creates space for readers to question rigid social hierarchies and to imagine more inclusive and equitable futures through narrative.

## Conclusion

### SUMMATION

This final chapter of the thesis offers a Summation of the topics and arguments covered across this work followed by a section on Influence, which attempts to trace Pierce’s Revisionist Feminist legacy beyond the Tortall Universe. The successive section Living Author contemplates the complications and opportunities inherent in the research and analysis of a living author, especially an author as dedicated to expanding and revising her imaginary world as Pierce and the possibility for further significant revisions to the Tortall Universe. The section Further Studies suggests additional areas of research that could use this thesis as a foundation of studying Pierce’s Tortall Universe, Female Fantasy, and Revisionist Feminism. Finally, I conclude this thesis by outlining my final thoughts on this research and its implications in the section Final Thoughts.

Tamora Pierce's Tortall Universe does more than reflect contemporary American political attitudes; it imagines alternative futures, systems, and communities that interrogate the ideological patterns behind social structures. These imagined worlds model empathy, equality, and skepticism for a young audience, providing not just escapism but a framework for ethical and political engagement. This thesis has analyzed Pierce's Tortall Universe as an example of Revisionist Feminism through three primary lenses: young adult literature, focusing on issues of adolescence, puberty, and identity formation; U.S. culture, encompassing feminism, politics, society, and popular culture; and fantasy, including neomedievalism, revisionism, and world-building. The Introduction determined my narrative philosophies, highlighting the "storytelling" nature of human existence and the fallibility of binary ways of considering human experience. Chapter 1 covered attraction and romance in *The Song*, in addition to Alanna's body as queer and its cross-dressing tradition. This chapter additionally explored Feminist Magic and the Tortall Universe religion as an authorial choice to imagine alternate possibilities of equality in divergence from American society and neomedieval works. Chapter 2 examines *The Immortals* and Daine's hybrid relation to body, her instruction in wild magic, which is more subversive than *the Gift*, the depiction of non-humans in Pierce's Tortall Universe, and the posthumanist possibilities of Pierce's work. Following this, Chapter 3 examines masculinity, bullying, allyship, women in armed forces, and Kel's revolutionary characterization as a female Knight. Chapter 4 pulls from across the whole of the Tortall Universe to examine Pierce's continual examination and revision of her depictions of race, slavery, and class. This Conclusion provides a brief summary of the main elements of my research, an indication of Pierce's vast legacy, her role as living author, and my final thoughts.

This thesis is the most comprehensive scholarly examination of Pierce’s full body of work to date, including *Lands* set in Tortall, and the only one to give substantial attention to protagonists beyond Alanna, Daine, and Kel to include Aly and Beka. Moreover, while other works have examined one or two of the first three protagonists, this thesis is the only one to look at all texts in the Tortall Universe as a larger, interconnected entity. Although Leah Phillips’ *Female Heroes in Young Adult Fantasy Fiction* was the first book publication to seriously position Pierce alongside contemporaneous YA authors and fantasy as a genre and to recognize her broader influence on the genre, it remains largely focused on Alanna as a cross-dressing female hero and analyzes Daine mainly through her body and transformation. Kel’s journey is addressed only briefly. In contrast, this thesis offers a more holistic exploration of all of Pierce’s female heroes and emphasizes the historical, political, and social specificity of her work in relation to late 20th- and early 21st-century American contexts. Pierce’s author-text connection is evident in her novels, interviews, public engagement, and the evolving feminist arc of her protagonists. Her inclusion of forewords and afterwords in later editions also demonstrates a deliberate engagement with how feminism must evolve across time and a critical review of how these practices are enacted across the Tortall Universe as I defined in the Introduction Chapter Revisionist Feminist section. Pierce’s long-term engagement with her fictional world represents a model of authorial self-revision. Like Le Guin, who wrote, “Now I know that even in Fairyland there is no escape from politics, I look back and see that I was writing partly by the rules, as an artificial man, and partly against the rules, as an inadvertent revolutionary” (*Earthsea Revisioned* 7), Pierce uses fantasy to explore—and push back against—dominant political norms. Her work rejects the strict realism often favored in American political thought, instead offering a

productive blend of realism and idealism. However, Pierce's Tortall Universe has been focused on more overt Feminist Revisions to world than Le Guin's conception of Earthsea.

The female community in Tortall, as this thesis has shown, is not limited to a simple passing of the torch between generations. Alanna supports Daine, Kel, and Aly in various ways throughout their stories; Daine and Kel become close friends; and Daine acts as a maternal figure to Alanna's children. Aly, as George Cooper's daughter, carries forward Beka Cooper's legacy. These relationships are not hierarchical or one-directional. Kel's friendship with Daine and Alanna, for instance, signals to both characters—and to Tortallan society—that women with very different personalities and roles can coexist, support one another, and thrive within the same world. Alanna again technically breaks the rules by sending Kel the symbolic "Goddess Bless" gifts after being ordered not to mentor Kel during her journey to knighthood and in doing so demonstrates her continued dedication to supporting other women despite men's attempts to prevent and interrupt these connections. Feminism in Tortall is thus shown publicly in society and privately to Kel as reciprocal and dynamic and built on mutual recognition. Neither woman diminishes themselves or the other for their differences in experience and the journey to knighthood.

