BEYOND DAMSELS IN DISTRESS:

FEMALE HEROISM IN YOUNG ADULT FANTASY FICTION AND FANTASY ROLE-PLAYING VIDEO GAMES

by

SAFFYRE LOUISE FALKENBERG

Bachelor of Arts, 2016
Texas Woman's University
Denton, Texas

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
AddRan College of Liberal Arts
Texas Christian University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Arts

May 2018

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following individuals:

- My committee chair, Dr. Karen Steele. Her investment of time, energy, and wisdom into me and my project was more than I ever could have hoped for. The level of support and encouragement she provided during this process was simultaneously vital and refreshing.
- My second reader, Dr. Jason Helms. The very idea for this project germinated from an offhand remark he made during visual rhetoric class and a subsequent conversation we had in his office. His enthusiasm for my work and his guidance in crafting my argument helped polish me as a scholar.
- My third reader, Dr. Ariane Balizet. In addition to introducing me to the field of girls' studies, she has always been excited about and encouraging of my ideas. As a new graduate student, this helped me feel able to express myself, and it continued to help me through the process of writing this thesis.
- My husband, Jack Larsen. Thank you for being a constant source of support and encouragement. Thank you for being a sounding board for my ideas, for accepting my constant purchasing of new books, and for eating so much spaghetti when I was too tired to cook anything else. Most of all, thank you for your belief in me. It means more than you could ever know.
- My parents, Bob and Zeta Falkenberg. Thank you for always being committed to my education and for encouraging me to pursue my dreams. And, thank you for listening to me explain my ideas and rant about the things that interest me. Who knew I could turn that into a career?

- My friends, Sarabeth Bradley, Shellie Elliott, and Ivy Reid. They listened to my ideas, encouraged me during every step of the process, and helped me take breaks when I really needed them. Thank you for being the sweetest, funniest, and overall best friends a girl could hope for.
- My cats, Maya, Trucy, and Apollo. Technically, they were not much help, as they tried to sit on the computer every time the file was open. But their sweet cuddles, weird antics, and soft fur helped me when this process seemed too difficult.
- Paul McCartney. I played his discography on repeat throughout the entire drafting of this thesis, so I feel like he deserves at least some credit.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ii
LIST OF FIGURES vi
BEYOND DAMSELS IN DISTRESS 1
Project Overview 1
A (Short) History of Girls and Women in Fantasy 2
"Fake" Gamer Girls and Booth Babes: Contextualizing Girls and Women in Gaming 5
Bookworms and Gamer Girls: Constructing a Girls' Studies Framework 7
Identity, Agency, and Power: Towards a Feminist Analysis of Representation 13
A (Brief) History of the Female Hero 15
Reading Texts, Reading Games: Analyzing YA Novels and RPGs Together 20
Overview of Chapters 22
FEYRE CURSEBREAKER: FEMALE AGENCY, IDENTITY, AND POWER IN A COURT OF THORNS AND ROSES 24
The World of Sarah J. Maas 27
Huntress, Lover, Witch: Contextualizing the Female Hero 28
Feyre as a Female Hero: Power and Transformation(s) 31
Dimensions of Heroism in Romance and Fantasy for the Female Hero 37
Agency 37
Trauma 41
Sexual Violence 43
Sexual Agency 46
The Female Hero as an Artist 49
Literacy 53
Conclusion 54
HERO, CHAMPION, AND INQUISITOR: NAVIGATING GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN THE UNSTABLE NARRATIVES OF DRAGON AGE 56
No Girls Allowed: Age and Gender in Hardcore Gaming 62
Other Scholarship on Dragon Age 65
(En)coding Representation: Analyzing Gender and Sexuality in Video Games 68
"How about you stop thinking of me as a woman?": Gendered Narratives in Dragon Age 75
Dragon Age: Origins: The Warden, the Hero of Ferelden 78

Dragon Age II: Hawke, the Champion of Kirkwall 80
Dragon Age: Inquisition: The Herald of Andraste, the Inquisitor 82
Beyond the Metal Bikini: Visual Rhetoric and Female Bodies in Fantasy RPGs 85
"Have you ever licked a lamppost in winter?": Romance, Sexuality, and the Female Hero 90
Romance in Dragon Age: Origins 92
Romance in Dragon Age II 93
Romance and Gender in Dragon Age: Inquisition 96
Conclusion 99
FIGHT LIKE A GIRL: THE FUTURE OF RESEARCH ON GIRLS AND FANTASY MEDIA 102
WORKS CITED 108
WORKS CONSULTED 114
VITA
ABSTRACT

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig.1. Still of Morrigan from DA:I, wearing the same outfit from *DA:O* 86

Fig. 2. Still of Bethany from *DA:2*. 86

Fig. 3. Stills of Flemeth in *DA:O* vs. Flemeth in *DA:I*. 87

Fig. 4. Stills of Isabela in *DA:O* vs. Isabela in *DA:2*. 87

Fig. 5. Still of Vivienne from *DA:I*. 87

Fig. 6. Comparison of Zevran wearing Wade's Superior Drakeskin armor set vs. a female Hero of Ferelden wearing the same set. 88

BEYOND DAMSELS IN DISTRESS

Fantasy has always been a part of my world, but I distinctly remember the moment that I fell in love with the genre. In 2003, I was nine years old when I accompanied my family to see *The Return of the King* at the movie theater. Though I had never seen any of the previous films before, let alone read the books, I gasped in triumph when the One Ring finally melted in the fires of Mount Doom. Afterwards, I couldn't get enough. I persuaded my mother to buy me a beat-up copy of the entire *Lord of the Rings* trilogy in one volume at a thrift store, which I still have on my shelf to this day and have cited in this thesis. I filled my life with more and more fantasy novels, searching for the same joy I felt when reading Tolkien's stories. It was not until my teen years that I realized something was missing: girls. This absence did not lessen my enjoyment of the genre, but I actively searched for fantasy with female characters with whom I could identify. Turning to contemporary young adult (YA) fantasy fiction helped me locate this representation, to an extent, as I found girl heroes in Hermione Granger, Katniss Everdeen, and Annabeth Chase. While I didn't find the subjects of this thesis, *A Court of Thorns and Roses* or *Dragon Age*, until I was an adult, their depictions of gender and sexuality in girl and woman heroes make them worthy of scholarly attention in order to fill the gap of research on girls in fantasy, young adult literature, and video games.

Project Overview

In this thesis, I argue that a girls' studies lens reveals that the fantasy genre, despite its patriarchal roots, is ripe with potential to empower girls through representation of diverse girlhoods and femininities as embodied by the female hero and other female characters. This argument is supported by my analysis of representations of gender and sexuality in young adult fantasy fiction and fantasy role-playing video games (RPGs) with a special focus on the female

hero. The project focuses on *A Court of Thorns and Roses* by Sarah J. Maas and BioWare's *Dragon Age*. This analysis is necessary at this moment because fantasy, YA fiction, and video games are marginalized within academia as being frivolous or unworthy of study (Attebery, *Stories* 1). Performing scholarly, feminist readings on texts and games that are not feminist also emulates feminist reading and gaming practices. Additionally, these artifacts of popular culture reveal current attitudes about a variety of social justice issues, not just representations of girls and women. A better understanding of fantasy, YA fiction, video games and how they intersect is vital to understanding contemporary attitudes on identity politics and shaping how future generations see themselves. As Brian Attebery notes, the very heart of what fantasy is and what it has the potential to do are aligned with issues of identity, power, and agency, all issues that women and marginalized persons must face every day (*Strategies* ix). Although much of fantasy still lives in the past, there are faint glimmers on the horizon of what fantasy will be able to do in the future, when it is allowed to reach its full, nonnormative potential.

A (Short) History of Girls and Women in Fantasy

Fantasy as a genre has a long and rich literary tradition. According to Attebery, fantasy has roots in both myths and fairy tales: "fantasy, as a literary form, is a way of reconnecting to traditional myths and the worlds they generate" (*Stories* 9).[1] In addition to fairy tales and myths, Judith Hillman explains that high fantasy also finds its origins in medieval romance:

> Although we don't know who first combined the words *high* and *fantasy*, we do know that this subgenre evolved from an old form of literature, the medieval romance of the

[1] It is important to note that Attebery uses the terms "myth" and "fairy tale" somewhat interchangeably and refers to the Brothers Grimm cobbling together a sort of national mythology for Germany out of the folk tales they collected, which we know today as fairy tales (*Stories* 15).

