Lady Hero: Teaching Models of Empowerment in Young Adult Fantasy Literature

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# Table of Contents

**Introduction: Feminist Fantasy and Models of Empowerment**  
A Working Definition of Empowerment  
The Axes of Empowerment  
Female Empowerment Models in YA Fantasy Literature  

**Alanna and Kel: An Exploratory, Optimistic Model**  
Introduction  
Alanna the Lioness  
Keladry of Mindelan  

**Aerin and Harry: A Less Conclusive, Yet More Mature Model**  
Introduction  
Aerin Dragon-Killer  
Angharad “Harry” Crewe  

**Conclusion**  

**Works Cited**
Author Robin McKinley muses in an interview that fantasy giants like “Kipling and especially Tolkien seem barely to have noticed that women exist.” For the most part, she’s right: *The Hobbit* has a grand total of zero women characters. Of course, arguments can be made for a character like Eowyn in the later books who takes up arms and fights in the war. However, many critics point out that Eowyn relinquishes her sword to marry Faramir at the end: “I will be a shieldmaiden no longer, nor vie with the great Riders, nor take joy only in the songs of slaying. I will be a healer, and love all things that grow and are not barren” (*Return of the King*, 262). It is important to dwell on Tolkien’s specific representation of women because he is, as fantasy scholar Lori Campbell writes, well known as “the premier architect of modern literary fantasy” (9). Tolkien himself drew from Arthurian romance (57). As part of Campbell’s anthology, Jack Downs writes how women in the Arthurian romance tradition tend to be “at the center of virtually all conflict. As passive characters, they are prizes to be won, damsels to be saved or defended, and political tools to be exchanged between men” (59). In his essay, Downs largely defends Tolkien’s representation of women, arguing that Tolkien does indeed have central female characters. But he qualifies his argument, acknowledging that Tolkien was conflicted about his female characters’ right to have agency. Downs tracks how Tolkien’s inspiration from Arthurian romance influences the pervasive disempowerment of women in Tolkien’s own work. And as the father of modern fantasy literature, he has set the tradition for how the majority of women characters are treated in the genre. Thus, when women characters do make an appearance, they tend to be one of two archetypes: the damsel in distress or the evil sorceress. For the latter archetype, Campbell writes that, “in myth, medieval romance, and folk/fairy tales,
a magical woman is nearly always an evil one” (11). Not only is a powerful female character deemed the villain rather than the hero, but her power is also attributed to her magic rather than her character.

Things changed in the 1970s. Amid the second wave of feminism, women who grew up reading Tolkien began writing their own novels. Though they take all the high fantasy aspects that Tolkien drew on from Arthurian legend—high-octane adventure, dragons and other fantastical beasts, and knights to slay them—these authors respond to Tolkien by subverting gender roles and questioning how to create an empowered female character in a genre that has traditionally shunned women. In this thesis, I will discuss just two of these authors, Tamora Pierce and Robin McKinley, who wrote in the same period. Both women are prolific authors, having written multiple series in multiple worlds. Due to the scope of this project, I will focus on Tamora Pierce’s *Song of the Lioness* quartet and *Protector of the Small* quartet and Robin McKinley’s duology, *The Hero and the Crown* and the *Blue Sword*. Specifically, I will explore the relationship between the female character pairs from each author.

Pierce’s *Song of the Lioness* concerns the journey of Alanna the Lioness, the first woman to become a knight. With the hand of the Goddess on her and a powerful magical “Gift” (*Alanna*, 49), Alanna is viewed as a legendary icon. Pierce’s subsequent *Protector of the Small* series follows Keladry of Mindelan, who succeeds Alanna as the second female knight in the novel’s history. Kel has no magical abilities but nevertheless looks up to Alanna as her model.

McKinley’s *Hero and the Crown* depicts the coming-of-age of Aerin, who becomes a dragon slayer and first warrior queen of her kingdom. In the sequel, *The Blue Sword*, main character Harry is also portrayed as Aerin’s successor. Aerin appears to Harry in visions and dreams to
help Harry becomes the second female warrior queen. With each character, I will explore the
nature and circumstances of their empowerment as well as discuss the implications of the strong
mentorship relationship between each pair of women.

Both Pierce and McKinley are quite self-aware of how their books are situated within the
histories of fantasy and feminism. Like many modern fantasy authors, both Pierce and McKinley
name Tolkien as their leading influence. In an interview, Pierce looks back on her
disappointment with his portrayals of women: “At the end of Lord of the Rings, which was my
first exposure to named fantasy, Eowyn gives up her sword, which I thought was this tremendous
betrayal” (Rosenberg). Strikingly, McKinley brings up the same exact moment: “But the lack of
women doing anything but being beautiful and symbolic (don’t get me started on Eowyn)
bothered me from first exposure and is white-hot critical to the storyteller I grew up to be”
(Interview by Centorcelli). McKinley identifies how many female characters may do heroic
things, but the limiting circumstances in which they do so weakens their empowerment. One of
the most limiting factors is the fact that “so many of the female superheroes were superheroes
because of magic,” laments Pierce (Rosenberg). She observes that magic acts as an excuse for a
woman’s power, influencing or even guaranteeing female characters’ success and consequently
hurting its validity. Because of the many problematic portrayals with female fantasy characters,
Pierce and McKinley wrote their stories with the goal of creating realistic lady heroes. As a
child, McKinley remembers wishing for “books that didn't require her ‘to be untrue to my gender
if I wished to fantasize about having my sort of adventures, not about wearing long, trailing
dresses and casting languorous looks into pools with rose petals floating in them as the setting
sun glimmers through my translucent white fingers and I think about my lover who is off”
somewhere having interesting adventures’” (Sanders). She criticizes the unrealistic standards that women are typically held up to, expressing a desire for female characters who can be powerful and still be themselves rather than be forced to act within prescribed gender roles. In the following chapters, I will show how these complexities of empowerment that both authors identify manifest in their own writing.

**A Working Definition of Empowerment**

But what does empowerment truly mean? Before we explore Pierce and McKinley’s portrayals of empowerment, we must first establish a working definition of empowerment. In the history of feminism, women first fought for empowerment through political rights: first-wave feminists of the late 1800s fought for basic rights, including property rights and the right to vote. The second wave of the 1960s and the 1970s fought for greater access to employment, education, and abortion rights. By the third wave of the 1980s, people began to question this method. Rather than achieving empowerment through equality with men, a counter movement called “girlie feminism” rose in popularity. This approach found women taking pride in their femininity and sexuality, flaunting key symbols like high heels and lipstick (Dicker, 123). Now in the fourth movement, distinguished by social media and increased calls for inclusiveness and diversity, some critics warn that the term “empowerment” is in danger of becoming overused. Rebecca Wanzo writes in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* that feminism is compatible with any desires and endeavors freely chosen by a woman. If a woman chooses to dress in a man’s suit and tie, it can be considered feminist because this attire queers gender performance and resists cultural mandates about femininity.
Plastic surgery to sculpt a body to look more like Barbie can be feminist, if it satisfies a woman’s desire to realize her ideal form of embodiment. Submissiveness can be a feminist stance as an articulation of free will and self-discipline. (“Pop Culture/Visual Culture,” 666)

Manzo suggests that the most modern definition of empowerment has come to represent any individual choice. Regardless of the environment or culture, if a woman chooses to perform an action, it is empowering. Though the implications of this perhaps overly-broad definition are concerning, Manzo’s definition emphasizes the common element throughout feminism’s historical trajectory: agency, or the ability to retain autonomy over one’s decisions. Roberta Trites writes in *Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children’s Novels*, that “the most powerful way that feminist children’s novels reverse traditional gender roles, however, is by their reliance on the protagonist’s agency. In these novels, the protagonist is more aware of her own agency, more aware of her ability to assert her own personality and to enact her own decisions, at the end of the novel than she has been at the beginning” (6). Trites bridges historical feminist theory to literary theory here: empowerment through agency is crucial for a female character’s maturation. But Trites adds an important qualification: she cautions that this agency is specifically power over one’s own decisions rather than a more traditional sense of power over others. Trites thus uses “the term ‘power,’ then, to refer to positive forms of autonomy, self-expression, and self-awareness” (8).

Trites’ clarification suggests that it is crucial to define the concept of power itself in order to better understand agency. Critics largely identify two main definitions for power, as there are “those who define power as getting someone else to do what you want them to do, that is, as an
exercise of power-over,” as well as “those who define it as an ability or a capacity to act, that is, as a power-to do something” (“Feminist Perspectives on Power”). Trites’ own definition clearly sides with the second of these two. I will show how both Pierce and McKinley also define their characters’ agency as the second definition. In fact, their portrayals of empowerment highlight how the traditional concept of “power-over” others is problematic and typically assigned as male. Fundamentally, the definition requires that one must take power away from others in order to have power. Thus, it is not the goal of Pierce and McKinley’s female characters to achieve power over others because they would only transfer their disempowerment to someone else. Rather, they are gaining the power to make their own decisions and to lead their own lives.

**The Axes of Empowerment**

Though we have established a definition of empowerment through agency, the method by which one attains agency is not a one-dimensional concept. To illustrate these different models, I propose the following visual aid:
There are four main models that I have found the majority of feminist theories of empowerment to follow: empowerment through collective action, individual action, traditionally male characteristics, and traditionally female characteristics. However, I want to stress that these axes is by no means comprehensive or absolute. It is merely a useful way to visualize the diversity of empowerment models. I illustrate the models as two axes because it is rare for a theorist, author, or character to be situated squarely in any of these four extremes. In fact, I will argue that Pierce and McKinley’s female characters tend to slide between these axes and change positions over time. Before I do so, we must first delve further into each model.

Empowerment through collective action originates in the concept of “sisterhood,” or the “belief in women’s working together as equals,” as described by feminist historian Rory Dicker (15). Dicker describes how the term appeared as early as the first wave of feminism, when women’s rights activists “manifested a kind of sisterhood in writing their women’s rights treatise, the Declaration of Sentiments, which revealed their sympathy with women whose lives were very different from their own” (15). Though this definition of sisterhood seems to focus more on bridging all women regardless of race, age, or class, sisterhood also came to represent the larger goals of feminism. That is, women began not only to fight as a collective but also for the collective. Feminist scholar bell hooks addresses this larger scope of feminism when she defines feminism as “a struggle to end sexist oppression. Therefore, it is necessarily a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels, as well as a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires” (hooks, 26). hooks’s
definition argues for empowering women through ending domination in all its guises. She suggests that it is more effective and valuable to enact long-lasting, systemic change rather than empowering the individual woman. Second-wave feminists continued this strategy, campaigning as a collective for political rights. Even the way in which feminists look back on and organize their history takes on the collective approach. Dicker explains that “The idea of the “waves” of feminism was created by historicists, not the feminists themselves obviously (in March 1968 by Martha Lear). But after the waves were identified, feminists began to link back their own actions to the women in the previous generation and see their work as building on top of each other” (5).

Building the narrative of the feminist movements allows feminists to understand their actions as contributing to a larger endeavor, one that can eventually remake a society without oppression.

In contrast to first-wave and second-wave feminism, popularity of empowerment through the individual rose during the feminist backlash in the 1980s. During this third wave of feminism, women began to reject the communal sisterhood of their mothers’ generation. Dicker writes that women of the eighties “believed that inequality should be addressed on an individual level; as one woman puts it, ‘Sure, there’s discrimination out there, but you can’t just sit there feeling sorry for yourself. It’s the individual woman’s responsibility to prove her worth. Then she can demand equal pay’” (108). Dicker believes this “competitive individualism” is the “greatest threat to sisterhood,” as self-development comes at the expense of fighting for the larger community of women (16). At the same time, she acknowledges how this competitive individualism is “a byproduct of feminism. That is, in gaining rights and opportunities for women, collective feminist activism has allowed women to be more self-sufficient and more able to concentrate on ‘self-development.’ Feminism has encouraged women to acquire not just civil
rights but also the right to become individuals” (17). While the ultimate goal is for individual
women to have agency, there are both individual and collective ways to achieve that agency.