This thesis shows how Pierce's fiction combines nuanced characters, real-world issues, and accessible, meaningful stories for young adults. It also addresses significant gaps in existing scholarship, particularly on *The Protector* and the rare literary act of following heroines beyond their hero's journey. This vision aligns with a Revisionist Feminism that does not demand a choice between progress and tradition, nor pit identity politics against broader structural concerns. Instead, it promotes critical engagement with past feminist efforts while acknowledging that all such engagement is historically situated. Revision here means building

forward while staying in conversation with the past. As I discussed in the Introduction, Tatar defines female heroism through curiosity, knowledge, sympathy, and empathy (6). Across all chapters of this thesis, Pierce's protagonists have been shown to embody this ideal. They are curious and empathetic and committed to healing, justice, and political change.

Pierce's contributions helped expand the fantasy genre by centering girls and women in heroic narratives, without sacrificing popularity or market success. Her legacy demonstrates a consistent willingness to revisit her own work, confront her blind spots, and revise accordingly. While her portrayals are shaped by her experiences as a white woman, Pierce has consistently shown a commitment to inclusive feminism—not through tokenism, but through evolving self-awareness and ethical engagement. Her continued returns to the Tortall Universe, across decades, have maintained relevance by refusing to trap characters or readers in static definitions of gender, identity, or feminism. Her work has helped popularize a form of young adult fantasy that encourages girls and women to imagine themselves as complex, powerful, and capable of change. More than a reflection of feminist discourse, Pierce's work helps generate it. In doing so, Pierce aligns with broader trends in children's literature. As Kimberley Reynolds explains, "It is not accidental that at decisive moments in social history children have been at the centre of ideological activity or that writing for children has been put into the service of those who are trying to disseminate new world views, values, and social models" (2). Pierce's protagonists occupy this liminal, transformative space. As Phillips notes, they "undertake this work by radically and dynamically occupying the space in-between. In so doing, they are able to offer a model of selfhood recognizing plurality and change, forming through connection and making space for kinship informed by an ethos of ethical responsibility" (*Female*139). Pierce's Tortall Universe models feminism as relational, situated, and deeply ethical and ultimately concerned

with identity, ecology, and community. Her stories also engage with American historical narratives, often challenging cultural myths of exceptionalism and ahistoricism. As Attebery writes:

The American writer must find some way of reentering the ancient storytelling guild: he must validate his claim to the archetypes that are tools of the trade. To do so, [s/]he must find an archetypal analog for his[/her] own land—an American fairyland—to which those old world magical motifs may be drawn. (*Fantasy Tradition* xii)

Pierce does just that, reimagining a feudal system that both mirrors and critiques modern American politics, inviting young readers to reflect critically on their own world.

As Chris Lyon writes, recent political movements, such as Me Too and Black Lives Matter, while lacking specific policy goals, derive power from “moral clarity and broad appeal to justice” (21), reflecting a global shift toward idealism. This framework illuminates Pierce’s approach: her heroines rarely dismantle systems through direct policy or revolution. Instead, they offer models of moral courage, empathy, and community-based change. Pierce’s feminism is revisionist, critical, and future oriented. From *The Song* onwards, her fiction consistently explores women’s issues, intersectionality, technological and ecological concerns, and equality in legal, social, and cultural domains. Her method is instructive without being didactic, using fantasy not to escape but to confront real-world injustices in a framework that young adults can safely and imaginatively engage with. Ultimately, Pierce’s Tortall Universe provides a space where female heroism is multifaceted—where bravery, intelligence, compassion, and imperfection coexist—and where feminist ideals are not fixed, but constantly reimagined. Her work affirms that fantasy is not only a genre of imagination, but a site of activism, empathy, and

transformation. It is a safe place to enter and explore difficult issues, but it is not safe when unconcerned or removed from our reality and cultural constructions.

## INFLUENCE

While Pierce's Tortall Universe is distinct, though not wholly unique, among YA Female Fantasy due to Pierce's revisionist politics, the mode of revision is part of a broader trend among female authors when later engaging with their own work. Le Guin returned to Earthsea with *Tehanu*, Anne McCaffrey returns to Pern with *Dragonsong*, Diana Wynne Jones also returns to the same fantasy universe in the Chronicles of Chrestomanci.<sup>26</sup> However, the scope of explicit dedication to telling these *female* stories that intertwine with one another in the same universe over time in both our own world and Tortall while also retaining each series' unique characterization and story within YA Fantasy is truly unparalleled by any other author. Existing scholarship and sales figures alone do not capture Pierce's full influence. By closely analyzing narrative structures and recurring themes across the Tortall Universe, this project situates Pierce's work within broader critical conversations on feminism, young adult literature, and neomedievalism—effectively examining the evolving relationship between Pierce and academia. There is a need for a more comprehensive exploration of Pierce's relationship with her readers. Another important avenue for tracing her impact lies in examining the work of contemporary authors who have explicitly cited Pierce as an influence. The following is a list of published authors who have explicitly cited Pierce as an influence, with references included:<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Diana Wynne Jones' stories are more reflective of British children's and young adult fantasy literature than American and are not as dedicated to exclusively exploring girls' and women's stories.

<sup>27</sup> Thank you to Tamora Pierce's Facebook fan page where I discovered some of these influences.