> 11th and 12th centuries. […] *High* has come to signify a fantasy that resides in a secondary world marked by a medieval ethos of chivalry, honor, and codes of behavior. (167)

While fantasy has been around since before the time of *Beowulf*, fantasy as we know it today is thanks in part to J. R. R. Tolkien and his creation of Middle-earth with the publication of *The Hobbit* in 1937. Many fantasy novels since then follow the conventions Tolkien set out, because, as Lori M. Campbell points out, Tolkien is widely credited with creating the modern fantasy genre (4-5). The primary conventions popularized by Tolkien and replicated by other writers mostly pertain to the plot structure, the world-building, and the characters. Tolkien utilizes the plot device of the grand quest to save the world, typically featuring unlikely heroes, a cast of sidekicks, a journey filled with trials, and an eventual return home, a pattern that many other writers throughout the 1960s and 70s repeat. Additionally, Tolkien's creation of Middle-earth inspired many other fantasy writers to set their stories entirely within the fantasy world. In the years leading up to Tolkien, it was common for fantasy stories to take place only partially in other worlds or to have the fantastic enter into the "real" world. Tolkien thus emulates ancient and medieval fantasy texts by setting his stories entirely in a created world. Finally, Tolkien's creation of different "races" of fantasy creatures, such as elves, dwarves, and orcs, in addition to humans, sets the precedent for many future fantasy works. Even today, many works of fantasy fiction have at least one, if not all, of these fantastic beings in their stories.

Although women, according to Lori M. Campbell, have been reading and writing fantasy from the beginning of the genre's inception, women are usually left out of the conversation by male gatekeepers, both among the fantasy publishing industry and its readership (4-5). By ignoring or excluding women from fantasy, the publishing industry perpetuates many of the sexist tropes common in both classic and contemporary fantasy. These tropes portray women as

powerless, as objects to be either saved or seduced, or as stock characters without any sort of individual development. Some common tropes include the damsel in distress, the goddess, the witch, and the huntress. Early women fantasy writers, according to Attebery, challenged the norms and tropes of the genre: "Drawing on common experiences and knowledge of one another's work, women fantasists [were] engaged in such joint enterprises as refurbishing the archetypal images of the goddess, redefining the qualities of heroism to include female experience, and reaffirming women's access to the narrative storehouse of the past" (*Strategies* 89). Thanks to the fiction of Ursula K. LeGuin, Diana Wynne Jones, Tamora Pierce, and Philip Pullman, among others, the female hero is increasingly visible and popular in modern fantasy. Heroes of diverse races, ethnicities, sexualities, and levels of ability have also started to appear in fantasy literature, such as in Leigh Bardugo's *Six of Crows* (2015), Sabaa Tahir's *An Ember in the Ashes* (2015), Audrey Coulthurst's *Of Fire and Stars* (2016), and Roshani Chokshi's *The Star-Touched Queen* (2016), although diverse heroes are still relatively rare in fantasy overall. Yet the mere presence of a female or marginalized hero in a fantasy narrative does not automatically mean that the story imparts intersectional feminist themes. Indeed, even fantasy fiction by female or queer authors or authors of color is susceptible to perpetuating the genre's biases against women and other minorities because of the genre's conventions, internalized misogyny, or some combination thereof.

Fantasy for children and young adults in particular exists in a liminal space because of the individual histories of both genres. Before the twentieth century, the majority of fantasy fiction and children's literature was written for masculine consumption, while today contemporary children's and young adult literature is generally written and consumed by women and girls. Fantasy for children and young adults also has a history of borrowing from and

adapting narratives never intended for child audiences. According to Michael Levy and Farah Mendlesohn, "Children's fantasy has far stronger roots in tales of the fantastic than it does in tales for children: the history of children's fantasy is essentially one of appropriation, both children appropriating texts, and those who have written for children in the last three centuries appropriating and adapting their material for children" (11). No matter its intended audience today, fantasy as a genre draws upon traditions and subjects that were originally never intended for child or adolescent readers, reflecting the development of children's literature as a whole. According to Marsha M. Sprague and Kara K. Keeling, fantasy serves two primary purposes for children and young adults, especially girls: fantasy reinforces young people's idealism and gives young people a place where they can belong (113). Fantasy fiction for children and young adults is thus a powerful literary form that is capable of demonstrating to young people how they can exist in and change the world around them in terms of social justice and personal ideology.

"Fake" Gamer Girls and Booth Babes: Contextualizing Girls and Women in Gaming

Like the literary genre of fantasy, the content of many video games often portrays offensive depictions of women in both fantasy and non-fantasy games. Fantasy role-playing games capitalize on the tropes of fantasy fiction, while additionally contributing to the marginalization and objectification of female characters through visual elements. Many female characters in fantasy games are slender with large breasts and backsides and wear very little clothing. One of the most notorious video game tropes is that of the "metal bikini," lingerie for female characters that functions as body armor. Likewise, despite women comprising around half of the gaming community, male gatekeepers, both industry professionals and players, actively and sometimes violently force women out of the conversation, especially when women try to discuss sexism in games (Shaw viii). Many female game designers have discussed being sexually

harassed in the workplace, sometimes to such an extent that they leave the industry altogether. Plus, video gaming trade shows such as the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) utilize scantily clad women as promotional models or "booth babes" in order to attract the assumed straight male patrons to the kiosks. These booth babes contribute to an overall atmosphere of sexism that assumes women's only role in the industry is to titillate men. Additionally, female players are often not taken seriously by male gamers; for example, male players often refuse to play on teams with female players or will quiz female gamers in order to prove that the female player is not a "real" gamer. In online gaming, women are even encouraged to expose parts of their anatomy to prove that a woman is in fact playing the game: "Thus we can see that many men on the Internet do want to see—and indeed often pressure women to perform or display—overt and normative female sexuality" (Jane 47).[2] This combination of factors produce an environment that is toxic or even dangerous for female industry professionals or gamers.

In addition to misogynistic portrayals of girls and women in the content of the games themselves, the video game industry is rampant with sexism. Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm note that there is "a deep misogyny present in the medium's culture as a premise" (9). Any discussion of gender and video games must contextualize that discussion within the flagrant and violent misogyny of #Gamergate.[3] #Gamergate, probably the most well-known instance of sexism in the video game industry, was a long and violent campaign on Twitter, 4chan, 8chan, and Reddit that included doxxing (releasing all of someone's personal information publicly), death threats, and rape threats against several female game designers and

[2] The unfortunate refrain is "tits or GTFO."

[3] While there are many articles and discussions about #Gamergate available, the most comprehensive, in my opinion, is Caitlin Dewey's article in *The Washington Post*, "The Only Guide to Gamergate You Will Ever Need to Read" (2014). To get a more personal look into the horrors of #Gamergate, check out Zoe Quinn's memoir, *Crash Override: How Gamergate (Nearly) Destroyed My Life, and How We Can Win the Fight Against Online Hate* (2017).

media critics.[4] The controversy began when game designer Zoe Quinn's ex-boyfriend penned a long blog post claiming that Quinn had slept with a video game journalist in exchange for a good review for her game *Depression Quest* (2013). This post sparked a barrage of harassment against Quinn. Around the same time, Anita Sarkeesian produced a series of online videos called *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*, and she was also doxxed and threatened. The threats were so violent that Sarkeesian cancelled many of her public speaking engagements, fearing for her safety. Other women in the industry, such as Brianna Wu and Felicia Day, were also the subjects of doxxing, death threats, and threats of sexual violence (Dewey). This violent treatment of women who speak up against the sexism of the industry or who simply make good games has contributed to a culture of fear in the industry. Many women are afraid to speak out against misogyny or even continue their careers in the industry for fear of violent reprisal.

Bookworms and Gamer Girls: Constructing a Girls' Studies Framework

Just as this project draws on the insights of literary and video game scholars, it also depends on girls' studies, an interdisciplinary field, even if the majority of research comes from the social sciences. Although it may seem as if the humanities, particularly certain areas of literature, would be a natural fit for girls' studies, there is a significant lack of research on girls in the humanities. The girls' studies research that does exist in the field of literature mainly focuses on representation of girls and how they function in their narratives. Girls' studies extends the work of feminist research by examining girls as they exist in society, recognizing that girls have distinctive experiences when compared to women. Girls' studies illuminates how media such as

[4] Initially, the conversation started on 4chan but moved to 8chan after 4chan banned threads related to #Gamergate.

literature and video games socially condition girls as girls, rather than simply considering girls as future women.

The most important aspect of girlhood to understand is that there is no one static version of girlhood, but rather many different girlhoods. Catherine Driscoll's book *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (2002) functions both as a history of girlhood and an examination of society's understanding and views of girls, drawing on methods and theories in cultural studies. Ultimately, she strives to create what she refers to as a "genealogy of girlhood," which she describes as a history and context of girlhood within culture (Driscoll 5) The book is broken down into three sections, the first section examining how society constructs girlhood through history, adolescence, and puberty. The second section discusses the girl becoming a woman through analyses of theories of girlhood from Marxist, psychoanalytical, and feminist perspectives, as well as studies of girlhood and girls in cultural studies. Driscoll then persuasively establishes the importance of understanding girls in popular media:

> Popular culture and public discourses are not only shared across specific cultural locations but extend into girls' lives, including experience of self. In the expanding body cultures of the twentieth century, feminine adolescence paradigmatically materializes theories about bodily presence, identification, and pleasure. (235)

By analyzing media consumed by girls, scholars can thus clearly see the messages about body, identity, and sex, among other topics, that girls are exposed to and potentially influenced by.