Now we come to the second axis: aside from individual and collective action, feminist
theories tend to map empowerment models onto traditionally male or traditionally female
characteristics. Many feminists have endeavored to prove that women are equal to men by
succeeding in men’s roles or adopting traditionally male characteristics. However, other critics
have pointed out the problematic nature of this approach. Dicker notes that many people “take
issue with the standard dictionary definition of feminism because it tends to reinforce an
androcentric understanding of equality: Women will become equal when they have what men
have. Should women merely want to copy men, though? Aren’t there some flaws with the
systems men have created?” (7). Dicker questions the logic in measuring oneself against the
standards that the patriarchy has created. Her comment relates to our earlier discussion about the
problematic definition of power. The domination of others is typically attributed to men, but it is
not necessarily the best definition of power. Other critics like Roberta Trites find that “trying to
gain power by acting male makes [a woman] little more than a hero in drag, which is indeed
irritating and retrograde” (5). Trites refers here to the main character of Jerry Spinelli’s There’s a
Girl in my Hammerlock (1991), in which she “joins the wrestling team in hopes of getting a
boyfriend” (5). Trites criticizes the oversimplified notion of empowering women by turning them
into men. It is problematic because the woman must reject one’s femininity in order to feel
empowered. Robin McKinley’s comment about how she wishes she did not have to be “untrue to
[her] gender” in order to be a hero rings even truer in this context.
Because of the glaring problems in approaching empowerment through male characteristics, many feminists have shifted to the other extreme: embracing and flaunting their femininity. While second-wave feminists protested at the Miss America pageant in 1968 and burned “objects of female torture” like bras, hair curlers, and makeup, third-wave feminists took the opposite approach (Dicker, 84). In response to this bra-burning dynamic, third-wave feminism spawned a new movement called “girlie feminism,” which reappropriated “all things considered female,” from lipstick, to high heels, to Hello Kitty (Dicker, 122). Trites brings in the literary side as well, identifying how feminist authors write protagonists who “recognize and rely on traits that gave their literary foremothers strength: compassion, interconnectedness, and communication” (5). More extremely, feminist scholar Rebecca Wanzo observes that modern feminists argue plastic surgery, prostitution, and even pornography to be empowering as long as the woman involved made the decision herself (666). Even today, female artists gain significant social standing by flaunting their traditionally feminine characteristics. Rapper Cardi B shot to fame in 2017 because she is both a self-proclaimed feminist and a proud, former stripper (Wells). Still other critics question whether enough time has passed for women to reappropriate things that still oppress so many other women. Feminist theorist Lois McNay describes this debate about “whether or not women should choose to undergo elective cosmetic surgery, whether sex work/prostitution may be viewed as an empowered life choice or act of desperation, whether the wearing of the veil should be regarded as submission to patriarchy or a political statement” (43). McNay’s examples give rise to another question: is it possible to truly know whether a woman is empowering herself, or whether she is so entrenched in societal gender norms that she is not conscious of them influencing her decisions?
From the exploration of these models of empowerment, it has become increasingly clear that a fifth model is emerging. In discussing the traditionally male and female characteristics, one may ask, why subscribe to this binary at all? Is not the most empowering thing to do to dispel with gender labels altogether? Renowned feminist theorist Judith Butler makes this same argument when she coined her theory of “gender performativity” in her book *Gender Trouble*. She proposes that gender is a learned behavior, produced by one’s own “stylized repetition of acts” and enforced by societal expectations (179). The revelation that gender is a learned behavior, and that the binary gender structure is constructed rather than innate, allows literary characters to break from their prescribed gender role, or even more radically, to do away with the binary altogether. Trites suggests the term “androgynized fantasy” to describe this budding model of empowerment (12). She writes that several feminist fantasy authors have “developed literary characters who enact power that is ultimately not necessarily gender specific” (25). However, she also acknowledges that this approach is still difficult for many authors and critics to adopt. Rather than erase gender altogether,

often in feminist children's novels, androgyny is used to indicate balanced power. Perry Nodelman praises novels that do ‘not so much blend male and female into genderless androgyny as [those that salvage] both masculinity and femininity as traditionally understood, and [keep] both intact and in battle with each other within the hearts and minds of characters of both genders’ (‘Children's Literature’ 34). (25)

Ultimately, this definition of androgyny as “incorporating the best of both genders” reinforces the binary structure of relegating certain traits to males or females. It seems to be a step away from the complete rejection of gender roles that Butler advocates. Nevertheless, Trites suggests
that empowerment through extreme male or female traits is not as effective as a combination of
gender traits. The characters who manage to unify “both stereotypically masculine and feminine
characteristics into a balanced whole” are to her the most successful (25). In this way, the idea of
“androgyne” empowerment is also a spectrum; on one end, characters inhabit the best of both
gender traits. On the other end, characters’ actions attempt to be devoid of gender. With this fifth
model, I offer a revision of my earlier visual aid:

Axises of Empowerment

Though these are the axes on which I have observed most theories of empowerment to
situate themselves, feminist theory is ultimately focused on accepting the diversity of
approaches. This attitude of inclusiveness began within the third-wave feminism as a response
against what Naomi Wolf calls the “victim feminism” of the second-wave movement. Wolf
portrays second-wave feminism as “sexually judgemental, even antosexual,” “judgmental of
other women’s sexuality and appearance” and “self-righteous” (14-15). She continues to criticize
the fact “that second-wave feminists want people to forego marriage rather than extend civil
rights, give up beauty rather than expanding the definition” (15). This description is perhaps an oversimplification of second-wave feminists, as R. Claire Snyder writes in “What is Third-Wave Feminism” that second-wave feminists were actually split on topics such as prostitution and pornography (179). Nevertheless, third-wave feminists’ call to “expand the definition” of empowerment rather than trying to nail it down was an important step towards shaping current feminist theory. Marilyn Friedman agrees in her book, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*, arguing that agency should be the most important aspect of empowerment rather than the context in which the empowerment occurs. That is, “minority cultural practices” such as remaining in an abusive relationship or practicing Islam should be accepted as long as the women retains her autonomy over the decision (187). Lois McNay summarizes this non-adjudicative approach to empowerment: “Freedom is not about stipulating the way individuals “ought” to live but rather encouraging them to interrogate the limits of what appears to be natural and inevitable in present forms of identity and attempting to go beyond them” (45).

**Female Empowerment Models in YA Fantasy Literature**

Now that we have thoroughly explored the various forms empowerment can take, let us explore how two literary case studies put these models into practice. In the subsequent chapters, I will discuss how Tamora Pierce and Robin McKinley’s female warriors operate within these models of empowerment. The methodology of my analysis mirrors the goals of the authors: Pierce and McKinley are not concerned with writing prose that asks us to rethink the concept of the sentence. They are instead focused on moving us through the story and innovating within familiar structures of character, plot and thematic development. This choice of innovation
explains perhaps why these authors and the majority of the YA fantasy genre have not interested academic critics thus far. Therefore, though I examine important, individual language choices, I largely focus on entire trajectories of individual characters as well as inter-character relationships over multiple series. I will argue that each female character pair has an intentional order in which the women “read” each other: Kel and Harry see their predecessors, Alanna and Aerin, as their models for success. Consequently, they respond to their predecessors’ actions, either improving on or misunderstanding them. Through this “reading,” each pair fluctuates between different models of empowerment and different levels of agency.

I will begin with Pierce and end with McKinley in order to illustrate a progression of increasingly complex models. Pierce’s characters, Alanna and Kel, demonstrate a clear, optimistic trajectory of increasing agency. However, that agency does not lessen the problematic nature of both women’s empowerment. With McKinley, I will argue that Aerin and Harry acquire agency less straightforwardly, in part due to the miscommunication in their mentorship relationship. One reason for this increasing complexity may be the differences in intended reading ages. Based on the Scholastic Guided Reading Levels, Alanna and Kel’s series are intended for younger readers in grades six to eight.¹ In contrast, Aerin and Harry’s series are

¹ The Scholastic Guided Reading Levels use a dual grade-level and a letter system to provide suggested reading levels. There are many other reading level systems that dispute the Scholastic system. However, it is useful to look at these scores because they represent publishers’ opinions on the level of thematic complexity in the books. Though I suggest a clear progression of maturity from Pierce to McKinley, each authors’ series have their own progressions as well. The four books in Alanna’s series have the respective scores of 6-8U, 6-8V, 6-8V, and 6-8V. Interestingly, the four books in Kel’s series have the respective scores of 6-8V, 6-8W, 6-8W, and 6-8W. The slight progression in scores between Alanna and Kel’s series supports that readers are intended to go from Alanna to Kel, and that a reader’s own maturity mirrors the growing maturity of the characters’ models of empowerment. The scores of McKinley’s series are less conclusive. Aerin’s story, The Hero and the Crown, scores as 9-12Z, while Harry’s story, The Blue Sword, scores as 6-8Y. This reverse progression of reading level is further complicated by the fact that McKinley wrote Harry’s story first even though she comes after Aerin in the novel timeline. Nonetheless, the less-mature reading level for Harry’s story supports my argument that Harry misreads Aerin and that their mentorship relationship is less successful than Alanna and Kel’s.
intended for readers from grades seven to twelve. Additionally, Pierce had originally written Alanna’s series as a several-hundred page novel meant for adults. However, when she attempted to publish it, she was advised to break the novel into a series of four, shorter books meant for teenagers (Spicer). The difference in these scores and Pierce’s publishing history supports my argument that Pierce’s series teach a simpler, more exploratory model of empowerment because they are intended to nurture younger readers. In contrast, McKinley’s less-conclusive series admits more of the difficulties when putting these models into practice, thus representing a more complex model intended for older readers.

Within these progressions of agency, I will also show how Pierce and McKinley engage with my “axes of empowerment.” I will illustrate how Alanna represents the empowerment of the individual and its pitfalls, while Kel’s story moves towards the collective end of the spectrum. On the male/female axes, Pierce is careful not to relegate her characters to what Trites calls “male heroes in drag,” which is the danger of creating lady knights. Instead, Pierce takes the opportunity to experiment with the idea of gender performativity in Alanna’s story. With Kel, she moves more decisively towards empowerment through both male and female characteristics, bordering on the androgyny axes I introduced earlier. While the axes are central for organizing our understanding of Pierce’s empowerment models, they are less important for McKinley’s series. Aerin and Harry do progress towards a collective model of empowerment, but the actual implementation is more problematic. On the male/female axes, Aerin and Harry both adopt traditionally male characteristics, but McKinley does not challenge this model or explore feminine characteristics as a source of strength. As her placement on the axes is less conclusive, this structure seems to be less useful for McKinley. Instead, McKinley focuses on challenging
the fundamental definition of empowerment through agency. In contrasting Aerin and Harry’s models, she suggests that agency is not enough if the characters do not understand where their power comes from or how they came to attain it. In other words, perceivable effort is required to validate their empowerment.

In both authors’ explorations of these models of empowerment, they identify the challenges one faces when putting these models into practice. Though Alanna and Aerin are held up as models for Kel and Harry, it is clear that their methods have flaws. It is thus more accurate to call Alanna and Aerin mentors rather than models, as they are still valuable teachers for Kel and Harry but are not necessarily meant to be imitated. Furthermore, Kel and Harry’s attempts to learn from their mentors does not necessarily mean that they are more empowered. Through their characters’ learning process, Pierce and McKinley demonstrate their commitment to presenting young readers a pragmatic approach towards empowerment: they teach that empowerment is never absolute, and thus one must be open to constantly readjusting one’s strategies as the situation demands it. In achieving this didactic goal, Pierce and McKinley bring two very different genres together. They leverage the issues of agency and power inherent in fantasy to teach models of empowerment to young adults. Thus, they successfully show how fantasy, a genre historically hostile to women, can complement the young adult genre to promote a feminist agenda.
Alanna and Kel: An Exploratory, Optimistic Model

Introduction

I will begin my exploration of empowerment models with Tamora Pierce’s two female knights, Alanna from *The Song of the Lioness* Quartet and Keladry from *The Protector of the Small Quartet*. Alanna the Lioness is the first lady knight in centuries (within the novel’s world) to earn her shield. As a young girl, she disguises herself as a boy, switching places with her twin brother to learn the art of knighthood. Alanna is fated to succeed from the very beginning, with a powerful magical “Gift” (*Alanna*, 50) and the “hand of the Goddess” on her (*Alanna*, 141). While Pierce wrote Alanna’s story throughout the early 1970s and 1980s, Keladry’s story was written in the early 2000s.² Set a decade after Alanna, Kel’s story depicts how she is the first woman to follow in the steps of Alanna. She acts as a foil for Alanna, as she undergoes her training in the open without disguise or magical abilities.