- Alaya Dawn Johnson (Pierce, *Tempest* Front Matter)
- Anita Kelly (Johns)
- Bruce Covil (*Pierce, Mastiff* Front Matter)
- Callie Bates (Pierce, *Tempest* Front Matter)
- Cassandra Clare (Clare)
- Cinda Williams Chima (Smith)
- Delilah Waan (Waan)
- EK Johnson (Smith)
- Elisse Hay (Reyes, “Fresh”)
- Elizabeth Lim (Crosby)
- Gail Carriger (Carriger)
- Garth Nix (Parnassus)
- Holly Black (Pierce, “Tortall: A Spy’s”)
- Jessica Cluess (Pierce, *Tempest* Front Matter)
- Katee Robert (Reyes, “Katee”)
- Katherine Arden (Kristen)
- Kristin Cashore (Cashore)
- Laurie Forest (Jean)
- Leigh Bardugo (Parnassus)
- Libba Bray (Bray)
- Lillie Lainoff (Dusty)
- Margaret Killjoy (The Sapling)
- Margaret Rogerson (Dominguez)

- Marie Lu (O’Sullivan)
- Marieke Nijkamp (Nijkamp)
- Maya Kobabe (Wood, “Gender”)
- Naomi Novik (Giltz)
- Nicki Pau Preto (The Fantasy)
- Rachel Hartman (Pierce, *Tempest* Front Matter)
- Rae Carson (Pierce, *Tempest* Front Matter)
- Sarah Best Durst (Yingling)
- Sarah J. Maas (Pierce, *Tempest* Front Matter)
- Stephanie Meyer (La Force and Mount)
- Tricia Levenseller (Contois)
- Vanessa Lens (Lens)

One way to begin assessing Pierce’s influence on other authors is by comparing the list above to the top thirty highest-rated titles on Goodreads’ list “Best Kick-Ass Female Characters from YA” list (Best Kick-Ass).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Based off access in October of 2024, Goodreads lists are always subject to change. To give a sense of engagement, 9,103 people voted on the books in this list.

Top 30 Titles in Goodreads Listopia “Strong Female Protagonists”

Accessed October 2024

Title and Rank in List	Author
1. The Hunger Games	Suzanne Collins*
2. Divergent	Veronica Roth
3. Vampire Academy	Richelle Mead
4. Graceling	Kristin Cashore
5. Throne of Glass	Sarah J. Maas
6. Daughter of Smoke and Bone	Lani Taylor
7. Cinder	Marissa Meyer
8. Alanna: The First Adventure	Tamora Pierce
9. Howl’s Moving Castle	Diana Wynne Jones*
10. Wild Magic	Tamora Pierce
11. First Test	Tamora Pierce
12. Insurgent	Veronica Roth
13. A Wrinkle in Time	Madeleine L’Engle*
14. Dealing with Dragons	Patricia C. Wrede*
15. The Wee Free Men	Terry Pratchett*
16. The Golden Compass	Phillip Pullman*
17. City of Bones	Cassandra Clare
18. Trickster’s Choice	Tamora Pierce
19. The Chronicles of Narnia	C.S. Lewis
20. Terrier	Tamora Pierce
21. Cece Rios and the Desert of Souls	Kaela Rivera
22. Ruthless Magic	Megan Crewe
23. Clockwork Princess	Cassandra Clare
24. Clockwork Angel	Cassandra Clare
25. Angelfall	Susan Fe
26. Clockwork Prince	Cassandra Clare
27. Ella Enchanted	Gail Carson Levine
28. The Lightning Thief	Rick Riordan
29. Siege and Storm	Leigh Bardugo
30. Page	Tamora Pierce

Key:

**Bolded:** Male-identifying author

**Yellow:** Tamora Pierce

**Blue:** Directly Influenced by Tamora Pierce

\*: Born within 9 (less than a decade) years of Pierce

Fig.3. Created by myself from (Best Kick-Ass)

This simple comparison demonstrates three interesting patterns. The pattern most striking is Pierce’s influence and popularity within this subgenre as demonstrated by the blue and yellow highlights. The second thing of note is the rarity of male-identifying authors on the list, which seems to support my anecdotal experiences I referenced in the Introduction that Pierce’s readers are mainly female and YA Fantasy about girls is also mainly written by women. A third and perhaps most unexpected pattern revealed by this list is the presence of a cohort of authors, all born within a decade of Pierce and who additionally write popular YA Fantasy featuring strong

female protagonists (see list title). This trend points to potential generational dynamics in the development of YA Female Fantasy that have yet to be explored. A study of connections between YA authors, such as Suzanna Collins or Stephanie Meyer and Tamora Pierce, who were born relatively close in time but publish within the YA genre with a very different trajectory, would be a new and intriguing exploration. Additionally, there are interesting parallels that can be drawn between the content of the work of these authors and Pierce's, exploring the elements of Pierce's work that these fantasy authors echo in their narratives or fantasy worlds. However, that work exceeds the scope of this work in order to draw meaningful connections between these connections.

For the purposes of this work, I hope this table demonstrates the influence that Pierce has had on the genre as a whole and indicates an interesting avenue of investigation into larger trends of female authors in YA Female Fantasy. Pierce and authors who read her, most often as children, and *who also write fantasy literature with female protagonists* have an absolutely staggering number of books sold all combined. Not only are these authors massive money-makers in the publishing world, the number of children and adolescents, both boys and girls of any age, who are reading or have read an author on this list demonstrates how these ideas and themes are proliferating through generations of culture. The "Children and Young Adult Books Global Market" report states that in 2023, North America was the second-largest global young adult book market.<sup>29</sup> Globally, the young adult books market grew from "\$11.76 billion in 2023 to \$12.06 billion in 2024", which means that there is substantial buying power for these books, especially in North America (ltd.). This widespread consumption means that the themes and

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<sup>29</sup> The largest region of book sales in this market is Asia-Pacific.

values presented in these books are not confined to niche readerships but are actively shaping cultural norms and expectations for young people across multiple contexts.