Girls' studies functions as an interdisciplinary enterprise, which this thesis is indebted to. Highlighting the interdisciplinary nature of the field, Anita Harris's edited collection of essays *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity* (2004) includes pieces written from scholars in many different disciplines, all examining issues central to girls. This collection is divided into six

topics: constructing girlhoods in the twenty-first century, feminism for girls, sexuality, popular and digital culture, education, and research by and with girls. Within this collection, Harris identifies a set of key issues that girls' studies, to date, has explored extensively: "the relationship between popular cultures, material conditions and gendered identities; the role of social institutions such as school and the media in shaping femininities, and the places and voices young women utilize to express themselves" (Harris xix). Of particular concern in this project is examining the way that the entertainment media such as YA novels and video games, that girls consume construct female identity. The focus on the issue of entertainment media shapes identity therefore positions this thesis firmly within a girls' studies framework.

Media of all kinds, especially popular culture, has a major effect on girls' development and sense of self and identity. Andi Zeisler's book *Feminism and Popular Culture* (2008) still addresses many of the issues at the heart of girls' studies and justifies the academic study of popular media. In this book, she traces the history of women in and as consumers of popular culture from the 1940s to the early 2000s while also examining how feminism itself is represented. In addition to examining her own complex relationship with popular culture and feminism as both a child and an adult, Zeisler legitimizes the study of popular culture in a feminist academic context by discussing the highly political nature of popular culture, arguing against those who believe that feminists have more pressing concerns. Zeisler writes, " Pop culture informs our understanding of political issues that on first glance seem to have nothing to do with pop culture; it also makes us see how something meant as pure entertainment can have everything to do with politics" (7). Popular culture does not exist in a vacuum, and there is no such thing as media without a message. Interrogating these media messages and critically

examining them rather than merely consuming them is vital in an increasingly media-driven society.

While related to feminism, girls' studies focuses specifically on girls as their own entities with unique experiences. "Coalescing: The Development of Girls' Studies" (2009) by Mary Celeste Kearney traces the development of girls' studies as an independent field of research and establishes the field as an extension of feminism. Reflecting on its current trends and room for growth, Kearney discusses the consequences in academe's long history of ignoring girls' experiences, even by feminists, likely trying to distance themselves from infantilization by the patriarchy. Because of this, she stresses the importance of considering girls qua girls rather than merely viewing girls as future women. Girls' studies functions as an extension of feminism, as feminist scholars historically have not taken age differences into account when studying women: "Scholars interested in sex and gender focused primarily on females, albeit with little attention to age and generation, thus contributing to the popular conflation of feminist scholarship with women" (Kearney 5). Although girls' studies and feminist scholarship certainly share many of the same concerns and rely on the same methodologies, girls' studies does not conflate the experiences of women with those of girls.

Although an emergent framework for literary study, girls' studies is not a new field. Linda Duits and Liesbet van Zoonen locate the origins of the field as early as 1976 with Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber's book chapter on girl subcultures. As Duits and van Zoonen identify central trends within girls' studies and gaps that still persist, they highlight the idea that girls do not reflect on the messages of media and are thus "victims" to media. It is this point that is especially of interest. Instead of viewing girls as victims of media and marketing, I argue for the importance of understanding and acknowledging the critical engagement that girls often have

with various forms of media. In the chapters that follow, I examine how, in the words of Duits and van Zoonen: "The project of the reflexive self is […] firmly engrained in girls' everyday understandings and performances of gender" (114). In this way, understanding how girls engage with media—including instances of girls' considerable agency in these encounters—is vital to understanding how girls perform gender. As a theoretical framework, girls' studies is invested in acknowledging and analyzing the agency of girls in interacting with popular culture media like fantasy fiction and video games.

Understanding how media, including popular culture, affects girls helps us understand how girls construct their identities. Elline Lipkin's *Girls' Studies* (2009) provides a thorough overview of issues relating to girls and girlhood, discussing the complex relationship girls have with media, among other subjects. She discusses the socialization of girls, body image, sexuality and sexualization, media and marketing, and media created by girls to shed light on the numerous issues of power and agency that bombard girls, affecting cultural norms and gender scripts. Her chapter on girls and the media centers primarily on advertising, but it does discuss the effects media have on girls more broadly. Analyzing the media that girls are exposed to and consume is important because "the media often encourage girls and women to hold themselves to an impossible set of often-conflicting standards, unattainable by mere mortals, and often erase or tokenize girls of color, girls with disabilities, or queer girls" (Lipkin 134). Analyzing the media that girls consume, like the YA novels and RPGs I cover in my thesis, reveals the expectations for girls and women and how they affect identity and cultural expectations.

While some YA fiction and rated-M RPGs typically contain mature subjects, a girls' studies framework is nevertheless indispensable because these works both represent and appeal to girls. Despite the *A Court of Thorns and Roses* novels' violence and sexuality, the books are

still marketed as YA fiction, which generally targets individuals between the ages of twelve and seventeen years old (Cart 146). Therefore, it is important to analyze the mature content of these novels in relation to the girls reading them. Likewise, though the *Dragon Age* games are rated M, intended for audiences over the age of seventeen, both young girls and boys regularly play games such as these. According to a study by Cheryl K. Olson et al., 48.8% of the children surveyed regularly played games with an M rating (77).[5] In fact, research featured in *The New York Times*, sexual images in media or pornography serve as children's primary sources of information about sex, which can have damaging consequences to their sexual development: "These [sexually explicit] images confound many teenagers about the kinds of sex they want or think they should have" (Jones). Whether or not girls are the intended audience to play these mature games, they are anyway, which is what makes analyzing them so important. In fact, this appropriation of adult materials by children is reflective of the origins of young adult and children's literature. As with the appropriateness of the content for girls, some may question whether the characters in these novels or games are even considered girls. Though Feyre in the *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series is nineteen, she self-identifies as a girl at points in the series and describes her transition from girlhood to womanhood. While chronologically a woman by today's standards, the narrative circumstances position Feyre in the social role of a girl. Although *Dragon Age* never specifies the age of its characters in the game, it has a large fan following of girls, making it relevant for an analysis grounded in girls' studies. Because of the girl target audiences or fan bases, it is thus necessary to use girls' studies to determine what messages in these series are influencing girls' senses of self and perceptions of identity.

[5] In this study, there were 1,254 participants in 7th and 8th grade. Of these participants, 53% were female and 47% were male. The results were gathered via self-report survey in two schools, one in Pennsylvania and one in South Carolina.

Identity, Agency, and Power: Towards a Feminist Analysis of Representation

Whereas video games appear to be made by and targeted to men and boys, the majority of contemporary young adult fiction is written by women: approximately 63% of NPR's top teen novels have female authors, and female authors make up the top three slots (Lewit). Additionally, despite the fact that YA fiction targets people between the ages of twelve and seventeen, over half of the people reading YA literature are over the age of eighteen (Cart 146). Although much of fantasy written for young adults appears receptive to gender equality because the majority of these books have female authors or feature female heroes, it would be a mistake to assume that a given text is feminist based on these two criteria alone. Like many venerable literary forms, from the epic to the romance, fantasy relies upon conventions that marginalize and objectify girls and women. Fantasy scholars should thus draw on well-established feminist literary frameworks and tools in examining the gendered ideology in each work of fantasy.

Many methods of feminist literary criticism exist to evaluate the kinds of messages contained within a text about gender and sexuality. Beginning in the 1960s, emerging from the second-wave feminist movement, feminist scholars focused on "the place of women in literary history, creating a female canon, and establishing forms of literary criticism that highlighted gender distinctions in writing, culture, and society" (Benstock et al. 154). Some of the methods of feminist literary analysis include representations of women and the female experience, issues of female authorship and female readers, feminine modes of writing and language, genre and gender, and text production and publication in terms of gender. However, it is not enough for scholars to analyze gender as the only relevant social category at work in the construction of character; people occupy many different identities—including, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, religious affiliation, and ability—at once that affect their lives in a real, tangible

way. Kimberlé Crenshaw popularized this idea, known as intersectionality, that different systems of oppression work against marginalized people, writing "I used the concept of intersectionality to denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's employment experience" (483). In her analysis of Black women's employment, she discusses how these Black women experience their intersecting identities within a system. While Crenshaw focuses on real women's employment experience, intersectionality is today an essential approach in feminist literary criticism as it illuminates the many different ways gender operates in a text within the context of multiple other identities.

According to Shari Benstock, Suzanne Ferriss, and Susanne Woods, early feminist criticism concerned itself with analyzing "images of women and representations of female experience" (153). Feminist scholars such as Mary Ellmann, Kate Millett, and Germaine Greer pioneered the analysis of representation in literary texts. In developing a method to measure female agency and feminist consciousness in fantasy, I focus on representation, which, as feminist scholars Benstock et al. write, "present[s] literature as a product of culture and gender as a social construction, not a biological given" (155). Analyzing the way fantasy authors represent identity, agency, and power as related to the female experience thus determines whether a work of fantasy is feminist. Representations of gender and sexuality in fantasy is especially important when considering young adult fantasy. Fantasy has the capacity to show readers what kinds of worlds are possible, and fantasy allows readers to work through and explore real-world problems from the safe distance of a remote setting, whether in time or location. According to Jeanne Murray Walker, "To read a fantasy is to absorb a particular interpretation of human experience, a kind of psychological or theological lore that claims that readers can change their identity and become powerful in the world" (110). This idea is especially important in the development of

girls, as fantasy has the potential to subvert the patriarchal values and cultural expectations of society. It is thus equally, if not more, important to have positive representations of gender and sexuality in fantasy because the beauty of the genre is that it does not have to be mimetic and can reveal other possibilities for existence.