That these characters even exist is important progress for women empowering themselves in non-traditional roles, in both the novel’s world and ours. But though Alanna and Kel are successful in their quests to be lady knights, their journeys of empowerment each have unique complications. For Alanna, her empowerment strategies skew towards the highly individual and highly male axes. Alanna’s magical abilities and god-touched aura isolate her as a powerful but abnormal character. They are speciously empowering but ultimately weaken her agency, allowing others to pass off her success as a fluke. Pierce writes into Alanna’s psychology this awareness of her disempowering characteristics: Alanna is visibly uncomfortable with the

² I do not take much of a New Historicist perspective for these authors, but it is worth noting that Alanna’s series was written during the second-wave feminist movement, while Kel’s series is more likely connected to the third-wave movement. However, their chosen models of empowerment do not map onto the values of the different movements. For example, it is up for debate whether the second-wave or third-wave movement was more invested in empowerment through collective action.
passivity that is forced upon her by her magic and legendary reputation. She rejects her own success when her magic is involved, instead expressing comfort with the physical fighting skills she feels she has fairly earned. That Alanna prefers her physical accomplishments raises its own concerns: empowering herself through a traditionally male method suggests that Pierce merely turns Alanna into a boy to achieve her goals. However, Alanna’s experimentation with gender performativity suggests that her character represents a more nuanced approach to empowerment: She is still learning what is the best way to empower herself, and Pierce allows readers to learn alongside her. Ultimately, Alanna’s journey can be understood as a highly pragmatic model of empowerment; it has its problems, but Alanna’s strategy establishes an important precedent. Her initial success within a patriarchal system allows Kel to break the system open even further.

Kel views Alanna as a role model, endeavoring to become the second lady knight. She does not imitate her predecessor, but actively improves upon Alanna’s model. Alanna’s desire to be respected through her fighting skills is realized in Kel. Instead of being a vessel for obscurely described magical powers, or being swallowed up by the surrounding landscape, or surrendering to her emotions (all of which happen to Alanna), Kel conquers space actively, overcomes obstacles with logical reasoning, and suppresses her emotions. Honing her fighting skills and logical reasoning, Kel gains the agency that Alanna did not have through these traditionally male forms of empowerment. Consequently, the question of whether Kel succeeds at the cost of her femininity is even more crucial to explore: Kel struggles with her femininity, viewing it as an obstacle to her goals. However, Pierce’s description establishes ways in which she can view her femininity as a source of strength as well. In incorporating her female characteristics, Kel also improves on Alanna’s highly individualistic journey. Kel, and the older Alanna, work together to
build a community of women who help empower each other and future generations. In this way, Kel moves towards a more collective model of empowerment, and both she and Alanna expand the traditionally male role of a knight to include a more androgynous approach.

**Alanna the Lioness**

Although Alanna’s success as the first female knight is already subversive, she is by no means perfectly empowered. Also a powerful sorceress, Alanna falls into the tradition of female characters in fantasy literature whose only power comes from mysterious magical circumstances. Pierce herself admits that she had “done Alanna a disservice by making her a mage, a wizard, and a knight” (Spicer). Pierce is aware that, though she intended for magic to add to Alanna’s powers, it ended up becoming an excuse to explain how a woman could have power. Alanna’s magic may be speciously empowering, but the actual description of her magic reveals how it disempowers her. When the crown prince, Jonathan, falls prey to the “Sweating Sickness,” a magically induced fever that drains any healer of his own magic, Alanna steps in with her own Gift. Although she is only eleven, Alanna draws on magic meant for much more advanced sorcerers to save her friend: “She choked back a gasp as her flesh turned into purple fire contained only by her skin. She glowed; she shimmered; she burned with raw magic. It hurt. Every part of her screamed for cold and dark to put out the fire. She couldn’t hold it. She would burst like a rotten fruit” (*Alanna*, 100-101). Although Alanna initially calls on her magic, it consumes her. Her magical “Gift” is supposed to be just that: a gift that empowers Alanna by giving her special powers that ordinary people do not have. But she is portrayed as only a vessel for her magic, indicating how she is not in control of her own fate. Thus, she is disempowered by
her own magical abilities. As Alanna saves Jonathan, “A voice spoke, and Alanna screamed. 
That voice was never meant for human ears. ‘Call him back,’ it chimed. ‘I am here. Call him 
back’” (Alanna, 101). Though Alanna attempts to control her Gift, a mysterious deity instructs 
and overpowers her. Rather than empowering her Alanna’s magical connection to the Great 
Mother Goddess bends her into a subservient role.

Even during one of her greatest ordeals, Alanna’s agency is completely removed from 
er. Towards the end of the first year of her training, Alanna and Jonathan travel to the Black 
City to fight the evil gods, the Ysandir, that reside there. The morning that they leave, Alanna 
wakes up “suddenly, before dawn. Every nerve in her body quivered, as if she were about to take 
a test in the practice yards...She didn’t know why she was in such a hurry, and she didn’t stop to 
think about it, either” (Alanna, 193). The language portrays Alanna as having no control over her 
body and no understanding of her actions. Though she ultimately defeats the Ysandir, it is clear 
that supernatural forces greater than Alanna manufacture the entire ordeal. Furthermore, those 
supernatural forces do not permit Alanna to question her own lack of agency. Because Alanna’s 
abilities do not come from her own consciousness, she ends up disempowered even as she 
succeeds.

The language reveals how Alanna is a passive medium for her magic. Furthermore, the 
descriptions obscure how her magic works and where it comes from. When Alanna brings 
Jonathan back from the Sweating Sickness, Pierce describes her as falling “into the blue depths 
of her friend’s eyes. She was twisting in a black, writhing well. The alien place pulsed around 
her, enclosing her like a living thing. Shrieks and cackling and the screams of doomed souls 
sounded all around her. She was on the edge, between the world of the living and the
Underworld. She drifted between Life and Death” (Alanna, 102). This description is rife with
metaphors; they are metaphors of place, meant to describe the environment in which Alanna tests
her will. However, these metaphors are not particularly original or descriptive. While the lack of
originality may stem from Pierce’s still-immature skills as a writer, the non-specificity of these
metaphors suggests a different conclusion: they serve to draw the focus away from illustrating
where Alanna is and how she navigates it, instead highlighting her emotional reaction. That is,
the use of generic metaphors relegates her to the stereotypical portrayal of a female overcome by
her emotions. The personified aspects of the landscape like the “writhing well” and “alien place
enclosing her” become representations of these emotions, engulfing her. Furthermore, when the
narrative actually describes Alanna bringing Jonathan back, “their gripped hands glowed
white-hot, melting the shadows around them. Their combined Gifts burned away the walls of that
unreal place” (Alanna, 103). In the moment of her success, not only is Alanna disempowered by
the surrounding landscape, but her actions are also not singularly hers, as she must draw on
Jonathan’s Gift to return to the living world. The description again uses generic metaphors,
refraining from explaining how the magic works. Providing only the vaguest understanding of
the magic in metaphorical terms, the description leads us to doubt whether Alanna is truly
responsible for her own powers. In this way, the language reflects the societal disbelief of how a
woman could have power and the uncertainty of where a woman’s power would come from.

Because of this magic and supernatural connection to the gods, Alanna is special. In other
words, she is viewed as an abnormal event governed by fate rather than a truly empowered
woman. Other characters acknowledge her unusual position, taking her success for granted.
Prince Jonathan describes Alanna as a page who seems to be “just a small squire who takes a lot


of interest in what the pages do” (Alanna, 177). Jonathan’s comment suggests how, even though Alanna is only a page, no one questions the fact that she has powers greater than her years. After Alanna saves Jonathan from the Sweating Sickness, “Myles, Coram, and Timon stared at Alanna, awed because the Duke had been so awed” (Alanna, 91). This early reaction sets up how she is ultimately estranged from society because she is destined for legendary status through great, individual achievements. Though she becomes powerful and famous for her deeds, Alanna’s success is highly unique to her situation. Consequently, society attributes Alanna’s success to her magic and god-touched status rather than her own effort. This societal reaction weakens Alanna’s empowerment. As Alanna herself realizes the drawbacks to her individualized model, she resolves to adopt a more collective model, taking an active mentorship role in Kel’s series.

Alanna is self-aware that her magic and supernatural connections are problematic and remove her agency. That self-awareness manifests as a rejection of her own success. Alanna voices her discomfort in the aftermath of her successes, downplaying the praise and special treatment that her friends give her. In response to Myles and the others’ awe at her magical powers, “Alanna felt dazed and a little lonely. She didn’t like people looking at her as if she were something frightening” (Alanna, 91). Estranged from her own magical abilities, Alanna rejects the expectation that she is fated to become one of the most powerful knights in history. It could be argued that Alanna’s disavowal of her own power and glory is further evidence of her disempowerment. However, one could also understand Alanna’s discomfort with her success as acknowledging the limitations of her own empowerment. Alanna does not fear her own power, but rather fears how the nature of her power removes her agency over her own success. Thus, in
the aftermath of the Sweating Sickness, Alanna minimizes her role as much as possible: “When asked about it later, she gave all the credit to Sir Myles. Whenever the knight tried to discuss what had happened that night, Alanna always changed the subject” (Alanna, 105). Though Alanna does not fully understand why she feels the need to refuse credit for her actions, we can understand her discomfort as addressing the fundamental problem of her character: Alanna is disempowered by her own magical powers in the moment of her success. Though the inclusion of magic ultimately weakens the validity of Alanna’s power, the fact that Pierce writes this awareness of magic’s consequences into Alanna’s psychology demonstrates how she is conscious of creating nuanced portrayals of empowerment. Alanna’s rejection of her own success establishes Pierce’s feminist critique, which she further develops with Kel.

While Alanna is uncomfortable with the way her magical powers disempower her, she shows confidence in her physical abilities. As a young knight-in-training, Alanna resolves to fight and beat Ralon, an older page who bullies her. Because Alanna is smaller in size, she looks for other strategies to beat Ralon in a fight, approaching her friend George to learn street combat. When Alanna finally battles Ralon, the description of their fight is straightforward: “She stood up, and he leaped at her, landing a wild punch on her cheek. Thanks to the dishonorable George, Alanna was ready for this. She slammed a fist up and under, into his stomach again, knocking the breath from his body. Swiftly she broke his nose with the other hand” (Alanna, 76). Compared to the previous descriptions of Alanna in supernatural environments, this description is conspicuously devoid of metaphors. It is true that describing how a human body works is easier than describing magic, since one exists in the real world and the other does not. Regardless, the specificity of the language, in that we perceive every move Alanna’s body makes and how it
affects her opponent, ensures that we understand where her power in the fight comes from. The onslaught of physical movement after physical movement also emphasizes how there is no description of emotion in this scene. Alanna admits that she is scared before she challenges Ralon (Alanna, 74), but her emotions do not interfere or overcome her in the actual moment of her success. Most importantly, the description pauses to explain that “because of George,” Alanna has an edge over her opponent. Rather than avoiding where Alanna acquires her power, the description states clearly that she applies the skills George taught her. And instead of portraying her body as a vessel, the description places Alanna as the subject of each sentence, highlighting how she is the driver of her own physical power and thus retains her agency. It is exactly for this reason that Alanna feels she is able to take pride in this accomplishment rather than shy away from it. Beating Ralon is the true indicator that “she had finally earned her place among the boys” because her training effort is directly responsible for defeating him (Alanna, 68).