One of the later additions to this work is the depth of similarity between Le Guin, Pierce, and other female authors who began writing fantasy in the 1970s and 80s. Many of these women have been forgotten, their work is out of print, such as some of Pierce's books set in the Emelan series, or their work is unrecognized in the wider fantasy scholarship. However, while Le Guin's work is now as widely revered and recognized within the niche of current fantasy scholarship where she is discussed at fantasy conferences almost as frequently as Tolkien, critical research on Pierce seemed sparse but has been increasing recently. Her work seems to bridge between the current surge in popularity of YA literature with authors, such as Sarah J Maas, Cassandra Clare, Leigh Bardugo, and Naomi Novik and the accolades given to authors, such as Le Guin, Robin Hobb, Diana Wynne Jones, and Mercedes Lackey as foundational female writers in fantasy. This lack of focus on Pierce's work persists, even when, as demonstrated by the table above, the current generation of authors and those authors more than a decade younger than Pierce credit Pierce as an inspiration themselves.

## LIVING AUTHOR

Tamora Pierce's relationship with her audience is particularly tight-knit and remarkably positive on the whole. While, as noted in Chapter 1, her work has received criticism, Pierce herself has largely escaped personal backlash, which is extraordinary in the often-volatile world of online fandom. For decades, she has participated in fan forums—such as Sheroes, Goldenlake, Reddit threads, and her official Facebook fan page—with a level of engagement rare among

fantasy authors. In these spaces, fans have critically debated topics, such as Alanna's early feminist limitations, often with Pierce's own contributions shaping, but not dominating, the discourse. Fantasy, as a genre, is already deeply enmeshed in questions of morality in regard to both in its fictional narratives and the real-world politics of its creators. As scholarship increasingly turns toward fan studies and digital culture, it becomes crucial to interrogate the evolving relationship between author, text, and fandom. In an era where accessing an author's thoughts is often as simple as reading their Twitter or Facebook posts, the boundaries between authorial intent and reader interpretation have blurred in unprecedented ways. These dynamics raise urgent questions about the nature of canon, revision, and accountability.

Despite ongoing health issues, Pierce is still writing and publishing, meaning that the Tortall Universe will continue to evolve both in the future, and in the ripples and revisions it will cause to the past.<sup>30</sup> This continued engagement is evident in her recent adaptations. In 2024, Pierce released a graphic novel version of *Test* followed by a graphic novel version of *Adventure* in 2025 (Grayson). These adaptations raise compelling questions: How will visual storytelling handle elements like menstruation or Alanna's gender concealment, which rely on textual interiority? Goodreads reviews of early editions suggest that the *Alanna* graphic novel reimagines racial representation and incorporates more gender-fluid characters, highlighting a revisionist impulse grounded in social justice. As one reviewer notes, the adaptation succeeds in "keeping it true to the source material while also remaining cognizant of the shortcomings" (Gretal, *Alanna: A Graphic Novel*). Pierce's legacy is now being negotiated across mediums,

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<sup>30</sup> In a newsletter sent via Pierce's official Patreon on October 5, 2024, Pierce revealed that she has been diagnosed with two terminal illnesses.

eras, and generations—as her original young readers grow into critics, scholars, and creators themselves.

Pierce’s Feminist Revisionism is not limited to thematic updates but includes structural ones as well. Her 2018 novel *Tempests and Slaughter*, the first of the *Numair Chronicles*, marks the first Tortall book centered on a male protagonist. Yet this does not undercut her legacy as a writer of YA Fantasy about girls; rather, it broadens the lens through which she explores injustice and adolescence—right down to honest depictions of puberty, such as a boy waking up with an erection (Pierce, *Tempests* 56). It is precisely this capacity for change and complexity that places Pierce in conversation with Le Guin. As Le Guin reflects:

In the years since I began to write about Earthsea I’ve changed, of course, and so have the people who read the books. All times are changing times, but ours is one of massive, rapid moral and mental transformation. Archetypes turn into millstones, large simplicities get complicated, chaos becomes elegant, and what everybody knows is true turns out to be what some people used to think. (*The Books* 558)

Like Le Guin, Pierce recognizes that earlier feminist ideals can become outdated—not because they were wrong, but because cultural and moral consciousness evolve. Her revisions reflect a sustained commitment to critical self-awareness. This has produced moments of both community and rupture. J.K. Rowling offers the most infamous example of how living authorship can complicate a reader’s relationship with a fantasy world. In 2007, Rowling retroactively announced that Dumbledore was gay—a revelation many fans critiqued as hollow due to the lack of textual evidence. Her public views on gender and trans identity have alienated many readers (Quatrini 2; Duggan 151; Ehnenn 230). However, Pierce stands in opposition to many of the current trends of authorship by welcoming alternate readings of her work in fan spaces,

continuously engaging with *current* trends in progressive and feminist ideologies and creating fan spaces that are explicitly concerned with social justice.<sup>31</sup> Unlike Rowling's top-down authorial control, Pierce's model more closely aligns with Le Guin's: both authors return to their fantasy worlds not to assert narrow authority, but to broaden feminist discourse. As May notes, Pierce's feminism has always been evolving: "This critique also confirms Pierce's own awareness of her developing feminism, one in which she 'began to expand [her] definition of what made a woman heroic' and to include 'all kinds of women' and 'all kinds of courage'" (66). Where Rowling's additions often obscure or contradict the messages of her original work, Pierce's revisions illuminate and expand hers.