A (Brief) History of the Female Hero

If we consider works by some of the most popular and influential authors of high fantasy for children and young adults, such as J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and Lloyd Alexander, female heroes are scarce. While these authors do feature female characters in their fiction, only C. S. Lewis elevates some of these female characters to hero; even then, however, his female heroes are always accompanied by a male counterpart. Because high fantasy has a patriarchal lineage, the heroes of high fantasies have been, almost invariably, male. Yet, roughly coinciding with the rise of second-wave feminism during the 1960s and 70s, fantasy writers began to introduce readers to female heroes, whose entrance onto the high fantasy stage has prompted scholars to consider the difference gender makes to high fantasy heroes.

The history of the scholarly exploration of the hero in high fantasy ranges from virtually ignoring the female hero, making sweeping statements about female heroism, or offering a more intersectional view of the female hero and her journey. Until the rise of second-wave feminism, scholarly studies of the hero in high fantasy either largely ignored female heroism or only mentioned female heroes in passing within the context of the male hero. Attebery adds, moreover, that "academic folklorists have also contributed to the invisibility of the female hero" (93). With the rise of second-wave feminism, feminist scholars have begun to consider and define the female hero, often in deeply theoretical ways, as a unique entity. Feminist scholars

influenced by third-wave feminism, moreover, have adopted more postmodern views of heroism and identity, avoiding absolutes and eschewing male-female binaries.

Over time, the literary conception of the hero in Western society has changed. Western culture typically envisions the traditional hero of classical and medieval literature as male, embodying qualities such as strength and courage. In the Western tradition, the male hero is also typically white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, and upper-class. For example, Odysseus in *The Odyssey*, Aeneas in *The Aeneid*, and Beowulf in *Beowulf* are not only male, the texts announce the centrality of the male hero to the narratives in the titles. Since the classical Greek and Roman epics and the medieval romances in Europe, writers throughout the centuries have explored the notion of heroism in complex ways, introducing readers to characters with qualities we might not normally consider heroic, from Daniel Defoe's early modern common hero Moll Flanders to Arthur Miller's common tragic hero Willy Loman. By the twentieth century, Tolkien fashioned as hero Frodo Baggins, a small, modest, domestic-loving hobbit who demonstrates a different sort of heroism: "such is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere" (262). In this way, it is Frodo's relative unimportance and unassuming nature that make him heroic. Heroism itself has also become more broadly envisioned; rather than being defined solely through rank and achievements on a national scale, heroism has come to include domestic or everyday actions as well.

Although literary critics have been studying heroism for centuries, Joseph Campbell, a scholar in comparative religion and mythology who authored a major study on the hero, influentially launched the critical examination of heroes in high fantasy with his work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Synthesizing heroic traditions from across cultures, Campbell

outlines the archetypal hero and the structure of the quests the hero must complete to demonstrate that hero stories from around the world share common features. Campbell calls this theory "monomyth," claiming that all heroes throughout time and place are essentially the same. The hero's gender, as Campbell writes, is irrelevant to the narrative: "The hero, therefore, is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms" (14). Despite his profession of gender blindness, Campbell reflexively, and tellingly, refers to the hero throughout his study with masculine pronouns. Additionally, the very structure of the quest Campbell identifies assumes that the hero is a heterosexual, cisgender man; for example, Campbell specifies that the hero must resolve his Oedipal complex by having a sexual encounter with the Goddess (102). Campbell's model is thus one that begs for an update, given academia's current understandings of gender and sexuality.

Robert A. Segal extends Campbell's notions of the hero by identifying key heroic archetypes and providing examples from literature and history in his book *Hero Myths: A Reader* (2000). The book, an anthology of hero tales, identifies eighteen heroic archetypes: warrior, hero of strength, national, class, cultural, trickster, explorer, defiant, tragic, saint, intellectual, reluctant, failed, absurd, madman, comic, and entertainer. The most problematic archetype he identifies, however, is that of the "female hero as male," an archetype which reveals Segal's deeply-ingrained assumptions about gender and the hero (116). Segal writes that the female heroes as male "are heroic in their independence, their courage, and their skill. They meet males on male terms. In transcending their gender, they blur the boundary between masculine and feminine" (117). Despite the fact that this book was written in the middle of the third-wave feminist movement, Segal's views on gender are essentialist. His definition of the archetype

assumes that girls and women cannot be independent, courageous, or skilled unless they are acting "like a man." Segal additionally cannot envision a female hero as her own entity; he can only imagine a female hero as she relates to men. Heroism, for Segal, is an exclusively masculine enterprise.

In 1981, the feminist critics Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope probe Campbell's unexamined assumptions about gender in their book *The Female Hero in American and British Literature*. They state that prior scholarship on heroes has only focused on the male hero at the expense of the female hero and that merely saying that the hero's journey is applicable to both men and women does not take into account the many differences sex and gender produce. To that end, they analyze female heroes in works by authors such as the Bronte sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot. Pearson and Pope use the term "female hero" rather than "heroine," as I will do, because, as they explain, "patriarchal society views women essentially as supporting characters in the drama of life. Men change the world, and women help them" (qtd. vii). Following Pearson and Pope, I eschew the term "heroine" in this study because it implies that the female hero is the sidekick to the male hero and indicates that only men can be heroes. While "female hero" still denotes a male standard, it equalizes the two roles and removes the implications of the sidekick. The authors argue that the overall structure of the hero's journey—the separation, initiation, and return stages —are the same for both male and female heroes; the particulars within each stage, however, look distinctly different in narratives featuring female heroes (Pearson and Pope viii). Because Pearson and Pope focus primarily on realistic literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the journey, a central feature of fantasy fiction, is left largely unexamined in their study. Pearson and Pope's understanding of "journey" functions as a metaphor for psychological transformation rather than the physical quest in fantasy narratives.

Even though this book does not focus on fantasy heroes, the authors' gendered reading of heroism is still useful in understanding the fantasy genre.

A student of Joseph Campbell, Maureen Murdock extends Campbell's study on the hero in her monograph *The Heroine's Journey* (1990). Although written on the cusp of third-wave feminism, this book depends upon a second-wave feminist perspective. Murdock is a psychologist and her outline of the heroine's journey comes from a developmental and psychological framework rather than a narrative one; however, because she models so much of her paradigm on the work of Campbell, it is useful to consider her framework in narrative terms. Murdock's framework, like that of Pearson and Pope's, emphasizes the heroine's journey as an internal one. She writes, "The journey begins with our heroine's search for identity" (Murdock 4). This internal search for identity follows a cyclical pattern, in which the heroine separates herself from the feminine and takes on masculine qualities to complete a road of trials and achieve outward success. At this stage, she realizes her inner dissatisfaction with herself and must reconnect with the feminine and work to integrate her masculine and feminine qualities. Although very much dependent on binaries, Murdock's framework is useful because she acknowledges that the female hero "has changed the face of woman with each passing generation" (184). In this way, Murdock realizes that there is no overarching definition for female heroism and that the female hero is dependent on social constructions.

Lori M. Campbell extends the work of Joseph Campbell, Carol Pearson, and Katherine Pope in her collection *A Quest of Her Own: Essays on the Female Hero in Modern Fantasy* (2014). This collection of essays examines the range and diversity of the female hero in modern fantasy literature. Rather than offering a narrow definition of the female hero in the introduction, Campbell argues, "it is perhaps more productive here to define her, based on the findings of the

contributors, by using the shorter list of what she is *not* as a way of understanding who she is" (L. Campbell 283). This calculated refusal to proscribe set qualities of female heroism is rooted in third-wave feminism, its focus on intersectionality, and its long-standing skepticism of grand, totalizing theories about gender and genre.

Reading Texts, Reading Games: Analyzing YA Novels and RPGs Together

At first glance, young adult fantasy novels and fantasy role-playing video games may seem to have little in common, save that they are both fantasy and popular culture artifacts. Yet the two media actually share many features that invite comparisons. A central feature in both media is the quest, which most easily allows the two to be compared. Both fantasy novels and role-playing games rely on the quest, and thus both YA fantasy and fantasy video games follow similar narrative structures.

Strikingly, the individual quests in fantasy RPGs mirror the hero's journey as described by Joseph Campbell. This parallel structure is apparent in Joshua Peery's instructional essay "Game Writing in Practice - MMORPG [Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game] Quests." He writes that "in most MMORPGs, quests are often composed of similar basic pieces, in a basic structure that has become familiar to players" (Peery 350). These "basic pieces" are elements of the hero's journey, which are familiar because the narrative structure has been internalized by much of society through time and repeated exposure. Although his essay focuses on MMORPGs in particular, the quest structure is identical to single-player RPGs as well. Non-playable characters (NPCs) typically offer the quest to the hero in the same way that the call to adventure functions in high fantasy fiction. The player typically has the opportunity to accept or reject the quest. If the player accepts, they complete the quest and return to the NPC for a reward, paralleling the larger structures of the Initiation and Return stages. If the player rejects

the quest, the refusal of the call in Campbell's terms, the NPC can either attempt to manipulate the player into changing their mind or, if the quest is important to the larger narrative, the story will not progress until the player accepts and completes the quest. This further imitates the Refusal of the Call step because, according to Joseph Campbell, the hero always ends up accepting the call, even after the initial refusal (49). Based on Peery's practical advice for composing a video game quest, it becomes clear that the structure of the game quest mirrors that of a literary quest and serves as an avenue of comparison.