Alanna explicitly prefers her physical skills over her magical abilities, even when it is clear her success is due to supernatural occurrences. When fighting the Ysandir gods with Jonathan, Alanna expresses this preference: “She felt better now. This was what she had trained for. She turned all her attention to the swords, letting Jonathan control their sorcery” (Alanna, 206). It may seem like a contradiction that Alanna feels more confident in her less-natural skill here, as her magical powers are innate and her sword skills are learned. But the fact that Alanna’s fighting skills are acquired is precisely the reason why she prefers them. Unlike her magical powers, in which both she and the description are unable to explain how it works or where it comes from, Alanna knows exactly how much work she put into learning her fighting
skills, like her training with George. She thus feels justified in wielding her sword with agency. Alanna emphasizes the role of her physical body even when it is obvious that her magical connection to the gods are in play. When her surrogate father Myles of Olau brings her to the ruins at his barony, Alanna manages to move a door that he has never been able to open: “‘Myles, you seem to think I’m special. I’m not, really.’... ‘Drat it, Myles, I just put my back into it!’ she cried” (Alanna, 151). Alanna’s choice of expression, “put my back into it,” communicates how her effort is not without purpose. Deliberately denying the supernatural assistance she knows she receives, Alanna instead attributes her success to her physical control over her body. Though both Myles and Alanna know that she did not “just put [her] back into it,” Alanna’s desire to place her self-worth in fighting skills illustrates how she fights to regain her agency. Ultimately Alanna becomes known as a legendary sorceress with the “hand of the Goddess” on her (Alanna, 141). But all along the way, Alanna makes it clear that she is uncomfortable with the narrative written for her.

Alanna identifies with her fighting skills because she feels she has earned them through her own effort, in contrast with her unexplained magical abilities. But physical skills are a traditionally male form of empowerment. As a result, critics have accused Pierce of empowering Alanna by turning her into a boy. It is true that Alanna does everything possible to be a boy from a young age; she physically masquerades as one, dressing, walking, and talking like the other boys in order to go through knight training undiscovered. Alanna becomes so much of a boy that she must relearn how to be a girl. At seventeen, she asks the local healer to teach her how to dress as a girl. She also relearns how to walk like a girl, sit properly with skirts, and comport herself as a lady of the Court. Alanna laments that “‘it’s going to be as hard to learn to be a girl
as it was to learn to be a boy” (In the Hand of the Goddess, 159). However, her observation does not mean that she has turned into a boy. Rather, it illustrates Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, as it is equally difficult to learn to be both genders. Anastasia Salter agrees in her essay, “Closed Minds: Tamora Pierce’s Teenagers and the Problem of Desire,” how the “message left in front of children is the idea that gender itself is a construction, and that the only inherent differences are in physical and sexualized body structures” (165). The idea that Alanna, born as a girl, is more comfortable acting male is a “redefinition by Pierce of what is natural,” Salter goes on (151). Pierce does not simply turn Alanna into a boy; through Alanna’s gender identity struggle, she introduces the more complex possibility of gender performativity and fluidity. Furthermore, Pierce emphasizes the superficiality of this gender performance: though Alanna masquerades as a boy, she does not physically turn into one. Though the initial premise of Alanna’s story may be her transformation into a boy, Pierce is careful not to reduce Alanna’s empowerment. Instead, she uses the situation to help both Alanna and the reader learn how gender is a societal construct.

Though Pierce’s portrayal of Alanna is more nuanced than transforming her into a boy, Alanna’s empowerment strategies are still limited. For Salter, it is problematic that Alanna is “performing masculinity in the first place. Why can’t she defy authority and gain agency as a female?” (166). Essentially, Salter asks whether Alanna’s empowerment is cheapened because she only achieves success by hiding her gender for eight years. Furthermore, she questions whether Alanna’s achievements are truly feminist because she does not “seek to destroy the system of knighthood or overthrow the institutional structures that shape her country” (166). Alanna accepts that she must achieve success through a traditionally male role; thus, she must set
aside feminine models of empowerment even if she does not reject them. However, Salter goes on to defend Alanna’s methods, arguing that she represents a pragmatic model of empowerment: “A crusade against the system might be admirable for political reasons, but not achievable. By working as she does, Alanna forces the system to serve her regardless of intention, and in the end becomes a model for what is possible” (167). In proving to society that a woman can do a man’s work, Alanna’s achievement is an important first step, if a limited one. In this pseudo-medieval world, Alanna’s strategy is more realistic than trying to overthrow the patriarchal system overnight. We can thus understand Alanna as part of a larger strategy: she opens the way for future women like Kel to break down these institutions.

**Keladry of Mindelan**

Kel follows in Alanna’s footsteps to become the second lady knight. However, she builds on Alanna’s model rather than simply imitating her predecessor. John Lennard identifies in his book, *Reading Tamora Pierce*, how Pierce revises her characters over multiple series. Her sequel quartets “revisit, reflect on, and rewrite their precursors, a process the poet Adrienne Rich, fusing ‘revising’ with ‘re-envisioning,’ usefully called ‘revisioning.’ Moreover, both sequel quartets are longer and aimed at older readerships than their precursors, so the processes of growth and education they narrate are embodied in the extensions of the narratives” (155). We can thus understand Kel’s story as a set of revisions on Alanna’s initial empowerment model. Through her revision, Kel both improves on Alanna’s model and encounters her own complications.

In response to how Alanna’s magic disempowers her, Kel regains this agency through traditionally male characteristics. Like Alanna, Kel’s early years of training are punctuated by
several trials in which she distinguishes herself among the pages. Unlike Alanna, the descriptions of Kel emphasize her control over her environment and her success. One such ordeal occurs at the end of Kel’s page training when a fellow page kidnaps her maid and leaves her at the top of Balor’s Needle, the tallest tower in the castle. Deathly afraid of heights, Kel nevertheless climbs up the tower to rescue her maid. She is then forced to climb down the rusting, outer set of stairs when the same page locks the door to the inner stairs she came up. Pierce meticulously describes the entire process of going down the stairs: “Getting on her hands and knees, turning her head until she saw the opening at the edge of her vision, Kel backed up until both feet touched empty air...She groped with one foot until she touched the first metal step. She tested it, making sure she could rest her weight on it, before she set her other foot down. Carefully she straightened her legs” (Page, 233). Because Kel does not have magical skills, she must rely on her physical skills. The passage meticulously breaks down the idea of Kel’s female body into individual body parts touching physical things. In contrast to the generic metaphors that described Alanna using her magic, this belabored description ensures that there is no ambiguity about how Kel uses her body. Furthermore, the emphasis on Kel’s body movements illustrates how she overcomes her fear of heights by dominating the space around her. In direct contrast to Alanna, who is overwhelmed by the landscape, the language here gives Kel agency. But while Kel avoids passivity, she is only able to do so by conquering the physical landscape, which is a traditionally male empowerment model.

Kel’s success is due not only to her physical domination but also her logical reasoning skills. On a forest expedition with four other pages, the group stumbles upon a bandit camp and must fight them off until help arrives. Though she is not the page in charge, Kel takes command
when the others freeze up, as they all agree that Kel has the “cool head” (*Page*, 109). Like the metaphors used to describe Alanna’s magic, the phrase “to keep a cool head” gives only the most general sense of Kel’s abilities. However, this time Pierce continues past the level of metaphorical understanding and walks us through every thought in Kel’s head as she considers the possible outcomes of the fight:

> Spears would keep the bandits at a distance if they chose to ride blindly through the magic...Once they learned the magical barriers couldn’t stop arrows, the pages were in trouble...Kel was thinking at lightning speed. How to do this? If help didn’t come soon, someone would get hurt--the odds were too great. They would need a healer then. (*Page*, 109-111)

Like with Kel’s body climbing down the stairs, Pierce breaks down the idea of Kel’s mind into individual, specific thoughts. Again, the description portrays Kel as proactively evaluating how to manipulate the landscape around her rather than reacting to the stressful emotions the situation is producing. Because the description gives us privileged access to Kel’s thought process, her subsequent commands to the other pages are shown as logical. In establishing the logic of Kel’s actions, there is no question that Kel’s power stems directly from her ability to apply her tactical thinking to the current situation. Thus, the description ensures that Kel has agency over her decisions. But while Pierce gives Kel the logical reasoning skills that make her a better commander than her fellow boys, Kel inhabits a traditionally male role to gain her empowerment; her logical reasoning skills give her credibility as a leader largely because this society privileges this typically male characteristic.
Though Kel successfully regains her agency through these fighting skills and logical reasoning, she questions whether this agency is at the expense of her femininity. Kel is forced to deal with the most overtly feminine aspects of herself when she begins to develop breasts and her menstruation cycle. When Kel’s maid points out her growing breasts, Kel frustratedly acknowledges that “there was little she could do about the boys’ future comments, except choose her clothes with care and hope her new, inconvenient badges of womanhood grew slowly” (Page, 60). Kel is too practical to wish for her breasts, something she cannot change, to go away. But though she may resign herself to her growing breasts, she expresses her conflicted feelings when she calls them “inconvenient badges of womanhood.” Kel is aware that women normally celebrate their breasts as a sign of maturity, but her quest to succeed in a male-dominated profession makes them a weakness for her. Kel’s attitude towards her feminine condition worsens when she bleeds for the first time. Her maid, Lalasa, comforts her as she cries: “Please don’t cry. You never cry. Not when I would be awash in tears from all those bruises, not when that beastly horse steps on your foot” (Page, 98). Kel replies, explaining “I hate my body doing new things without telling me” (Page, 99). The most distressing aspect of Kel’s menstrual cycle is not the pain or blood but the realization that her body is not in alignment with her. It is true that Kel’s emotions may be heightened because of the hormonal changes in her body. But there is also a deeper reason: Kel succumbs to a rare moment of emotion because she is not control over her body. Her agency is determined by the control over her body, surroundings and emotions, all of which are traditionally male signs of power. Therefore, when the process of becoming a woman changes her body without permission, Kel cannot help but see it as actively
“deagentifying” her. Not only does Kel find her femininity inconvenient, but in this moment she also sees it as entirely incompatible with her desire to be the best knight.

Kel’s emotions and maternal warmth, both traditionally female characteristics, also conflict with her goals as a knight. After Kel is knighted, the nation goes to war with a neighboring country. Wyldon, the high commander, assigns her to command a refugee camp because she knows that she is the only one who will truly care for the commoners. When her refugees are kidnapped by the enemy, Wyldon forbids Kel from going after her charges. Though Kel’s emotions are in turmoil internally, she silently obeys Wyldon’s order (Lady Knight, 258). The novel’s society tends to reflect the real world in associating emotional outbursts with female weakness and emotional suppression with male strength. At one point Kel remembers a proverb, “‘Emotion is weakness,’” in order to remind herself to control her feelings in front of the boys (Page, 44). In order to retain her male-defined agency, Kel denies her feminine characteristics, or her emotional and maternal relationship to the refugees, in favor of being an obedient, stoic knight. Though Kel eventually disobeys orders and follows her refugees, she does so believing she has failed her duty as a knight. She even tells Wyldon in the aftermath, “You have every right to yell at me, my lord...Go ahead. I deserve worse” (Lady Knight, 404). Kel saves her refugees by indulging her feminine characteristics, but she is left questioning her self-worth.

Through this characterization, we could conclude that Kel treats her femininity as an obstacle to her success as a knight. Or we could understand Kel’s psychological conflict as putting pressure on the fundamental concept of a knight. If Kel had obeyed her commander’s orders and refrained from saving the refugees, she would represent the ideal knight based on the current chivalric code of conduct. However, Kel’s ultimate decision to follow her intuition
illustrates how she incorporates her feminine characteristics to decide for herself what a knight’s
duty should be. Kel’s actions emphasize how the chivalric code, though traditionally male, is at
its core a moral code. She challenges that code, questioning whether feminine ideals like
maternal warmth and intuition can strengthen it. Kel’s actions push back against criticism that
the concept of a lady knight is too androcentric and inherently limiting. While Alanna may not
have challenged the system of knighthood, Kel goes further. Rather than just doing what the
boys do, she actively creates and improves on the idea of a knight, adding feminine
characteristics that make the code of chivalry stronger. Though Kel may still feel guilty that she
disobeyed orders, the result of including her feminine ideals is success: she saves the refugees
and is praised for it. In the aftermath, Wyldon admits that his judgment was wrong. He tells Kel
that “You are a true knight, Keladry of Mindelan,” and that he is “honored to know” her (405).
This rare moment of approval from her former training master cements the argument that Kel’s
femininity actually improves on the code of chivalry.