I have demonstrated that Tatar's definition of female heroism can be applied to all of Pierce's protagonists, though, as I have also explored, they are all very different. Aisenberg and L. Phillip's definitions of female heroism can also be applied across all of Pierce's protagonists. Within the context of feminist heroism, curiosity becomes a moral and intellectual strength—a way of seeking understanding in order to help others. Pierce's female protagonists exemplify this revised vision. As demonstrated across Chapters 1 through 4, characters like Alanna, Daine, Kel, and Beka are driven by a deep desire to learn—not just about magic or combat, but about people, systems, and injustices. Their curiosity is never idle; it is purposeful and tied directly to empathy and action. In this way, Pierce places her characters firmly within a feminist tradition that reclaims intellectual pursuit and moral inquiry as heroic attributes rather than liabilities. Furthermore, Pierce's and Le Guin's revisions in contrast to Rowling's demonstrate an ability to move beyond the limitations of a particular wave of American feminism that was considered

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<sup>31</sup> Pierce has held fundraisers for women's rights and Black Lives Matter in recent years. The moderators of her Facebook fan group, where she is an active participant, have explicit terms allowing political posts related to equality.

progressive at the time of each author's first publication period respectively—1968 for Le Guin, 1983 for Pierce, or 1997 for Rowling.<sup>32</sup> While Le Guin may have originated the framework for feminist self-revision in fantasy, within just a few years of Pierce, Pierce has deepened and expanded it across decades and multiple series. Her fan engagement and revisions show a feminism that is responsive, collective, and always evolving. Although both authors address in their updated forewords and afterwords the political significance of their decisions to replicate or challenge gender inequality, their approaches to world-building, characterization, and narrative technique differ substantially.

## FURTHER STUDIES

When I began this research with my Master's dissertation in 2015, Pierce felt like a shared secret among mostly American, and largely female, fantasy readers. Since starting my PhD in 2019, however, scholarly interest in her work has steadily increased. New articles are published each year, and emerging YA authors continue to cite her as a key influence. While this academic momentum has only truly developed over the past decade, it reflects a generational shift: those of us most shaped by Pierce's stories in childhood are now contributing to the critical field. Yet long before institutional recognition, fans were already deeply engaged in thoughtful discussions of her work in informal spaces. This thesis contributes to that ongoing dialogue, offering a sustained analysis of the Tortall Universe within broader critical conversations on feminism, YA literature, and neomedievalism. It also marks a pivotal moment in Pierce studies by tracing her Revisionist Feminist tradition and identifying key directions for future research.

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<sup>32</sup> While all three women initially published in different decades, they all overlapped publishing within each of their fantasy worlds of Earthsea, Tortall, and Harry Potter in the 1990s and 2000s.

Although there are valid critiques to make of Pierce's work, as Sahn notes, her lasting influence lies in her commitment to encouraging readers to ask those very questions, "empowering readers by prompting them to interrogate discourses of power within the text's imagined world, and to keep asking questions on our own" even after they finish a story (168). Pierce's novels embody this critical potential. They tell compelling, character-driven stories while seamlessly addressing complex political themes. Her work is difficult to twist into support for hate and to admire Pierce's fiction while holding misogynistic views seems impossible. Her narratives make space for feminist values in clear, uncompromising ways.

Looking ahead, I believe YA media studies must re-evaluate its reliance on mainstream popularity to determine scholarly focus. Why do reductive series, such as *Twilight* or *Harry Potter* dominate academic discourse, while authors like Pierce—who explicitly challenge normative constructions of gender and sexuality—remain comparatively underexamined? While it is important to critique widely read or popular works, I believe, as academics, we should strive for greater representation in the texts we choose to examine. Pierce is only one example of this trend. The next generation of YA Fantasy, despite citing Pierce as inspiration, often gravitates toward Alanna's model rather than Daine's or Kel's model of feminism as expansive revision. Most do not explore politics with the same explicit commitment that Pierce consistently brings to her storytelling. These trends warrant closer comparative study. One promising area for further exploration lies in generational dynamics within YA Fantasy. Authors, such as Mercedes Lackey, who began the Valdemar Universe in the 1980s, represent a cohort with parallel commitments to female-centered worldbuilding. Mapping these connections could illuminate how shared cultural and historical contexts shaped a generation of feminist fantasy. Moreover, I believe that there are parallels in world-building between Lackey and Pierce, especially between

The Immortals and Lackey's *Heralds of Valdemar*. Comparative analyses of her work alongside that of authors she inspired could provide insight into shifting representations of gender, identity, and magic in contemporary fantasy. Scholars should also reconsider the constraints imposed by "YA" as a marketing category and explore how Pierce's influence extends beyond that label.

Linguistically, Pierce's strategic use of dialect to signal social class invites deeper analysis. Tobe's speech, for example, resembles Appalachian English, or "mountain talk", a topic I explore more fully in a forthcoming publication. Likewise, Pierce's experimentation with narrative form—in particular, the first-person accounts and document-style presentation in *A Spy's Guide* and the *Provost's Dog* series merits closer study. These texts incorporate visual cues like aged pages, crossed-out text, wax seals, and smudges to simulate authenticity (Pierce, *Spy's* 32, 151, 238). Short story collections, such as *Tortall and Other Lands* and *A Spy's Guide*, also present opportunities to investigate form and perspective. As discussed in Chapter 4, these works explore feminist questions by presenting the same story through multiple, sometimes conflicting, viewpoints. This approach aligns with a broader trend in YA Fantasy toward supplemental compendiums and "informational" texts that expand worldbuilding beyond the primary narrative.