The lineage of the quest throughout literature and video games becomes even more apparent in the scholarship of Jeremy M. Downes. In his essay "Romancing the Quest: Quest Narratives in Changing Contexts," Downes establishes the RPG quest as an important step in the history of the quest narrative. He briefly touches on the entire history of the quest as a narrative structure, discussing the literary development of the quest across time and cultures. He concludes with an analysis of the quest in video games, comparing the video game quest to all the literary quests that have come before. He writes: "What larger games offer is the experience of being a key part of a larger story, like the deeper sense of involvement we get when a quest narrative is related to our own local or familial environments" (Downes 73). In this way, Downes demonstrates that the video game quest is simply the most recent iteration of the quest in a long and varied tradition of quests.

However, many video game scholars would disagree with my premise that the narrative structures allow YA novels and video games to be compared and analyzed together. Almost all academic studies of video games begin with the argument that analyzing video games is not the same as analyzing books and that using similar close reading techniques for the two media simply does not work (Salter 7). One of the main reasons for this argument is that video game

scholars believe that reading is a passive activity, while playing a game is an interactive activity.[6] However, in her 2014 book *What is Your Quest?: From Adventure Games to Interactive Books,* Anastasia Salter suggests that this is a vast oversimplification of the issue and that books and games are actually quite comparable. As literary scholars have demonstrated for centuries, Salter argues that reading has never been a passive experience because of the way that readers engage with a text in order to create meaning. This engagement is what makes books and games comparable: "both reader and player create meaning from the world: the dialogue of book or game is incomplete without them, and the same can be said of the hybrid forms in between" (Salter 8). Thus, using similar methods to compare and analyze books and games makes more sense than many scholars believe.

Overview of Chapters

In Chapter One, I will be exploring the female hero in the *A Court of Thorns and Roses* trilogy by Sarah J. Maas. Maas cultivates many different types of heroism throughout the series through her female hero Feyre, negotiating issues of identity, agency, and power in a way that can be empowering to certain groups of girls. I identify four different hero archetypes that Feyre embodies through the series: the unlikely hero, the huntress, the romantic hero, and the witch. This chapter demonstrates the many facets of Feyre's heroism by tracking the developments in her agency, intersecting identities of gender, sexuality, class, and ability, and experiences with violence and trauma throughout the three novels. The chapter also examines Feyre's engagement with the feminist concerns of art and literacy.

[6] This is a notion that literary scholars would reject immediately, one of the reasons I believe the two fields could benefit from more interdisciplinary work and communication.

Chapter Two focuses on the three potential female heroes in the *Dragon Age* series produced by BioWare. These games envision a more stereotypically masculine form of heroism in unstable game narratives with female heroes potentially at the center; while relying on the male gaze, the games educate players on issues of gender equity and sexual difference through characters and game mechanics. I explore the various female heroes in the series by focusing on the gendered narratives within the games, the visual rhetoric of the objectification and sexualization of the female characters, and the potentials for romance and sex within the female heroes' narratives.

The conclusion offers a brief synthesis of the thesis before clarifying the importance and exigency of the study by briefly examining another popular example of fantasy media. In this very brief analysis, I discuss HBO's *Game of Thrones* and the rape of Sansa Stark in the fifth season of the show. Using this wildly popular television program as an example, I establish the necessity of using a girls' studies lens on fantasy media to determine the messages this genre is producing about gender and sexuality and how those messages can affect consumers. After this short discussion, I posit a few ideas for future research over the broader topic of gender, sexuality, and girls' studies in fantasy media in addition to suggesting areas for future research over *A Court of Thorns and Roses* and *Dragon Age*. I finish with some speculation grounded in this thesis's analysis about the future of both the series, as each recently announced upcoming releases.

FEYRE CURSEBREAKER: FEMALE AGENCY, IDENTITY, AND POWER IN *A COURT OF THORNS AND ROSES*

Fantasy is a deeply gendered cultural form that has always been dominated by men, both within the publishing industry and among the genre's authors and readership. Throughout much of fantasy's history, well-developed white male characters are at the forefront as heroes, while flat female characters have often occupied the realm of archetypes. The majority of these archetypes exemplify stereotypes about women, or contribute to negative tropes about female characters. For example, the damsel in distress,[7] a female character who needs a man to save her from peril, is both a popular and hackneyed trope in fantasy, as are the witch, a female character whose magical powers position her as a villain, and the trophy, a female character whose sole purpose is to be a sexual and romantic prize for a male hero. Fantasy inherits the vast majority of these tropes from its literary predecessors, fairy tales and medieval romances. Both of these literary traditions are deeply invested in patriarchal ideas.[8]

Identity, agency, and power are at the center of most fantasy narratives. Fantasy explores who has power in society, how the individual can exist within society, and the challenges of coming of age for those who lack agency and power. Attebery writes, "Coming of age is central in any mythology. Like all rites of passage or of initiation, it marks the passage of an individual

---

[7] I will be discussing the damsel in distress more in connection with Anita Sarkeesian's work on the trope in the next chapter.

[8] Some feminist studies of fairy tales include Marcia L. Lieberman's classic article, " 'Some Day My Prince Will Come': Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale" (1972), Marina Warner's monograph, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (1995), Donald Haase's anthology, *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches* (2004), and Veronica Schanoes's monograph, *Fairy Tales, Myth, and Psychoanalytical Theory: Feminism and Retelling the Tale* (2014). A selection of feminist readings of the medieval romance include Dana A. Heller's monograph *The Feminization of Quest-Romance: Radical Departures* (1990), Nancy F. Partner's monograph *Studying Medieval Women: Sex, Gender, Feminism* (1993), Laura D. Barefield's monograph *Gender and History in Medieval Romance and Chronicle* (2003), and Deirdre Jackson's monograph, *Medieval Women* (2015).

from one state to another: from one tribe to another, from laity to the priesthood, from life to death, or, in this case, from childhood to adulthood and full participation in society" (*Stories* 89). Questions of power and identity are at the heart of the human experience in general, but they are especially relevant to women and girls as they navigate a patriarchal society that is frequently oppressive towards them. According to Attebery, women and fantasy are both "outside the culturally defined norm; both are Other" (*Strategies* ix). In connecting the exclusion of both fantasy and women's writing from the literary canon, Attebery illuminates an important dimension in the relationship between fantasy and women's writing. Although fantasy as a genre is dominated by men, the interests of fantasy align with the interests of women, making the genre ripe with potential for exploring issues of female agency and empowerment.

Analyzing representations of girls and girlhood through the scope of girls' studies is vital in the feminist study of fantasy for children and young adults in particular. In addition to analyzing representations of girlhood, the interdisciplinary field of girls' studies is concerned with examining how the messages transmitted in cultural productions affect the development and perceptions of actual girls. Lipkin writes, "Despite the changing images presented to girls and the newly developed variations within types of media, educators and critics all agree that the stereotypes presented are crucial, if not crushing, in forming understandings of gender and cultural expectation" (126). Girls face unique challenges in the process of acculturation. By using girls' studies to analyze fantasy literature for young adults, scholars can determine how the genre's ingrained patriarchal traditions and tropes affect girls and how feminist interventions into the genre might benefit girl readers as they develop.

My analysis of the representation of gender and sexuality in young adult fantasy will focus on three books in a series: *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (2015), *A Court of Mist and Fury*

(2016), and *A Court of Wings and Ruin* (2017) by Sarah J. Maas. I will refer to these books by the shortened titles *Thorns and Roses*, *Mist and Fury*, and *Wings and Ruin* from this point onward. Not only is this series quite contemporary, it is also popular. The *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series has been a bestselling young adult series since its initial publication ("A Court"). The series focuses on a human girl, Feyre, who lives with her family on the border between the human land and the world of the fae, Prythian, where a magical wall keeps the two lands separated. Prythian is divided into seven different courts, each ruled by a High Lord: Winter, Spring, Summer, Autumn, Dawn, Day, and Night. Feyre must save Prythian from the rule of Amarantha, a general from the enemy fae nation of Hybern, and the threat of takeover from Hybern's king. Throughout the series, Feyre transforms from an unlikely hero to a huntress to a romantic hero and finally to a witch as hero.