Though Kel struggles to see her femininity as a source of strength, she does not
completely reject it. Rather, she tries to reconcile it with her goals. On the first day of training,
Kel deliberately wears a dress to dinner: “She was a girl; she had nothing to be ashamed of, and
they had better learn that first thing. The best way to remind them was to dress at least part of the
time as a girl” (First Test, 32). Kel does not apologize for her sex. But though she may accept the
sex she was born with, she struggles to see it as anything other than another obstacle in the way
of her goals. One night after dinner, Kel comes across some of the older pages beating a younger
one. Committed to standing up to the bullies, Kel considers that “fighting in a dress would be
tricky. Rolling up her skirt, she gathered it at one side and knotted it. I don’t care if Oranie [Kel’s
sister] thinks that sashes make me look thick-waisted, Kel told herself... From now on, that’s what I wear” (Page, 26). Though Kel tries to embrace her sex, her agency is measured in her bodily control, requiring that she pull her femininity out of the way just as she pulls aside her dress.

During the majority of the novel, Kel views her feminine characteristics as limiting her ability to become a knight, or a traditionally male warrior. However, the actual language of Kel’s physical descriptions suggests that Kel brings together both genders in an ideal combination. Kel is described as having “a dreamer’s quiet hazel eyes, framed in long lashes, and plain brown hair that she wore cropped as short as a boy’s. Her nose was small and delicate, her skin tan and dusted with freckles. She was big for a girl of eleven, five feet three inches tall and solidly built” (Page, 4-5). And for all her worrying, Kel also ends up having small breasts. As one of her peers humorously puts it, “It’s not like you’ve got melons or anything, they’re just noticeable” (Page, 126). These evaluations of Kel’s physical appearance conclude her to be androgynous-looking, with both male and female qualities. In contrast to Kel’s own frustration at her femininity, the language does not privilege one over the other, instead weaving between her feminine features like her “long lashes” and “small and delicate” nose and her masculine hairstyle and build. And while the boys may notice her breasts, they themselves do not get in the way of her training. At least physically, there exists the possibility of Kel empowering herself through both genders equally.

Though Kel may not realize it herself, Pierce’s description of Kel’s body and how it moves suggests that she views both genders as sources of strength. As a child, Kel lived in the Yamani Islands, a country that Pierce based off of Japan. During her years as a squire, Kel
reconnects with her lady friends from the Islands when they visit, and they play a game of “fan toss” with a “shukusen,” or a “lady fan” (Squire, 209). Also taken from real Japanese history, the shukusen looks like a normal fan, but its silk parts hide steel blades that cut like a knife. In this way, the shukusen embodies empowerment through both traditionally female and male characteristics. Moreover, it uses the expectation of female weakness as a strategy of surprise, masquerading as a harmless decoration. As the ladies toss the fan around in a circle, Kel “didn’t try to be graceful. She stood well braced, her eyes on that whirling crimson silk” (Squire, 207). In contrast to the other women who dip gracefully “like dancers” (Squire, 207), Kel’s body moves like a man’s, planting her legs firmly for support as if preparing for a fight. Because of her training, Kel’s body approaches the situation with a male framework; but in this case, Kel uses it out of respect, aware that she is handling a powerful weapon. Rather than dominating her surroundings, Kel’s male-centric agency is set on equal ground with a female tool of empowerment.

In addition to expanding the androgynous model of empowerment, Kel’s story responds to Alanna’s in another important way: in contrast to Alanna’s isolation, Kel builds a collective empowerment model through various mentorship relationships. Kel’s focus on collective action demonstrates how she views Alanna as a mentor whose mistakes she productively learns from, rather than a model that she must strictly imitate. As Alanna’s successor, Kel’s existence already establishes a more collective mindset. Alanna herself sums up the important progression from her to Kel:

I had the magic, don’t you see, and the hand of the Goddess on me. Everyone could and did say I was a freak, one of those once-a-century people. No one else needs to strive for
what I did, because they couldn’t reach it. But you, bless you, you are real. Those girls
watched you, and talked about your style in the saddle, and the things you did. They
swore they’d take up archery, or riding, or Shang combat, because you had shown them
it was all right. (Squire, 388)

This passage demonstrates Pierce’s “revisioning in full force:” Alanna expresses how Kel has
revised her own model. She identifies once again how her success is tainted by her supernatural
powers, whereas Kel is an ideal role model because she succeeds through only the physical skills
she earned through her own effort. Though Alanna sets the precedent, Kel’s success cements the
long-lasting change that collective empowerment can enact.

Through female mentorship relationships, Alanna and Kel establish a “sisterhood”
community, a main concept of the third-wave movement where women cross boundaries of race
and class to help empower one another. Furthermore, this sisterhood establishes systems that
make it possible for future generations of women to empower themselves from a young age.

Alanna takes an active mentorship role for Kel, though their relationship is complicated by
Alanna’s reputation. Because the novel’s society believe Alanna’s magic to discredit her success,
the king forbids Alanna from having a direct relationship with Kel. Though the king’s order may
seem anti-feminist at first, Lennard explains this logic, asking rhetorically, “What is the worth of
the realm’s first female knight in a century if there is no second? It was imperative therefore that
the new heroine, Keladry, be without magic or a goddess” (164). Kel has neither magic nor
goddess, but Lennard emphasizes how her ordinariness is crucial: proving herself without
Alanna’s magical influence is stronger proof that a lady knight can be successful based on a
woman’s effort alone, and this is why the king tries to separate Alanna and Kel. Nevertheless,
Alanna provides material support for Kel, secretly giving Kel valuable items like bruise balm, a tilting saddle, and hand exercises to help build her muscle and skills (Squire, 387). Though ordered to stay away from Kel physically, Alanna does everything in her power to help Kel, demonstrating how she herself has realized how important female mentorship is.

Kel also becomes a mentor to several young women. Her maternal warmth translates well to her strategy of collective empowerment. Kel is most influential with Lalasa, her maid, who later becomes a self-sufficient dressmaker and self-defense instructor. Kel not only protects Lalasa from several sexual assault attempts but also teaches Lalasa self-defense techniques. Kel’s teaching role is the core of collective empowerment: because she passes on her knowledge, Lalasa goes on to teach self-defense classes herself to other young women. This ripple effect illustrates how Kel’s success as a lady knight spreads to the rest of the female community.

However astounding Alanna or Kel’s individual successes are, their roles as mentors amplify the possibility of empowerment beyond themselves. In addition to teaching other women her physical skills, Kel takes on politics and law to empower future generations of women. When Lalasa is kidnapped, her perpetrator is caught and tried, but he is only given a fine because of Lalasa’s commoner status. Kel subsequently approaches the King and Queen and asks them “to change the law” to give servants, and especially female ones, more rights (Squire, 166). Kel’s actions mirror the second-wave feminists main strategy, “the personal is political:” that is, they fought for more women’s rights through direct legislative change (Dicker, 14). In asking the monarchs not only for Lalasa’s personal retribution but also to change the system permanently, Kel ensures that female empowerment extends into the long-term.
The trajectory from Alanna to Kel is an optimistic one. Though each character’s empowerment models have their own complications, ultimately the novel’s world becomes a better place for women. Pierce is able to create this optimistic progression because she makes a definitive judgement on empowerment models. Although her characters’ strategies are imperfect, Pierce suggests through the improvements from Alanna to Kel that the collective and androgynous models are the most ideal. In developing a world that ends with greater possibilities for women, Pierce implements a more prescriptive learning process for young readers. While Pierce provides a pragmatic yet narrower portrayal of empowerment models, McKinley’s series is not so straightforward in its didactic message.
Aerin and Harry: A Less Conclusive, Yet More Mature Model

Introduction

Kel improves on Alanna’s model to progress towards a better world for female empowerment. However, the progression from Aerin to Harry is not so clear. Both women begin in situations with little to no agency. Aerin, the protagonist of *The Hero and the Crown*, is the king’s only child. However, she is treated as an outcast because her mother was a Northerner accused of spelling the king into marrying her. Centuries later in *The Blue Sword*, Harry is kidnapped by Damaria’s current king and thrown into a strange land and culture. By the end, both turn their deagentifying premise into the thing that gives them agency. However, the ways in which they do so have their own problems.

Aerin uses her triply-outcast status—as a woman, a bastard, and a foreigner—to her advantage: because she has no proper position in court, Aerin can choose how she wants to prove herself. She learns sword-fighting, trains her father’s old horse, discovers the recipe for a fire-proofing potion, and kills dragons—all things that a normal princess would not be allowed to do. Because the narrative describes each of these ordeals as a detailed, trial-by-error process, readers witness and consequently understand the source of Aerin’s power. Similar to Kel, Aerin’s model of empowerment is traditionally male. Though McKinley does not explore femininity as a source of strength, I argue that her portrayal of Aerin breaks down the typical idea of what traditionally male skills are. In other words, she challenges the convention of assigning highly perceivable scientific or physical processes to men. In the second half of her journey, Aerin’s initial empowerment seems to regress. Ironically, her agency decreases as she becomes a more powerful figure as the savior of the Damarian kingdom. Similar to Alanna, the
plot begins to attribute Aerin’s success not to her earned accomplishments, but to her innate
magic and her destiny to be a legend.

Harry “reads” Aerin, her predecessor, in the same way that Kel views Alanna as a role
model. Like Aerin, Harry derives agency from her deagentifying premise. Though she is forced
to change her entire lifestyle, Harry’s kidnapping becomes an opportunity to learn skills that give
her more confidence and power. However, the unexplained, supernatural way in which she learns
these skills contrasts from Aerin’s highly perceivable learning process. Unlike Aerin’s
trial-by-error descriptions, Harry rarely encounters obstacles towards her eventual success.
Though she is successful, Harry is consistently kept in the dark about where her powers come
from and why she is able to attain them so quickly. Just as Aerin’s empowerment model
emphasizes perceivable effort through visible, trial-by-error explanation, Harry’s emphasizes
verbal explanation. And though Aerin briefly mentors Harry through dreams and visions, these
occurrences actually increase Harry’s confusion about her powers. In this way, Aerin may
function as a distant role model, but she fails to mentor Harry. This failure represents how Harry
does not necessarily improve Aerin’s model. Nevertheless, Harry achieves her own sense of
agency by the end through her willingness to adapt to her situation.

Although Aerin and Harry’s journeys still engage with the axes of empowerment, they do
not conclude which model leads to a better world. Both Aerin and Harry prefer traditionally male
characteristics over female characteristics, but the narrative does not acknowledge the problems
of this preference (whereas Alanna and Kel play with gender performativity and explore their
traditionally feminine strengths). Though the series also shifts from individual empowerment
with Aerin to a greater focus on collective empowerment with Harry, their mentorship
relationship is troublesome. The axes of empowerment help inform the women’s chosen models, but their contrasting journeys produce a more important result: they reshape the definition of empowerment through agency. Aerin and Harry emphasize their ability or inability to have control over their powers, but they further specify that this control requires them to be able to explain where their power comes from. In other words, McKinley argues in contrasting these two characters that empowerment requires perceivable effort. Her characters privilege learned skills over innate skills as a way to validate a woman’s empowerment. Neither character’s model is perfect: Aerin struggles to retain her agency, and she is unable to provide useful mentorship to Harry. Harry follows in Aerin’s footsteps but, as she does not understand her own powers, she cannot take ownership of them. These complications build an even more pragmatic, if less optimistic, understanding of collective empowerment than Pierce’s: passing on empowerment to future female generations is not so straightforward because the model must be adapted for each individual and each situation.

**Aerin Dragon-Killer**

Aerin’s story begins with another story: Aerin tries to remember who first told her the story of her mother, the Northern “witchwoman” who is rumored to have spelled the king into marrying her (*Hero and the Crown*, 15). This story establishes the societal narrative that shapes Aerin’s early identity; as she is a woman, a suspected bastard child, and the daughter of a foreigner, she has truly drawn the short stick. The label that the rest of society imposes on her, “witchwoman’s daughter,” encompasses all three of these identity markers, and it is used to shun her from society and remind her of her mother’s evil. When Aerin asks to accompany her father
to the North, he refuses: “But he could not dare take the witchwoman’s daughter to confront the workings of demon mischief; his people would never let him, and he too sorely needed his people’s good will” (8). The label “witchwoman’s daughter” removes Aerin’s name, and thus prevents her from developing her own identity. Aerin internalizes the label’s devaluing of her person so much that she uses it to refer to herself on numerous occasions (15). This “unnaming” speaks to the larger issue of Aerin’s place at court: when Aerin first disobeys her father to fight a dragon, he does not know how to punish her: “You seem to be rather a military problem, but as you have no rank I cannot strip you of it, and as you do not bear a sword from the king’s hands he can’t take it away from you and hit you with the flat of it’” (91). Aerin’s lack of a court role represents how she lacks an identity separate from her enforced outcast status. She contrasts with Tor, the king’s nephew and heir, who is an official member of the king’s army.