Future studies might also apply this thesis' framework to *The Numair Chronicles*, considering how they further develop themes of injustice, coming-of-age, and male protagonists within the established feminist ethos of *Tortall*. Revisiting Pierce's evolving relationship with her readers—especially through platforms like Facebook—will also help scholars understand how direct author-fan interactions shape literary interpretation and community formation.

Theology and religion—especially in relation to feminist worldbuilding—deserve expanded attention beyond my section in Chapter 1. Pierce's depictions of divine and magical beings (the gods in *Provost's Dog*) offer fertile ground for comparison with works by Taylor

Driggers and Margaret MacDonald. Pounce/Faithful has received some critical attention as a reflection of Alanna's character, but further analysis is needed to situate Faithful within the broader legacy of magical or divine black cats in fantasy literature.

Form and medium in Pierce's graphic novels and *Spy's* collected pieces warrant closer examination, particularly in relation to embodiment and representation. For instance, Alanna's self-description as not conventionally attractive is complicated by illustrations that may challenge or contradict her own assessment, raising questions about visual versus textual identity. The graphic novels, which were produced with Pierce's oversight, offer a notable development in her revisionist legacy, creating space to explore how elements, such as sex, violence, and race are depicted and potentially revised. These adaptations also invite consideration of the collaborative nature of storytelling and community influence in shaping narrative futures. Moreover, as retellings of previously published works, they present an opportunity to examine whether such changes constitute erasure or retroactive continuity, or alternatively serve as a site for Feminist Revisionism within a new medium.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Scholarship takes time—years, decades, a lifetime—and so too does the shaping of complex, revisionist fantasy worlds. Perhaps authors inspired by Pierce will one day reflect back on their early work, just as Pierce and Le Guin have, and recognize how their relationships to their texts have evolved alongside their understandings of gender, politics, and the world. But for that to happen, authors and readers must be willing to engage in layered, sustained, and often

uncomfortable reflection and revision. This means embracing not just a single interpretation, but multiple and sometimes contradictory readings. It means returning to texts repeatedly with fresh questions, informed by shifting identities and cultural contexts. This approach aligns with what Fenice Boyd and Cynthia Brock describe as a multiliteracies framework of Pierce’s work—one that values “the many complex and nuanced similarities and differences within, across, and between us as individuals and members of different groups” (9). Boyd and Brock suggest that understanding how people make meaning requires moving beyond singular ways of seeing, and instead invites us to ask: how might different readers, shaped by different experiences, encounter and re-encounter the same story? Literature, then, becomes a space to “understand, moderate, and actively create [our] spaces and places in the world” (Boyd and Brock 10.). While this thesis has examined the many ways in which Pierce’s Tortall Universe reflects contemporary American culture and society, her work does more than mirror reality—it actively shapes it. Pierce’s stories influence a diverse readership across ages and identities, many of whom carry the values, questions, and frameworks encountered in her books into their professional and personal lives as scholars, authors, educators, soldiers, FBI agents, and lawmakers. Pierce’s books don’t just reflect the world; they help shape it through the people who read them. Bakhtin, Boyd and Brock’s methods of pedagogical thinking are especially relevant to Pierce’s work, which has always invited multiple readings—of gender, power, identity, and heroism. While the text itself is fixed, readers bring to it a plurality of perspectives. We may bring our own knowledge, time, and identity to the Tortall Universe, but every reader still meets Alanna’s defiant journey toward self-definition, Daine’s negotiations of the human and People worlds, Kel’s steady challenge to institutional bias, Aly’s tactical worldview, Fadal’s resilience, or Beka’s sense of justice. The stories remain shared—and constantly reshaped.

There are uncomfortable and justifiably scrutinized aspects of Pierce's Feminist Revisions that must be reconciled with in her legacy. In the Conclusion section of the Introduction Chapter, I briefly examined Pierce's online conversations that identify many of her characters as queer. In Chapter 4, in the section on Race, I critically examined Pierce's changing and developing depictions of race in several different periods of the Tortall Universe, developed across decades of time both in-universe and in our own. The conversations between members of her online fan base, sometimes including Pierce herself, and Pierce's interviews and speaking events in the many decades since *The Song* was published have often added beyond-the-text information to her characters and the Tortall Universe as a world. Pierce has expanded the Tortall Universe in many ways by these revisionist additions to her writing both in the tangible sense that she has added new information to the Tortall Universe and in the more intangible aspect of expanding the representations of political issues Pierce engages with throughout her Tortall Universe as a world. These additions have been both progressive revisions, for example the revelation that many of Pierce's characters are sexually queer or genderfluid, and reductive revisions, such as her comments on queerness being distracting to her characterizations of the female hero or her prejudices towards how people of color are portrayed in American history or the setting in *Trickers*, but both revisions must be reconciled within Pierce's Revisionist Feminism. As I have argued throughout this thesis, Revisionist Feminism is a model of feminism based in recognizing the reality of cultural perceptions even while criticizing their prejudiced ideological basis of recognizing a text's relative historical progressive and expansive depiction of female heroism while also critiquing its limitations from a contemporary political perspective, and above all, of an author or creator being willing to return to their previous work with a critical focus on where their feminist representations failed, encouraging multiple readings, and allowing the original text to remain intact as a marker of this journey.