In this chapter, I argue that Maas cultivates many different types of female hero via Feyre throughout the *A Court of Thorns and Roses* trilogy and negotiates issues of identity, agency, and power through Feyre's heroic transformations in such a way as to be empowering to certain groups of girls. By tracking Feyre's development through the series in terms of her agency, intersecting identities of gender, sexuality, class, and ability, and experiences with violence and trauma, this chapter demonstrates the many types of heroism Feyre cultivates throughout the series. My aim in this chapter and the next is not to define female heroism broadly; rather, I will be examining the cultural impact of different types of female heroes in high fantasy by tracking the aforementioned qualities. To contextualize Feyre within a tradition of female heroes, I draw on the scholarship of Joseph Campbell, Robert Segal, Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope, Maureen Murdock, and Lori M. Campbell as discussed in the Introduction. First, I track Feyre's development through heroic archetypes throughout the series, from unlikely hero to huntress to

romantic hero to witch as hero. Next, I examine nuances of Feyre's heroism and factors which affect her as a hero, including agency, trauma, sexual violence, sexual liberation, art, and literacy. Finally, I conclude by connecting the representation of Feyre as a hero to her potential to influence girl readers.

The World of Sarah J. Maas

While, to date, no scholars have published studies focusing on her fiction, Sarah J. Maas is a prolific writer of fantasy with a broad following of readers. Maas has been publishing high fantasy novels for young adults since 2012, when *Throne of Glass* was first published by Bloomsbury.[9] As the publisher of celebrated authors such as J. K. Rowling, Neil Gaiman, and Louis Sachar, Bloomsbury is one of the most prestigious publishers of fantasy fiction for children and young adults. Maas began writing the *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series concurrently with the *Throne of Glass* series, making her an unusually prolific writer. Historically, critics have often overlooked prolific female writers, whether or not their works have literary merit. In an 1855 letter to his publisher, Nathaniel Hawthorne famously says: "America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash" (Frederick 231). This pretentious example demonstrates how prolific female writers like Maas have historically been passed over by literary critics as being unworthy of study because of their gender and their output. This project aims to challenge this assumption. The *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series contains three books published by Bloomsbury, the series finishing in May, 2017, although Maas

[9] The first version of *Throne of Glass* appeared on FictionPress when Maas was just sixteen. The series contains seven books in total and one collection of short stories. The final installment in the series, the seventh book, comes out in May 2018.

has stated that she is writing a spin-off series beginning in 2018 continuing the characters' stories in Prythian ("ACOTAR Novella").

Huntress, Lover, Witch: Contextualizing the Female Hero

When female heroes are present in a fantasy narrative, they frequently occupy a gendered role, often serving as huntresses wielding a bow and arrows. Although there are many types of female heroes, Zoe Jaques notes that "the female warrior-hero in children's literature has thorny antecedents, and the archer in particular deploys a weapon with a completely gendered past" (151). The female hero is thus rarely depicted as a warrior who is defined by her physical prowess or her willingness to fight her nemeses at close range; instead, the female hero more often functions as an archer, a healer, or a witch, using her powers from a distance. A huntress differs from a warrior in that the huntress serves a different function: huntresses track and kill at a distance, while warriors rely on brute strength often at the expense of stealth. Additionally, the term "huntress" offers a more nuanced definition than "hunter" in this instance because there is "a tradition of the huntress as both a pursuant of game and a patron of the defenseless" (Jaques 158). Although some feminists might note that the name "huntress" implies a male norm, there is a literary tradition of the female hero as huntress that offers different connotations than the term "hunter." There are many examples of the huntress in literature, from Artemis the Greek goddess to Susan Pevensie in *The Chronicles of Narnia* and Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games*. Writing about the trope of the female archer in fantasy fiction, Jaques notes that female heroes draw on far more talents than male ones in high fantasy: "Offsetting the somewhat singular skills of the violent male hero, these female heroes deploy a wide skill-set, including archery, gathering, and strategy, to enable themselves and their clans to survive" (168). Not only does the

female hero use a bow for fighting and protection, she also uses the weapon to provide for others on a domestic level.

The female hero continues her domestic labor by usually occupying the role of the love interest, or the romantic hero, in fantasy fiction and literature in general. The use of the term "romantic hero" is not to be confused with the Romantic hero, which describes an entirely different type of hero stemming from a separate literary tradition. The trope of the female hero as the romantic counterpoint to a text's male hero has roots that are deeper than the times of William Shakespeare, although Shakespeare himself certainly did his part to popularize the female romantic hero and create some of the most memorable romantic heroes in our cultural consciousness through romantic comedy.[10] Historically, romantic comedy can be understood as a "plot being assimilated to the ritual theme of the triumph of life and love over the waste land" (Frye 182). By the late twentieth century, the romance plot was more broadly interpreted by middle-brow romance writers as a central love story with an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending ("About"). In high fantasy, a female hero is a romantic hero when she is part of an (often heterosexual) romantic couple and endures what Campbell and Murdock call the road of trials in order to be with the person she loves. While romance plots may seem to oppose feminist aims in some ways by exclusively focusing on a woman or girl's sexual and romantic desirability, romance can actually be quite liberating for female readers. Catherine M. Roach writes, "The answer of the romance story to this conundrum of living as a woman in a man's world, or, more specifically, as a heterosexual woman whose desire is for men is to offer a fantasy safe space that addresses these anxieties and has them all work out" (15). In short, the female romantic hero finds success when she is able to overcome all of the obstacles keeping her

[10] Some of my personal favorite examples include Beatrice (*Much Ado About Nothing*), Viola (*The Twelfth Night*), and Rosaline (*As You Like It*).

and her lover apart so that they can be together. There may be questions as to why there is so much emphasis on romantic heroes and the romance genre in a chapter on fantasy. Such investigation is necessary when analyzing contemporary works of young adult fantasy fiction, as many stories feature romance as either a subplot or even entwined with the main plot.

In addition to the trope of the female archer and the romantic hero, the female hero in fantasy literature often wields supernatural abilities. The trope of the witch dates back to the times of fairy tales and medieval romances. Historically, the trope of the witch sent negative gendered messages about the nature of female power. Writing about the views of magical women in medieval romance, Joanna Ludwikowska claims that "the presentation of women as magical, wild, unchecked, and governed by rules other than those of the world inhabited by men makes women not only the biological and intellectual Other of men, […] but also the Other of social order, reason, and nature" (85). The witch, then, is a symbol of the woman as the Other. Though the witch was a way to Other women throughout history and culture, contemporary fantasy has often reclaimed and revised the meaning of the magical woman. Sprague and Keeling claim that "fantasy stories are especially empowering when they feature girls who have supernatural powers that make girls equal, if not superior, to their male peers" (128). In many contemporary fantasies, the female hero is granted magical powers that she uses to save herself, her people, and her lands. As Lori M. Campbell notes, the superiority that these magical powers grant female heroes "carries with it an association with transgression that originally defines magic in a medieval or religious sense, but for modern readers this rule-breaking is a positive signifier of empowerment" (12). Modern fantasy thus frequently reverses the previous associations of witches from a critique of female power to a positive, even inspirational, image of women's emancipation.

Feyre as a Female Hero: Power and Transformation(s)

As the hero in the *A Court of Thorns and Roses* trilogy, Feyre initially exemplifies what W. H. Auden describes as an "unlikely hero," someone who is "the one whom everybody would judge as least likely to succeed […] humble enough to take advice and kind enough to give assistance to strangers, who, like himself [or herself] appears to be nobody in particular" (37). Feyre transitions over the course of the series from an unlikely hero to a romantic hero to, finally, a powerful witch. In the beginning of the series, Maas positions Feyre within the lowest social sphere. Feyre's family is destitute, to the point where they do not have enough food to survive the winter (Maas, *Thorns and Roses* 2). Journeying to the forest bordering her village every day to hunt for food, Feyre is the only individual standing between her family and starvation. This social role as an economic underdog positions her for heroism on both a domestic and national scale. Not only is she a girl in a world that presents few opportunities for women, but she is also the youngest child in in a patrilineal society where the eldest holds the most value and power in a family. Additionally, although her family used to be wealthy, Feyre's father can no longer function as the provider because his creditors beat him to the point of disabling him. Feyre's transition throughout the series in several different heroic roles is important to the series' girl readers, as Feyre demonstrates that there are many types of hero a girl can be.

Like many female heroes in high fantasy, Feyre's heroic agency is initially highlighted through her skills as a huntress. Feyre explains, "Five years ago, when the money was well and truly gone, when my father still couldn't--wouldn't—move much about, he hadn't argued when I announced that I was going hunting" (Maas, *Thorns and Roses* 12). It is this moment of crisis that prompts Feyre to hunt, temporarily fulfilling the masculine role of provider. In addition to

providing sustenance for her family, Feyre also uses her bow as a tool for protecting herself. At the beginning of the story, Feyre uses the bow to kill a wolf in the forest to defend herself; she does not hunt save when she absolutely has to for survival. Even though she is skilled with a weapon, she uses it primarily for gendered work: taking care of her family. Therefore, while the bow might seem to grant her agency, the bow is actually symbolic of her confined existence in this domestic sphere. Feyre's use of a bow and arrows at the beginning of the series is thus an introduction to female agency, a concept that the series explores and develops in much greater detail.