Though Aerin is shunned from society, her outcast status allows her more freedom than a usual princess has. All of Aerin’s unladylike endeavors—swordfighting, taming her horse, discovering the fire-proofing potion, and fighting dragons—are only possible because court officials do not care enough to forbid her from doing them. Making her own decisions on how to prove herself thus establishes her agency. But it is Aerin’s perceivable effort in these endeavors that confirms she is in full control of her success. When Aerin resolves to train Talat, her father’s old, crippled horse, the narrative moves through the process slowly. We first watch Aerin sit under a tree to acclimate Talat to her presence. The next week, Aerin feeds him treats and begins to groom him. The week after, Aerin climbs onto his back for the first time (34). Though none of these steps are particularly noteworthy by themselves, together they build a picture of the perseverance and patience Aerin needs to build a relationship with Talat. Rather than skipping
through time to the point where Aerin can comfortably ride Talat, the narrative chooses to dwell on these small obstacles because they illustrate Aerin’s work and explain the source of her power.

Similarly, when Aerin takes it upon herself to find the correct fire-proofing mixture, the narrative describes the project as a trial-by-error process:

The ointment recipe, Aerin found, was not as exact as it might be. She made one mixture, spread some of it on one finger, and thrust the finger into a candle flame--and snatched it out again with a yelp. Three more mixtures gained her three more burnt fingers...After that she used bits of wood to smear her trial blends on; when they smoked and charred, she knew she had not yet got it right. After the first few tries she sighed and began to keep careful notes of how each sample was made. (51)

Aerin’s “careful notes” of her “samples” is the vocabulary of scientific experiments. Her learning process is completely bared to the reader: the narrative takes the time to have us watch Aerin burn her own fingers, then watch her learn from her mistakes when she realizes a twig is a better tool. Aerin does not come about the correct mixture miraculously in one day. In fact, it takes two years before she lands on the correct quantities (56). The length of time establishes Aerin’s work ethic, namely how she puts in time and effort to achieve her goal. A scientific experiment is a fitting setting for this lesson; in contrast with magic and the supernatural, it is a highly perceivable process with logged calculations. Because the reader directly witnesses Aerin’s scientific achievement, it is difficult to dismiss her empowerment as coming from anything but
her own effort. It is the trial-by-error process that empowers Aerin, rather than the achievement itself.³

The mundaneness of Aerin’s progress also strengthens her empowerment. Though the result of Aerin’s experiment is an extraordinary immunity to fire, it is important that the way in which Aerin acquired this power is entirely ordinary. Consider if Aerin had spontaneously gained an immunity to fire; it would then be difficult to derive empowerment from this power because the explanation would fall back on supernatural or innate skill as an excuse rather than perceivable effort. However, watching Aerin mixing herbs and burning twigs repeatedly dispels the idea that a woman can only have power due to extraordinary circumstances. Even when Aerin begins hunting the most fearsome of mythical beasts, the process is almost humorously mundane. In Damar, dragons are no longer fearsome or mythical: “There is no glamour in hunting dragons. It was hard, tricky, grim work, and dragons were vermin” (29). Aerin’s dragon-killing has a clear upward trajectory; she begins with a small dragon before she takes on the larger dragons. Every battle is messy; Aerin makes several mistakes, almost killing herself in the process even with the advantage of the fire-proofing potion. Like the perceivability of the scientific experiment, the ordinariness of dragon-hunting makes it the ideal setting for Aerin to earn her empowerment.

In establishing how Aerin derives empowerment from perceivable learning processes, we must acknowledge that she adopts a traditionally masculine model. Throughout the book, Aerin is portrayed as overwhelmingly masculine in both her physical description and preferred

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³ In emphasizing the scientific, trial-by-error process of Aerin’s empowerment, one might ask whether this method works directly against the fantasy genre. As magic and supernatural occurrences are defining traits of fantasy, it seems that the importance of the reader witnessing the work involved in Aerin’s empowerment is contradictory to the fantasy genre. I will address this conflict further in my conclusion.
activities. While Kel and Alanna also empower themselves through masculine characteristics, I discussed how they also engage with their femininity and explore gender performativity. In contrast, McKinley does not consider femininity as a source of strength at all, nor does she challenge the male-centric models of empowerment that her female heroes use. Aerin is described as the opposite of an ideal princess: she is an “unusually large and awkward child who seemed to be able to break things simply by being in the same room with them” (13). Aerin’s physique is set at odds with her spiteful sister-in-law Galanna, who has the ideal female physique: “Aerin was as tall as Galanna already, for Galanna was small and round and compact, and Aerin was gangly and awkward” (23). Aerin’s lack of grace is mentioned repeatedly as the defining aspect of her behavior. Instead of embroidering and dancing, Aerin prefers traditionally male activities like sword-fighting, horseback riding, and scientific experiments. Though Aerin derives empowerment from these activities, the fact that she prefers her masculine characteristics over her feminine ones is a concerning didactic conclusion for young readers. It could be argued that portraying a masculine woman introduces the idea of androgyny and subverts stereotypical ideas of what a woman should look and act like. However, it is too easy to conclude from Aerin’s journey that one must act male to achieve empowerment, while exploring one’s femininity is a waste of time. The only power that Aerin gains from her feminine side is her magic, and it is negatively portrayed. It is revealed in the second half of the book that Aerin harbors a powerful magical Gift inherited from her “demon” mother from the North (145). Aerin’s magical abilities are far more powerful than her father’s or Tor’s, reinforcing the societal perception that magic is primarily a woman’s power, and that a woman’s power is evil and unnatural.
Other critics have offered the same criticism of McKinley’s female heroes. In “Dragon-Slayers vs. Dragon-Sayers,” Kara Keeling and Marsha Sprague summarize the two main reactions towards Aerin’s portrayal: “While some female readers find the dragon-slayer model attractive and empowering, others resist it, feeling that such female heroes are unrealistic and subvert what they find powerful and attractive about being women. Why, they ask, must girls become boys to have adventures and be successful?” (14). This criticism aligns with the other critics of the traditionally male empowerment model that I introduced in the previous chapters. In short, many critics feel that McKinley has simply “welded brass tits on the armor’ of her female hero.” (14). Keeling and Sprague go on to contrast Aerin, a “dragon-slayer” with examples of a “dragon-sayer,” or female fantasy protagonists who empower themselves through feminine characteristics:

Anne McCaffrey’s Harper Hall trilogy as well as Kaeldra in Susan Fletcher’s The Dragon Chronicles offer a melding of these qualities of nurturing and self-development, relying on traditional feminine values to accomplish their quests. They represent an alternative feminist heroism, one not dependent on assuming the traditional masculine role of a dragon-slayer, an armed warrior who conquers through violence. Instead, both of these heroines become “dragon-sayers,” literally taming dragons through communicating with and physically and emotionally nurturing infant dragons. Menolly and Kaeldra become mothers of dragons, offering readers a positive heroism based on love and female identity rather than one based on absorption into male roles of violence and destruction (however self-defensive). (14)
Though these characters are certainly needed and valuable, I want to push back on the dismissal of Aerin’s male model of empowerment. My analysis of her activities suggests that McKinley is emphasizing a more fundamental definition of empowerment that goes beyond the gendered categorizations: Aerin’s fire-proofing experiment and killing of dragons is not empowering because it is a male form of empowerment, but because it is a process that readers can witness. When Aerin burns her fingers to test the fire-proofing potion, the reader perceives her effort through the narrative’s description. The problematic nature of Aerin’s process comes from the fact that male traits are historically privileged as being highly perceivable to the reader. Scientific experiments and physical skills are both inherently visible to the eye, and these methods have long been attributed to men. In contrast, the work involved in building traditionally female skills like intuition and caring have been hidden away or dismissed so that they seem effortless. In characterizing Aerin’s process, I therefore use the phrase “perceivable effort” rather than “visible effort” to extract a more fundamental definition of empowerment. Aerin’s appropriation of these male methods emphasizes how the perception of effort, whether visible to the eye or explained to readers through narrative, is crucial for any form of empowerment, no matter if it is traditionally male or female. Thus, I argue that Menolly and Kaledra’s communication and nurturing skills are empowering not because they are feminine but because the narrative shows the women building these skills. This need for perceivable effort explains why a female character’s magical powers is often a problematic method of empowerment; because magic is typically innate and inexplicable, there is usually no work or effort involved in acquiring them.  

4 J. K. Rowling’s series Harry Potter, in which she combines the fantasy genre and the British boarding-school adventure genre, is an obvious exception. In portraying a wizardry school, her narrative
the difference between their models as well: Alanna’s magic is disempowering because her
descriptive language does not demonstrate perceivable effort, while Kel’s focus on physical and
logical reasoning skills is similar to Aerin’s in that they both choose highly visible, male
methods of empowerment. Although McKinley conspicuously lacks an exploration of feminine
models, she arguably goes further in breaking down the assignation of visible effort to men.

As a result of Aerin’s perceivable achievements, she earns her own place at court. After
defeating the first dragon, Aerin’s father awards her a sword, then gives her the punishment he
was not able to give before (94). Though it seems strange that this punishment is cause for
celebration, it symbolizes how Aerin has gained the same standing as the king’s other men.
Furthermore, “she had not merely been permitted her place, as she had grudgingly been
permitted her undeniable place at his side as his daughter, but she had won it. She carried the
king’s sword, and thus was, however irregularly, a member of his armies and his loyal sworn
servant as well as his daughter. She had a place of her own—both taken and granted” (94).
McKinley is particularly heavy-handed here with the didactic message she wants to promote, but
the message is nevertheless important. Aerin stresses not only that she has an official identity,
but also that she has actively “taken” it. In other words, she has exercised her agency to create an
identity, one that is separate from her identity as the king’s privileged daughter or the
witchwoman’s daughter. As soon as Aerin begins to prove herself, society develops a new name
for her: “And the small villagers came to love her, and they called her Aerin Fire-hair, and were
kind to her, and not only respectful” (96). Aerin literally makes a name for herself, shedding her
mother’s legacy and reclaiming her individuality. Though the marker of her difference, her

allows readers to perceive the effort it takes to develop magical powers, which subverts the idea that
magic is inherently inexplicable or innate.
orange hair, still remains in her label, it also nods to her achievements in discovering the
fire-proofing potion and killing fire-breathing dragons.

Despite Aerin’s reclaiming of her name, not everyone readily adopts Aerin’s newly
empowered status. “The small villagers came to love her,” but the royal court actually mistrusts
Aerin’s powers more, “especially when the only wound she bore from a task that often killed
horses and crippled men was a simple flesh wound” (96). This reaction clarifies why it is
important for readers to perceive Aerin’s fire-proofing experiment. Without witnessing that
process alongside her, Aerin’s fire immunity seems effortless, and thus implausible. But when
Aerin attempts to teach others how to make the fire-proofing potion, she is refused: “They knew
the story of the kenet, knew that anyone might learn the making of the stuff who wished to learn
it; but why was it Aerin-sol who had found it out? No one but Arlbeth and Tor asked her to teach
them” (97). Though Aerin tries to allow others to perceive her effort, others are even more
adamantly in denial of her power. This frustrating societal reaction represents the continuing
difficulty of female empowerment: even as Aerin empowers herself in the most visible way,
society refuses to understand where a woman’s power comes from. This wrinkle in the narrative
of Aerin’s success speaks to McKinley’s continuing commitment to pragmatic representations of
empowerment. She empowers her characters while avoiding an idealized optimism.