Revisionist Feminism continually aims for greater inclusivity, expansion of intersectional feminist perspectives, and an evolving understanding of contemporary political discourse and culture—all without avoiding the recognition of previous failures in feminism within these revisions. Revisionist Feminism is, at its core, the examination of multiplicity and contradictions that prioritizes examining the perpetual journey of feminism rather than a nebulous “completion”, or, in other words, perfection, of feminism. Recognizing the failures of feminism necessitates an eager willingness to self-critique and reflect while preserving the hope of greater equality for everyone, regardless of the biological differences that human culture has used to “storytellingly” ascribe worth, heroism, freedom, personhood, or empathy. As this thesis has demonstrated, Pierce’s Tortall Universe may not constitute the most expansive, progressive, or intersectional feminist texts ever written; nevertheless, her deployment of the YA Female Fantasy genre establishes both a safe and critical space in which to examine real social issues, particularly those arising from an American context, and ultimately demonstrate a consistent willingness to engage with feminism throughout time. The direct influence of Pierce on YA Female Fantasy authors and as a genre is another form of Revisionist Feminism beyond a single author or fantasy world. Moreover, Pierce explicitly and consistently acknowledges her regrets and prior shortcomings in forewords, afterwords, and other public forums, demonstrating a willingness to revise the world in interconnected texts within the Tortall Universe rather than attempt to erase or hide her fantasy world in an attempt to focus on expanding the intersectional feminist issues she tackles. Taken together, these dimensions reveal a distinctive legacy that belongs uniquely to Tamora Pierce and exemplifies Revisionist Feminism in a particularly compelling manner.

With Pierce’s age and ongoing health concerns, it is unclear how many more books she will publish beyond the upcoming graphic novels. In the meantime, critical attention to her work continues to grow, finally catching up to the long-standing fan conversations that have flourished

in informal spaces for decades. I suspect her work will soon gain wider cultural recognition, whether through adaptations or renewed academic attention. The recent negotiations over film rights, and the release of *Alanna: The First Adventure* and *First Test* as graphic novels, support that possibility. As a scholar, I have outlined several future areas of research that could build on this thesis' exploration of Pierce's Revisionist Feminist worldbuilding. Her texts explicitly engage with politics while fostering empathy, inclusivity, and expanded definitions of humanity and heroism. By continuing to approach her work through diverse interpretive lenses, we not only do justice to its complexity—we also model a way of reading that resists fixity and embraces change. As a reader, I am still searching for the next generation of YA Fantasy authors who carry forward Pierce's legacy—writers whose work is politically thoughtful, grounded in the real while still fantastical, unapologetically feminist, and reflexive about the stories they tell. So far, I haven't quite found these works. But then again, Tortall has existed longer than I've been alive, and a universe this expansive, dynamic, and self-aware needs, more than anything else, *time*.

## Appendix: Summaries of the Texts in the Tortall Universe

### The Song of the Lioness (The Song)

The Song follows Alanna from childhood, when she disguises herself as a boy to take her brother's place in training to become a knight, through to adulthood when, her gender revealed, she becomes the King's Champion and Tortall's sole female knight. Over the four books, *Adventure*, *Hand*, *Rides*, and *Rampant*, Alanna trains incredibly hard to become the best page, squire, and eventually knight, while also mastering her Goddess gift. She makes connections with important characters like Jonathan, the crown prince and eventual king of Tortall and her first lover, as well as George Cooper, the king of thieves and her eventual husband. Her adventures as a knight include defeating the series' main antagonist Duke Roger, working as a Shaman to a desert-dwelling Bazhir tribe, and retrieving the Dominion Jewel, a legendary artefact that allows a ruler to call up the land to defend a kingdom. Alongside that, Alanna has to deal with first concealing and then making peace with her gender, navigating her various romantic and sexual relationships, and learning how to be a woman and a knight, fighting not only for her own dreams and self-fulfillment, but also to protect Tortall and serve as a public inspiration to generations of girls.

### The Immortals

In *Wild*, Daine befriends Onua, the Queen's Riders' horse mistress, and helps to rescue the powerful magician Numair, who joins them on a journey filled with attacks by immortal monsters. As they deliver horses and train recruits, Daine calls upon her wild magic to defeat pirates and immortals, while also taking charge of a young dragon and receiving guidance from the Badger God, who knows her father. In *Wolf-Speaker*, Daine travels to Fief Dunlath to help

her former wolf pack and uncover a plot by the nobles, aided by Carthak, to destabilize Tortall by destroying the environment. While Numair seeks reinforcements, Daine learns to shapechange and, with the help of humans, immortals, and animals, stops the plot. Along the way, she cares for her dragon Kitten, befriends the basilisk Tkaa, and rethinks her views on immortals through her friendship with Maura, the heir to Dunlath. In *Emperor*, Daine joins a delegation to Carthak for peace talks and to heal Emperor Ozorne's birds, where she encounters the Graveyard Hag, who grants her the power to raise the dead. Amidst uncovering an underground movement against Ozorne, Daine is kidnapped in a plot to spark war with Tortall and capture Numair. She razes the palace in revenge. With help from the stormwing, magical immortal creature half metal bird and half man, Rikash and the Graveyard Hag, Ozorne is tricked into becoming a stormwing, losing his throne. Daine also learns she is a demi-god and continues to be guided by the Badger God. In *Realms*, Daine and Numair are rescued by Daine's divine parents and taken to the Divine Realms as war rages in Tortall, led by Ozorne. They must journey across the realms to return to Tortall, with the help of darkings—spies created by Ozorne who eventually switch sides. Daine and Numair begin a romantic relationship, and together they defeat Ozorne and the Chaos Goddess aiding his invasion. Daine chooses to remain human and returns to Tortall with Numair and her dragon, Kit.