In fact, it is because of Feyre's position as provider and savior of her family that she ascends to a hero on a national scale. After she kills a fae warrior disguised as a wolf, Tamlin, the High Lord of the Spring Court, takes her to Prythian because, as Tamlin explains, "Prythian must claim your life in some way, for the life you took from it. So as a representative of the immortal realm, I can either gut you like a swine, or…you can cross the wall and live out the remainder of your days in Prythian" (Maas, *Thorns and Roses* 37). Had she not been forced to fill the role of provider to her family, she would not have been positioned to be Prythian's hero through her eventual relationship with Tamlin. As we will see, her position as a huntress, driven by the class and gender structures in her own human world, enables her transformation into a romantic hero because of the power structures in Prythian.

Once Feyre reaches the realm of the fae, she sheds her role as a huntress and adopts the mantle of the romantic hero. Tamlin positions Feyre to save the Spring Court through her reciprocation of romantic love, forcing her into the role of romantic hero: "If he [Tamlin] wanted to break her [Amarantha's] curse, he need only find a human girl willing to marry him. But not any girl—a human with ice in her heart, with hatred for our kind. A human girl willing to kill a

faerie" (Maas, *Thorns and Roses* 283). Because she killed a fae, Feyre is initially only capable of being a hero to Prythian through traditional feminine means: sexual and romantic desirability. Despite her growing romantic and sexual attraction to Tamlin, she is unable to admit these feelings to him before the curse's deadline. Feyre thus fails at being a romantic hero when the heroism is based strictly on her own emotions. Well before the first book in the series has concluded, Maas' plot emphasizes the confinement and vacuity of female heroes tied to the romantic plot. Because Feyre fails at performing her gender-essentialist heroism, the narrative thus rejects the notion that romance is the only type of heroism that female characters are capable of, positioning her to succeed in a different form of heroism.

When Feyre initially fails as a romantic hero, she then must revert back to her role as a huntress to save Tamlin and his court from Under the Mountain, where Amarantha has taken them. In this way, the narrative illustrates the impossible demands on a female hero who must master not one but two different kinds of heroism at once. Because Feyre must negotiate many different heroic roles, Maas acknowledges the sexual double standard between males and females. Under the Mountain, Feyre must face a road of trials that is more typical in the hero's journey according to Campbell and Murdock's paradigms. She must either complete three separate trials or answer a riddle;[11] the trials themselves test her strength and endurance, cleverness, and determination. With these trials, she breaks expectations for masculine heroism, which prioritizes strength and direct assaults, according to Jaques as mentioned previously. Instead of fighting her enemy head on in the first trial against the Middengard Wyrm, she instead lures the Wyrm to a lethal trap. In this way, Feyre reverts back to the trope of the huntress. Rather than using brute force, Feyre uses her resourcefulness and cleverness cultivated by

[11] It is interesting to note that the answer to Amarantha's riddle is love.

hunting and trapping in order to save herself and the Spring Court from Amarantha's control (Maas, *Thorns and Roses* 323). Yet, at the same time, Feyre is still operating as a romantic hero in that she is completing these trials to reunite with her lover. In this way, Maas demonstrates that a female hero is capable of juggling multiple roles at one time and that one is not necessarily better than the other. However, by killing Feyre at the end of the book, Maas is symbolically killing the female hero as huntress and romantic hero to bring her back in a different heroic form.

By the end of the first book and the beginning of the second, Feyre transitions from a huntress to a witch. Resurrected by the High Lords and transformed into a fae, she returns to the narrative with a piece of each High Lord's magical powers. Her newfound power with magic allows Maas to explore more complex dimensions to female agency that position Feyre as a more empowered hero while subverting the negative associations with the witch archetype. Feyre is forced to negotiate different male responses to her newfound power, a negotiation which ultimately educates heterosexual girl readers in identifying and selecting romantic partners that support, rather than suppress, female power. Writing about the formative power of media and popular culture, Susan Douglas says that various media "socialized us, entertained us, comforted us, deceived us, disciplined us, told us what we could do and told us what we couldn't" (13). Maas's exploration of male responses to female agency demonstrates this acculturative power that media has on the individual. Though transitioning from a huntress to a witch, Feyre remains a romantic hero throughout the remainder of the series, eventually leaving Tamlin and marrying Rhysand to become the High Lady of the Night Court. Feyre's several relationships convey many complex lessons about coming of age as a girl hero in addition to sending a positive message to girl readers by demonstrating the reality that many people will have more than one romantic partner in their lifetimes.

Feyre must negotiate varying male responses to her magical abilities as she grows into her role as a witch. Tamlin, Feyre's first lover and the High Lord of the Spring Court, by turns denies the existence of her magical powers and then forbids her from exploring or training to use this magic, justifying his desires through the language of patriarchy: "Training would draw too much attention […] You don't need to train. I can guard you from whatever comes our way" (Maas, *Mist and Fury* 86). Tamlin does not want Feyre to draw too much attention with her powers, a common patriarchal refrain used to keep women in the background so they do not intimidate or embarrass men. Tamlin also refuses to instruct Feyre in her powers under the guise of protecting her, refusing to entertain the possibility that she might be capable of protecting herself. This refusal echoes the earliest admonitions in the Old Testament that sought to exclude women from knowledge and power. Tamlin demonstrates the toxic, patriarchal reaction to female magical power; the female must be suppressed and controlled to comply with benign patriarchy. Additionally, when discussing their future marriage, Tamlin denies the existence of High Ladies, reinforcing the belief that only men are capable of holding the highest levels of social power: "There is no such thing as a High Lady. […] High Lords only take wives. Consorts. There has never been a High Lady" (Maas, *Mist and Fury* 24). Feyre assumes that the wife of a High Lord is automatically High Lady; however, this is not the case. Tamlin's refusal to acknowledge that a girl might be able to hold both magical and social power equal to a man's reinforces his patriarchal beliefs and treatment of Feyre, despite the fact that she actually possesses more magical abilities than he does.

Despite negative responses to her power, Feyre learns that she has the ability to make her own choices. Whereas Tamlin consistently acts to constrain and control Feyre, Rhysand, the High Lord of the Night Court and Feyre's eventual romantic partner, encourages Feyre to

explore her abilities and even trains her to strengthen and control her powers, thus positioning Feyre to be an agent in her own life. Whereas Tamlin has led Feyre to believe that she has only one option, to forget her powers and marry him, Rhysand suggests instead, "You've got another choice. You can master whatever powers we gave to you, and make it count. You can play a role in this war. […] But it's your choice to make—no one else's" (Maas, *Mist and Fury* 74). Rhysand uses different rhetorical strategies with Feyre than Tamlin does; rather than telling Feyre what to do, Rhysand encourages her in one direction but ultimately reminds her that it is her decision how to act. Although frequently worried about Feyre's safety, Rhysand recognizes Feyre's power and models a feminist vision of a heterosexual partnership. His reaction to female power represented in the form of the witch thus mirrors some contemporary feminist revisionings of magical women in popular culture as theorized by Lori M. Campbell (12). Rhysand also revises Feyre's role as romantic hero by establishing her as his equal. In addition to acknowledging the existence of High Ladies, Rhysand is Feyre's mate, which Feyre describes as being "not lover, not husband, but more than that. A bond so deep, so permanent that it was honored over all others. Rare, cherished" (Maas, *Mist and Fury* 492). This bond is one that fae have the potential to experience, one that blossoms for Feyre and Rhysand towards the end of the second book. This bond also establishes them as magical and social equals, confirming the depth of Feyre's power, as it is a well-established fact among the various courts that Rhysand is the most powerful High Lord in Prythian's history (Maas, *Mist and Fury* 493). Rhysand reinforces the true extent of Feyre's power within the narrative in addition to modeling for men a pro-feminist response to female power.

In the narrative arc of the second and third books in the series, the story positions Feyre to save both Prythian and the human realm by emphasizing her newly-acquired magical abilities,

revealing a new kind of empowered female hero. After her return to her role as the huntress in Amarantha's realm, she transitions to the role of the witch after being granted magical powers in her physical transformation to a fae. Her magical powers allow her to save both Prythian and the human realm, as the king of Hybern plans to destroy the barrier between the worlds with the Cauldron, a legendary object of great power rumored to have created the universe. Feyre's unique position as a human turned into a fae is what grants her the ability to nullify the Cauldron's power. This dual nature of human and fae mirrors Feyre's dual position as both a girl and a hero. However, although the narrative positions Feyre to be able to save the realms on her own through her magical abilities, Feyre needs to combine both her own and Rhysand's power to negate the power of the Cauldron: "More. We needed more. He gave it to me. Rhys handed over everything. I was a bearer, a vessel, a link" (Maas, *Wings and Ruin* 665). Feyre acts as a vessel for her and Rhysand's combined powers, using this power to heal the Cauldron. Acting as a vessel for power functions as a yonic symbol, one that is extended by the feminine acts of healing and creating the Cauldron anew. Although viewing the female as a vessel has historically been a way to demonstrate feminine passivity and lack of agency, Maas co-opts this imagery as a symbol of female power. Ultimately, then, it is Feyre's role as a feminine romantic hero that allows her to be Prythian's savior.