Though Aerin finds empowerment, the second half of her journey weakens her agency
because it devalues her initial successes. When Aerin nearly dies from her injuries killing Maur,
the fearsome black dragon, she is called to the mountains, dreaming of a man named Luthe who
claims he can heal her. After making Aerin immortal, Luthe reveals the extent of Aerin’s
magical heritage from her mother, arguing that Aerin is the rightful heir to the throne and is fated
to save Damaria from the demonic northerners (148). Luthe “believed that you had to know at least something of the truth—I believed it until I saw you face Maur with little more than simple human courage and a foolhardy faith in the efficacy of a third-rate healer’s potion like kenet against the Black Dragon” (153). Though Luthe is trying to console Aerin with the knowledge that she has extremely powerful magic, his words suggest a more sinister message: by calling the fire-proofing potion a “third-rate healer’s potion” and Aerin’s dragon-hunting abilities as “simple human courage” and a “foolhardy faith,” Luthe devalues the effort Aerin put into empowering herself. He suggests that killing Maur is a fluke, rather than a result of her previous training killing dragons. Consequently, Aerin’s early achievements are written off as meaningless, merely serving as childhood activities as she waits for her true destiny to manifest. Aerin reverts back to her mother’s legacy when she accepts her destiny for greatness and magical powers, leaving behind the initial methods of empowerment that she earned.

Aerin does go through a learning process to understand how to wield her newfound magical powers. But in contrast to the fire-proofing experiment and the dragon-killing, none of this learning process is perceivable to the readers: “All [Luthe] could offer her was his knowledge, of magic, of history, of Damar, of the worlds he had traveled, and the wonders he brought back. He taught her eagerly, and eagerly she learned, each of them distracting the other from something each could not yet face” (148). Though the description describes a learning process, we do not witness the actual learning in any detail. In the span of these two sentences, the narrative skips through months of training, until Aerin has mastered her magic and is ready to defeat the Northerners. Consequently, when we finally view Aerin use her powers to light a fire, we lose the sense of empowerment in her achievement: “Remembering something else Luthe had
taught her, she gathered a few dry twigs and a heap of dead leaves together, and set them on fire by glaring at them” (180). In contrast to the long, detailed process of developing the fire-proofing potion or training Talat, all we know of Aerin’s magic is her ability to light a fire by “glaring” at it. Though we understand that Aerin has newfound power, we do not witness her effort to acquire it. It is therefore difficult for us to assign that power to Aerin and for Aerin to derive empowerment from an unexplained skill.

As Aerin progresses further into her destiny as the savior of Damar, she struggles to retain her agency. Before coming home to help Tor and her father defeat the Northern army, Aerin first defeats her demon uncle, Agsded. Due to these battles, Aerin becomes the savior of Damar, and she is recognized by her people as the rightful queen. But similar to Alanna, the actual descriptions call into question the validity of her agency. Before her fight with Agsded, Luthe gives Aerin a magical sword named Gonturan, which helps her through the battle: “The red sword bit at her again, and again Gonturan pulled her arm into place in time to deflect it” (174). In this sentence, Gonturan is the active subject in this sentence, not Aerin. It is her magical sword that defeats Agsded rather than the skills she built throughout her adolescence. However, Aerin is shown to be aware of her passive state and fights against it: “Someday, she thought tiredly, I must learn to go forward of my own free will...She raised Gonturan, and the blue fire cascaded over her; it was cool against her face. She closed her eyes--closing my eyes is stupid, she thought— and jumped into the fire” (174). Aerin acknowledges that she is losing her agency, though it is a strange statement because she suggests that she has never had agency, even in her initial achievements. For a moment, Aerin becomes the active subject again when “she raised Gonturan” instead of letting Gonturan raise her. Aerin regains her agency again when she kills
Agsded by throwing a wreath of poisonous plants at him (175). The action is Aerin’s choice; however, it is not explained why this action works. The fluctuating actor in this description communicates how Aerin struggles to prevent her magical sword, and her magic in general, from removing her agency.

As Aerin’s story progresses, it seems that she loses her initial agency even as she achieves greater heroic status. Though Aerin’s empowerment has its complications, McKinley leaves the story on a more optimistic note. In one of the final passages describing Aerin after she is queen, she teaches a suddenly considerable number of interested young men and women what she knew about dragon-hunting...Somehow or other Aerin’s dragon-hunting lessons began to spill into horsemanship lessons, and she taught her pupils first about riding without stirrups, and later without reins...Soon the Queen of Damar was rumored to be an uncanny judge of horseflesh, and her opinion on this colt or that mare was frequently sought. (226)

In teaching future generations the skills that she learned as an outcast, Aerin successfully transforms her individual empowerment into a collective empowerment model. However, McKinley suggests through the language that there is still work to be done. That is, Aerin’s skill with horses is phrased as “uncanny,” which diminishes Aerin’s effort to build that skill. Nevertheless, Aerin’s newfound role as a teacher represents a society in transition, one that begins to respect perceivable effort over innate magic.
Angharad “Harry” Crewe

Centuries after Aerin, Harry becomes the next female savior of Damar. Like Aerin, Harry begins her story with little agency. She grows up in Homeland, a pseudo-eighteenth-century British society, where women are severely limited in their opportunities. The narrative’s first portrayal of Harry describes how “she might have screamed, and hammered on the walls with her fists, or jumped over the low windowsill in her room...and run off toward the mountains; but she was trying her best to be good. So she was merely first to the breakfast table” (The Blue Sword, 1-2). Yearning for adventure, Harry chafes at the bit, suppressing her desire to do something in order to fit in with the culture. This characterization also establishes that Harry’s definition of agency is primarily male-oriented, in that all of her desired actions are physical. McKinley does not explore female modes of empowerment in Harry’s narrative either. The greatest indicator of an androgynous model is Harry’s name; Harry specifically prefers her androgynous nickname, rather than her full name, Angharad. Though names are significant for both Aerin and Harry, this detail is the extent of McKinley’s exploration of the androgynous axes.

Harry also desires agency through speaking, as women in this society are not allowed to participate in important decision-making: “Beth and Cassie and Harry were all biting their tongues to keep from asking any questions that might call attention to their interested presence and cause the conversation to be adjourned till the men retired to some official inner sanctum” (41). Again, the women repress their agency, silencing themselves because they know their interest, let alone their thoughts, are not welcome. On top of this, Harry is then kidnapped by the Damarian king. Though she is finally taken away from her repressive homeland, she still does
not have any agency over the decision. Interestingly, Corlath, the king, has little say in the matter either: driven by a powerful magical vision, Corlath has “no alternative” but to kidnap Harry (81). Harry wakes up flung over a horse in an unknown land and learns she is to be kept in Damar for unknown reasons. Surrounded by a strange culture and people, who speak a language that she does not know, Harry is at the mercy of fate.

Yet Harry’s kidnapping to Damar is the best thing that ever happens to her: Like Aerin, Harry finds immense possibilities in her deagentifying situation, possibilities that she would never have been able to explore in her pseudo-British homeland. Instead of refusing to adapt to this new culture, Harry learns to ride a Damarian warhorse, learns to fight in six weeks, becomes a member of the king’s elite warriors, and leads the Damarians to victory over the Northerners. Roberta Trites summarizes Harry’s progression in *Waking Sleeping Beauty*: “At one point she drinks a strong spirit that helps her foresee the battle they must fight with the Northerners. In the resulting vision, she perceives the leader to be a man; only later does she recognize that she herself is that leader. Thus, she eventually becomes what was for her initially unthinkable” (13). That Harry achieves the previously unthinkable suggests that she has achieved empowerment. Harry takes advantage of the possibilities that her initial kidnapping opens to gain a new homeland and become a strong, female hero.

However, the way in which Harry achieves these skills calls into question whether she is truly empowered. Trites agrees, pointing out that “unfortunately, Harry’s speech is often silenced throughout the text. Because she has been kidnapped by people who speak a foreign language, she must learn the language of those who have colonized her. And although when she experiences her visions she speaks in the Old Language, she must rely on Corlath to interpret for
her, for she does not understand the language when she is conscious” (13). Trites hits on the problematic nature of Harry’s success; even as new possibilities are opened to her, she is consistently prevented from understanding her powers. Aerin cannot even consciously control her ability to speak the Old Language; she has this unique power, but she does not understand how or why she came to have it. The language barrier, as Trites discusses, is one major obstacle in understanding her situation, as Harry literally does not speak the language. However, I argue that the language barrier represents a larger problem of self-perception. Initially, Harry does not understand what is going on because she cannot speak the language. But her lack of self-perception persists throughout the story for two more general reasons: her powers are portrayed as supernatural, and others refuse to explain Harry’s powers to her.

We can illustrate the first reason with the same language example. Harry eventually learns the Damarian language, but she learns it in just three days: “By the end of the third day she was speaking in sentences, simple, painful, and ungrammatical ones; but she found that certain Hill words were creeping into her Homelander vocabulary and staying there” (96). Though Harry admits that her speaking skills are rudimentary, she is surprised at how quickly she is able to pick up the language. Harry is unable to explain verbally why she has this ability: rather than actively learning the words, she characterizes them as invading her vocabulary. Because Harry’s ability is portrayed as supernatural—that is, it’s attributed to a force beyond explainable laws of nature—Harry cannot take ownership of her own power. Harry’s struggle to provide a verbal explanation reflects how there is little perceivable effort in achieving this ability.
Harry also learns to swordfight inexplicably in just six weeks. Lynn Moss Sanders writes in “Girls Who Do Things: The Protagonists of Robin McKinley’s Fantasy Fiction” how “it is also important to note that McKinley spends a portion of each of these books describing the physical training of both Harry and Aerin. Neither woman is a natural athlete, but both become exceptionally skilled at fighting with swords on horseback, largely through their sweat and determination.” Though Sanders is correct that McKinley describes the learning process of both women, the short timespan in which Harry achieves a level of mastery weakens the perceivable effort that the description tries to provide. By the end of the six-week training, Harry is able to unseat Mathin, her teacher, who exclaims that he has not “been given a fall such as that in ten years, and that was by Corlath himself” (113). Furthermore, Harry’s success is not attributed to her previous training, but rather to an inexplicable anger:

This anger rose in her slowly at first, faintly, and then with a roar; and she was, despite it or around it, as puzzled by it as by everything else that had happened to her since her involuntary departure from the Residency. It felt like anger, red anger, and it felt dangerous, and it was far worse than anything she was used to. It seemed to have nothing to do with losing her temper, with being specifically upset about anything; she didn’t understand its origin or its purpose, and even as her temples hurt with it she felt disassociated from it” (112).

Harry acknowledges that this anger drives her success, but she struggles repeatedly to elucidate what the anger is and where it is coming from. She even questions whether the feeling is truly anger, or whether it is something else. As a result, Harry feels disconnected from this feeling since, even as it comes from within her, it seems not to come from a place she can identify. As
Harry describes this inexplicable anger as a separate entity, it begins to represent all of the frustration she has felt from “everything else that had happened to her,” namely the continued lack of explanation she has received. Ironically, the anger that symbolizes this inexplicability cannot be explained either. Consequently, even as Harry succeeds against Mathin, she is not content, only able to manage a “wavering smile back at him, standing clumsily with her sword twisted behind her as if she’d rather not be reminded of its presence” (112). Harry is not proud of her achievement in this moment because she cannot perceive any effort in her achievement, and she cannot explain why she is able to do it. Thus, both Aerin and Harry’s narratives emphasize the importance of perceivable effort, but in different ways: Aerin’s narrative emphasizes visible explanation, while Harry’s narrative emphasizes verbal explanation.

Because Harry does not understand why she learns these skills so fast, it is difficult for her to feel that she has agency over these achievements. Harry acknowledges the absurdity of this learning process several times, asking herself, “How much can you learn in six weeks, even if Aerin is keeping an eye on you?” (104). When riding her warhorse for the first time, she is aware that it is strange to master this skill so quickly: “and at the same time she felt almost uneasy that it was too simple, that she understood too readily” (97). Harry identifies the illogical way in which she gains these skills. These inexplicable powers take a toll on her; when she grips Gonturan, the Blue Sword, for the first time, “she felt at once, wearily, that this was the way it was supposed to be held; and wondered if swordsmanship, like riding a war-stallion and speaking a language strange to her, was suddenly going to awaken in her blood like a disease” (101). For Harry, these newfound powers are not a positive development; even though she participates in activities that she never would have been able to do before, the fact that she does
not understand why she succeeds in these activities causes her distress, actually taking energy away from her rather than empowering her. Rather than viewing her powers as a gift, she characterizes the growth of her powers as a “disease.”