### The Protector

In *Test*, Lady Alanna, King Jonathan, and Lord Wyldon debate allowing Keladry of Mindelan to become the first girl to train as a page, resulting in Wyldon and Jonathan agreeing to place Kel on probation. Despite facing harsh treatment and bullying from her fellow pages, Kel befriends the older page Neal, the feisty horse Peachblossom and the courtyard sparrows, and launches a personal campaign to stop a hazing culture mostly led by Joren, another page. After

proving herself in various challenges, including a battle against spidrens with Lord Raoul of the King's Company and Kel's fear of heights, Lord Wyldon ultimately allows Kel to continue her training.

In *Page*, Kel continues her training, mastering various skills while dealing with ongoing challenges and making friends with more pages. Joren stops his overt attacks. Kel rescues a dog named Jump, befriends a shy maid named Lalasa, and teaches her self-defense, which Lalasa later uses to protect herself from sexual assault. After rescuing Lalasa and Jump from kidnapers on the morning of her final exams, Kel overcomes her fear of heights and is allowed to take the exams late, ultimately passing and becoming a squire.

In *Squire*, Kel worries about not being chosen by a knight, but eventually becomes Lord Raoul's squire, while Neal serves under Lady Alanna. Kel joins the King's Own on missions to hunt bandits and fight immortals and also cares for a baby griffin she accidentally rescues. As Kel hones her jousting skills, she rekindles Yamani friendships, navigates a romantic relationship with Cleon, and ultimately faces the threat of war with Scanra, led by Maggur Rethhausak and his deadly necromantic machines. As a squire, Kel is outraged at Lalasa's kidnapping when Joren receives only a fine for orchestrating the crime, leading her to push for changes to the law. Later, Joren dies in the Chamber of the Ordeal, while Kel and her friends pass their own Ordeal. Kel is tasked by the Chamber to stop the necromancer behind the killing machines, Blayce and his enforcer Stenman, and Alanna reveals herself as Kel's secret benefactor of the "Goddess Bless" gifts, expensive and tailored anonymous gifts Kel receives throughout her training.

In *Lady Knight*, Kel is put in charge of a refugee camp near the Scanran border during the war, where she trains the refugees and earns their respect. When Scanrans attack the camp, killing some and kidnapping others, Kel defies orders and crosses the border to rescue them,

along with allies from the King's Own and her training years, killing Blayce and Stenman, who had been using children to create killing devices, and effectively winning Tortall the war.

Despite committing treason, Kel is pardoned for her bravery, and she begins building the town of New Haven, earning the title "Protector of the Small."

### Tricksters

In *Trickster's Choice* Alianne (Aly), Alanna and George's sixteen-year-old (and only) daughter, is kidnapped and sold into slavery in the Copper Isles. With the Trickster's God protection, Aly works with the "Raka", the indigenous people of color, and Nawat the crow to help foment a rebellion. In *Trickster's Queen*, Aly succeeds in leading a rebellion to depose the current monarchy and replace it with the half-raka young noble woman Lady Dove.

### Provost's Dog

*Terrier* takes place over one hundred years before *Adventure* and introduces Beka Cooper, an ancestor of George Cooper, who is a magical law enforcement officer originally from the poorest area of Corus. Beka is friends with the rogue of Corus, Rosto, swordfighter Aniki, mage Kora, the Goddess' cat Pounce (Faithful), the knight Sabine, and "dogs" Tunstall, Goodwin, Ersken, and Farmer. In *Bloodhound*, Beka unearths a counterfeiting scheme to destabilize the kingdom between the rogue of Port Caynn and a disgruntled ex-military leader. Finally, in *Mastiff*, Beka works to overthrow a noble rebellion and helps abolish slavery in Tortall and marries the mage Farmer.

### Lands

A collection of short stories set within the Tortall Universe covering various stories of tertiary characters from other Tortall texts or following new places and characters set within the

same world. This thesis examines the short stories “Elder Brother” which takes place almost directly after the events of *Wolf-Speaker* and follows Qiom, the tree-turned-into-human by Numair’s magic as Qiom struggles to comprehend and integrate into human society’s implicit rules that were unfamiliar to him as a tree. Initially going to give up and die, a girl hiding dressed as a boy, Fadal, joins Qiom and together they form a partnership of mutual need and community. “The Hidden Girl” takes place chronologically in-universe directly after the events of “Elder Brother” and follows the religious and personal journey of the girl Teky and how she obtains power both working within her patriarchal society’s restraints and by manipulating them to her advantage by disguising herself as an old woman through her society’s gendered use of face veils.

### *Spy’s*

A compendium-style book of purported documents collected by George Cooper including a guide for Tortallan spy’s, letters between various characters in Tortall during the lifetime of George and Alanna, drawings and notes on immortal creatures, timeline of Tortall, etiquette guide for visitors from Yamani, war reports, and description of school for mages who wish to become healers.

### *Tempests*

The first and only currently published book within the Numair chronicles and Pierce’s first Tortall Universe novel with a male central character. It follows the character Numair from *The Immortals* through his childhood, first years at the Carthaki University, and his friendship with future emperor Ozorne.

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