Harry’s struggle to understand her unnatural learning process is exacerbated by the fact that her mentors refuse to give her any clarification. Though Mathin spends a significant amount of time to teach Aerin the Damarian language and swordfighting, he is reluctant to elucidate her purpose in Damar: “One of the things Mathin would tell her little of was Aerin Dragon-Killer and the Blue Sword. He would refer to Damar’s Golden Age, when Aerin was queen, but he would not tell her when it was, or even what made it golden” (118). Mathin’s refusal to tell Harry about Aerin prevents Harry from understanding the female legacy that she is a part of. Though Aerin chooses Harry as her successor, others do not allow Harry to understand who her female mentor is. Consequently, Harry learns how to fight and speak the language, but she does not understand the larger purpose of why she is here and what she is expected to do.

However, Harry does not stay silent in the face of her mentors’ reluctance to explain her purpose. Trites argues that Harry’s voice is silenced throughout her story, but in key moments, she voices her frustration: “‘I am tired of having things only half explained. Either I am damalur-sol, when it is convenient, or I am to be quiet and sit in a corner and behave till it is time to bring me out and show me to the troops again. Did you choose Mathin to teach me because he is close-mouthed?” (159). Harry confronts Corlath about his treatment of her. She summarizes the core hypocrisy of her empowerment; although she is expected to be the symbol of motivation and hope for all of Damar, she is given little explanation about her role. Through her outburst,
Harry demands the respect that a truly empowered hero would be given. Just by acknowledging this frustration, Harry regains some of her agency.

Because Harry lacks self-perception of how she earns her empowerment, she cannot be proud of her achievements. With only a vague understanding of why she was transplanted to Damar, she worries constantly that she does not belong. Though Harry’s powers elevate her to a high status, her identity crisis worsens because of her inexplicable powers. As Harry learns more of the language,

    each word [Mathin] taught her seemed to awaken five more from where they slept in the back of a mind that was now, she had decided, sharing brain space and nerve endings with her own. She accepted it; it was useful; it permitted her to live in this land that she loved, even if she loved without reason; and she began to think it would enable in her turn to be useful to this land...She could not take pride in it, for it was not hers; but she was grateful for it, and hoped, if it were kelar or Aerin-sol’s touch, that she might be permitted to keep it till she had won her right to stay. (115)

In this moment of interiority, Harry reveals the extent of her doubts. She acknowledges that this mind that can swordfight and learn a language so quickly is not “her own.” That is, she feels that these achievements are not truly coming from her, but rather from “Aerin-sol’s touch.” Harry “cannot take pride in it, because it was not hers,” so she feels she has not earned her new Damarian citizenship either. Harry’s use of the verb “permitted” reveals how she feels an external supernatural force is driving her to become powerful. She does not fill the basic definition of agency, which is to make her own choices; instead, she is merely keeping up with everything that is happening to her. Trying to makes the best out of the situation, Harry chooses
to accept her lack of agency, arguing that at least she is “doing something.” In this way, Harry ironically retains some of her agency; she may not have made the initial decision to come to Damar, but she vows to do her best with the role she has been given. Nevertheless, the removal of her agency complicates Harry’s so-called empowerment. Harry’s inability to take pride in her abilities mirrors Alanna’s own discomfort with her magic. But while Alanna takes solace in the physical skills she earns, Harry’s discomfort is resolved when it is revealed at the end that her great-grandmother was Damarian. In other words, McKinley resolves the inexplicability of Harry’s skills with a genetic explanation. This ending weakens McKinley’s commitment to a complicated portrayal of empowerment; it seems too much like a *deus ex machina*, acting as an easy solution that invalidates all of the potent questions Harry’s methods have brought forward up until this revelation.

As suggested through Harry’s acceptance of her situation, she does gain some agency later in the novel. The kidnapping allows Harry to act on the impulses she voiced in the very beginning of the story. When Harry returns to her homeland, she jumps the fortress’s wall when the soldiers refuse to let her in. This show of physical strength parallels Harry’s early desire to jump “over the low windowsill in her room” (1). Because of all that has happened to her, she is able to make these small decisions, if not control her greater destiny. Harry’s perception of her kidnapping changes as well. When she tries to explain her sudden disappearance to her old friend Jack, she phrases it as “soon after I...left here” (202). The hesitation in this statement highlights how Harry’s use of the active construction is so crucial: by phrasing her kidnapping as her own decision to leave, Harry takes ownership of her fate. She adapts to the situation, acknowledging that even if her kidnapping was involuntary at first, she has now chosen to accept it.
Harry’s ability to adapt to her situation stems from her early female mentorship relationships. Unlike Aerin, Harry’s mother is a central figure in her childhood: “She only learned to dance after her mother pointed out that such grace and balance as she might learn on the dance floor would doubtless stand her in good stead in the saddle” (5). Harry’s mother is the first person to give Harry the opportunity to participate in non-traditionally female activities. Furthermore, she teaches Harry the ability to compromise; she shows Harry the value in learning how to dance in order to improve her horseback-riding skills. This willingness to compromise shows up years later, in the way that Harry is willing to adapt to her deagentifying situation. Harry pays this early mentorship forward when she takes a female Rider, Senay, under her wing. Harry specifically notices Senay as one of the only other women in the yearly Laprun trials, in which warriors from all over come to prove themselves in a series of trials. She gives Senay the opportunity to fight alongside her, elevating Senay to an elite Rider.

These two female mentorship relationships represent how Harry’s story progresses towards a more collective model of empowerment. However, Aerin and Harry’s relationship, which is arguably the most central, is also the most conspicuously unsuccessful. As a distant, long-dead legend, Aerin manifests as a supernatural presence in Harry’s dreams and visions, announcing Harry as her successor. However, Aerin’s mentorship of Harry actually contributes to Harry’s confusion and frustration. When Harry first sees Aerin in the fire, Aerin does not speak, only smiling symbolically to claim Harry: “It didn’t smile, it grinned, the wry affectionate grin of an elder sister; and Harry’s head swam with love and despair” (101). Although Harry is grateful for Aerin’s blessing, she is filled with both “love and despair,” expressing her continued frustration at the vague shows of symbolic support rather than true elucidation. Later, Harry
laments, “I wish Aerin would stay long enough to talk to me—tell me what is going on” (101). Aerin eventually gives Harry some concrete advice, warning Harry that “Gonturan has her own sense of honor, child. But she is not human, and you must not trust as her human; remember it. She is a true friend, but a friend with thoughts of her own, and the thoughts of others are dangerous” (152). Aerin refers back to her own struggle to retain agency while using Gonturan, and she tries to pass on this knowledge to Harry. But it is unclear whether Harry is able to exert the control over Gonturan that Aerin could not. In a later battle, Harry muses that “there seemed to be something she should do first. Her numb right hand crept its way up the scabbard of Gonturan till it felt over the hilt to rest on the stone at her peak” (241). Like Aerin, Harry is no longer the actor in the sentence; there is a disconnect between Harry’s mind and her body, as her “numb right hand” draws Gonturan. Furthermore, as Harry goes on to inexplicably bring down an entire mountain on top of the Northern army, others do not see Harry, but instead “the Blue Sword or the woman who held it” (242). Harry is placed as secondary to Gonturan, purely a vessel for the magic that flows through the sword, suggesting that Harry is not able to act on the advice that Aerin gives her. Thus, while Harry’s world is portrayed as more collectively empowered, at the same time the communication failure with her primary female mentor belies the complexity of implementing this model.

Aerin and Harry’s stories illustrate how having power does not necessarily mean one is empowered. Rather, their narratives stress the importance of perceivable effort in gaining this power. Furthermore, Harry’s struggle to both understand her own powers and to “read” Aerin as her mentor illustrates how the success of her empowerment is less conclusive than Alanna and Kel’s optimistic trajectory. However, it is Harry’s rich, conflicted interiority that ultimately leads
readers to redefine empowerment through agency. Therefore, while Pierce introduces the
spectrum of empowerment models, it is Aerin and Harry’s productive self-fashioning that allows
older readers to challenge the simplicity of those models.
Conclusion

Through my exploration of Pierce and McKinley’s lady heroes, I hope that the diversity and complexity of empowerment models is clear. Above all, Pierce and McKinley have shown through these complexities that they are committed to creating pragmatic portrayals of women navigating fluctuating environments of power. Both authors explore the pitfalls of traditionally gendered empowerment models and the difficulties of applying these models to different individuals. What works for Alanna and Aerin does not necessarily work for Kel and Harry. Thus, the women’s ability to adapt their models to their particular disempowering situation is crucial. Furthermore, Pierce and McKinley put pressure on the definition of empowerment: they stipulate that one’s power must be gained through perceivable effort in order to truly have agency.

Yet these conclusions may seem to contradict the fantasy genre in two ways: first, the fantasy genre is argued by many critics to be a mode of escape, a space for highly fantastical, unrealistic stories and worlds rather than as a space to explore pragmatic models of empowerment (Leonard, 4). Second, it seems that the requirement of perceivable effort through visible and verbal explanation is at odds with the supernatural aspects of fantasy literature. I have struggled with this seemingly conflicting fusion of genres ever since I first read these series; for lack of a better way to articulate this contradiction, I came up with my own label, referring to Pierce and McKinley’s series as “realistic fantasy” for years. Looking back, this paradoxical genre name was my way of acknowledging that these explorations of empowerment models seem to work against the fantasy genre.
In some ways, they do. From Alanna and Harry’s struggles to retain agency in light of their magical powers, we have seen how magic is problematic because of its inherent inexplicability. Because it is easily used as an excuse for why a woman could be powerful, magic more often hurts female empowerment than helps. On the other hand, the fantasy genre contains many aspects that make it an ideal setting for such discussions. The character of the hero appears in every fantasy story, and it is at its most basic definition a character who is larger than life. Heroes are meant to have agency in the world, project exaggerated qualities, and commit notable actions. They are the opposite of the ordinary protagonist at the center of the realist novel. Thus, in calling Alanna, Kel, Aerin, and Harry “lady heroes,” I nod to how the authors repurpose a typically male role and return to its fundamental definition as “a person admired for achievements and noble qualities” (“Hero”). Furthermore, the historical medieval background of high fantasy lends itself well to discussions of empowerment; every fantasy story is literally a “game of thrones,” in that it trains us to read issues of power and agency as visibly allegorized through legendary battles over kingdoms. Thus, it seems that fantasy also has qualities that make it an ideal vehicle through which to force the issue of empowerment.

We must also remember that these authors are writing young adult fantasy literature. That is, for the purposes of teaching pragmatic female empowerment models, the young adult genre takes priority over the fantasy genre. Even if we conclude that certain aspects of fantasy are ultimately hurtful when portraying female characters, YA is able to circumvent this: Pierce and McKinley repurpose the most useful aspects of the fantasy genre for their feminist mission rather than casting the genre aside entirely.
My desire to demonstrate the value of young adult fantasy literature has roots in my own childhood. When I picked up the first book in Alanna’s series at ten years old, I was still too young to perceive the didactic messages embedded in her stories. However, I was young enough that I never questioned a woman’s right to be empowered. As I read and reread Pierce’s series in my teenage years, the narratives began to serve as a productive space in which I began asking how a woman could be empowered. Alanna and Kel’s methodical, highly perceivable learning processes instilled a fundamental work ethic in me that I still carry today. Discovering McKinley’s series as a young adult, I came away with a less conclusive yet more nuanced understanding of the many issues in implementing these models. In this way, my own reading experience from Pierce to McKinley mirrors the increasing maturity of their narratives.

When I entered college, I was frustrated when I realized that academia does not generally consider the young adult genre or the fantasy genre as “high literature.” Though Pierce and McKinley innovate differently than perhaps the great Virginia Woolf or William Shakespeare, I hope that my analysis has revealed the immense capacity that YA fantasy literature has to teach young readers not only complex but pragmatic models of female empowerment. I ask you now to reflect on your own personal reading journeys. Reread your favorite young adult novels, and submerge yourself within the most fantastical literary worlds. I guarantee that you will be surprised at the complex messages rumbling beneath these narratives. We need readers and writers like you to harness the power of these undervalued stories, stories that shape the fundamental, societal values of the next generation.
Works Cited