Dimensions of Heroism in Romance and Fantasy for the Female Hero

Agency

Feyre's agency as a hero is consistently challenged by not only her enemies but also the men who are her putative allies. Throughout much of the first and second books, Tamlin, his emissary Lucien, and Rhysand restrain Feyre using physical and magical means. Although they restrict her agency for a variety of reasons and in a multitude of situations, their impediments

collectively stem from the belief that Feyre is incapable of protecting herself. These male characters take away her ability to decide her own fate. In the case of a male hero, these restrictions would not be as significant because the stakes are different for girl heroes than boy heroes, though age certainly plays a role in this as well. For example, the professors at Hogwarts regularly prevent Harry Potter from doing or learning the things he wants, and the fellowship must protect the four hobbits in the group because of their lack of knowledge and skill. My reading does not view these characters' gender as causing their lack of agency but rather their ages or perceived ages that cause this agentic absence. However, because Feyre is a female hero, I view her lack of agency in these situations in gendered terms because it is a stereotype throughout all of literature, not just fantasy, that female characters, especially girls, need protection because the intersection of age and gender establishes girls as a vulnerable subject position. Feyre's lack of agency at male hands thereby reinforces patriarchal views of female power.

Another significant dimension to Feyre's heroic journey is the domestic abuse perpetrated against her at the hands of a lover; indeed, her journey to actualization mirrors the path that many survivors of abuse must walk. Tamlin is the one who restrains Feyre the most, both physically and magically, in order to control her, though this attempt at control is cloaked in the guise of protection. In this way, Tamlin functions as a narrative device to comment on the subtle patterns of control in patriarchal societies. For example, on their way to Prythian, Tamlin restrains her before crossing the wall: "I awoke with a jolt atop the horse, secured by invisible bonds. […] Magic—that's what the tang had been, what was keeping my limbs tucked in tight, preventing me from going for my knife" (Maas, *Thorns and Roses* 46). Ultimately, Feyre feels safe with him despite her gendered and racialized vulnerabilities and despite his psychological

and physical control over her. Although she is not technically a prisoner, refusing to acknowledge Tamlin's past treatment of her reinforces Tamlin's patriarchal behavior and his aggression towards her in the second book, when he evidences more controlling behavior towards Feyre. Indeed, she begins to acknowledge her experience in terms of captivity and torture:: "I'm drowning. […] I am *drowning*. And the more you do this [confine her], the more guards… You might as well be shoving my head under the water " (Maas, *Mist and Fury* 99-100). Feyre's feelings of confinement reach a breaking point when he locks her inside his house with a magical barrier. It is only then that Feyre realizes the severity of her lack of agency. Only when Feyre is a prisoner again, this time within her own home, does she realize the dangers she is in, though all of Tamlin's behavior up to this point has been motivated by male privilege. Tamlin's protective instincts, while no doubt patriarchal, also reflect a familiar anxiety expressed in much of children's literature: that to protect children, we must shield them from certain forms of knowledge. Despite the fact that Feyre is no longer a child, she is still being treated like one, an issue relevant to much of the scholarship around YA literature and girls' studies as Feyre is being infantilized by a representative of the patriarchy.

In addition to being guarded from knowledge about Prythian as well as her newfound powers, the men around Feyre try at times to prevent her from carnal knowledge as well, a common refrain in children's literature and even in much of YA literature. Lucien restrains Feyre in order to save her from what she does not understand: Tamlin's sexual congress with a maiden as part of a ritual that transforms him into a beast incapable of denying his desires. During the ritual festival, Feyre says that Lucien "slung me over his shoulder as if I were a sack of potatoes. Despite my wriggling and shouts of protest, despite my demands that he get my horse, he held firm" (Maas, *Thorns and Roses* 192). In this instance, Lucien is trying to protect Feyre from

witnessing Tamlin complete the Great Rite, the mating ritual that supplies the Spring Court with magic. This protection and prohibition from knowledge again returns to biblical themes regarding women, knowledge, and power, reflecting anxieties at the heart of children's literature: what do we allow children to know, and what knowledge do we try to protect them from? Despite the YA literature's adolescent audience, sex and carnal knowledge are still very much taboo topics.

Feyre's agency is also restricted by Rhysand, though to a lesser extent, in order to protect both her and himself from imminent danger, revealing the deeply-ingrained patriarchal society in which they live. Rhysand only once restrains Feyre when he is posing as Amarantha's "whore" and confidant. Although Rhysand, like Tamlin, is restraining Feyre in order to protect her, unlike Tamlin, Rhysand explains his actions and apologizes to her after the fact. At their first meeting, Rhysand attempts to frighten Feyre to convince her to leave the danger of Prythian by controlling her with magic: "Against my volition, my body straightened, every muscle going taught, my bones straining. Magic, but deeper than that. Power that seized everything inside me and took control: even my blood flowed where he willed it" (Maas, *Thorns and Roses* 239). Rhysand takes possession of her mind in order to frighten her and does not actually do anything to harm her, though he is ultimately unsuccessful in persuading her to leave. Once they are all Under the Mountain together, Rhysand attempts to help Feyre with her trials in secret, justifying the time they spend together to others by using her as a plaything in front of others. Although Rhysand does restrict Feyre's agency in these moments, his actions are a front in order to protect Feyre and himself from Amarantha. As a prisoner of sorts himself, he must comply with the patriarchal expectations placed on him due to his status within Amarantha's court. His patriarchal treatment

of Feyre, however necessary for survival, still undermines her as a hero because it reinforces her status as a lesser person because of her gender.

Trauma

Feyre experiences great physical and emotional trauma, a violence which hinders her agency until she is able to heal and learn to cope. While violence is an assumed aspect of the fantasy narrative, fantasy rarely engages with the emotional and mental effects violence has on the individual. Fantasy narratives typically cover only the physical effects of violence through depictions of injuries and death. Feyre's journey in *A Court of Thorns and Roses* is marked by violence and its accompanying trauma. Amarantha keeps Feyre imprisoned in a cell for three months, making her complete a trial every month and torturing her and others for information or amusement. After escaping from Under the Mountain, these physical and mental traumas have a lasting effect on Feyre. She wakes from nightmares each night with panic attacks, prompting Amren, Rhysand's second-in-command, to remark: "No wonder you're so thin if you vomit your guts up every night" (Maas, *Mist and Fury* 189). In addition to the nightmares, Feyre has other triggers from Under the Mountain, such as dark, enclosed spaces and the color red. After being faced with a mission underground, Feyre refuses to complete it. As for the color red, Feyre says, "I hated that color. More than anything. Amarantha's hair, all that blood, the welts on Clare Beddor's broken body, spiked to the walls of Under the Mountain" (Maas, *Mist and Fury* 17). When, against her wishes, red rose petals feature at her wedding to Tamlin, she experiences a panic attack that leads to the postponement of the event. Feyre's experiences with nightmares and triggers related to the event are consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.

In addition to struggling with the violence visited upon her, the violence Feyre is forced to commit Under the Mountain has a profound effect on her mental and emotional health, a

dimension of Feyre's identity as a girl hero coming of age that Maas develops throughout the second and third books. While many literary heroes in fantasies, epics, and medieval romances find glory in violence, rarely do such narratives pause to consider the effect committing such violence has on the hero. Working through trauma and the effects of violence are primary subjects in the second book of the series, as the final task Amarantha issues to Feyre in the first book is to kill three innocent faerie youths by stabbing them through the heart with an ash stake. While the completion of this final task liberates Feyre, Tamlin, and their court, Feyre is hardly able to celebrate. She admits, "I couldn't. I couldn't do it. It wasn't like hunting; it wasn't for survival or defense. It was cold-blooded murder—the murder of them, of my very soul" (Maas, *Thorns and Roses* 389). Even though killing these faeries would allow for the freedom of an entire kingdom, Feyre immediately questions the cost and is haunted by their deaths. She says, "Maybe I had always been broken and dark inside. Maybe someone who'd been born whole and good would have put down the ash dagger and embraced death rather than what lay before me. […] I was the butcher of innocents, and the savior of a land" (Maas, *Mist and Fury* 1). Feyre's connection of her ability to do violence and her inherent brokenness and immorality is notable because heroes are usually lauded for the violent acts they perform in the name of heroism. Feyre cannot separate the act of violence she committed from the people she saved. Although her actions saved the inhabitants of an entire land, it is the faeries she killed that she dwells upon. It is significant that Feyre experiences the effects of trauma and violence because it offers a new perspective for the hero. Feyre's interiority is thus a vital aspect of her identity as a female hero.

Likewise, the emotional and mental effects of war become a vital subject in the third book as Feyre prepares to enter battle for the first time and the rest of her companions brace to face conflict yet again. As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, male-centric fantasies, epics,

and romances glorify war for the honor that it brings to the warriors without confronting the immense emotional and mental toll that it takes. In Feyre's first large-scale battle, she must distance herself emotionally, entering a trance-like state and then vomiting when it is all over and she must face the horror of what she has done and what has unfolded around her. Initially ashamed of her reaction to the violence and gore, Feyre realizes: "War would linger with me long after it had ended, some invisible scar that would perhaps fade, but never wholly vanish" (Maas, *Wings and Ruin* 368). Even the seasoned veterans of war feel the way Feyre does. If war is seen as necessary to protect freedom, there is no discussion of the potential glory or honor that could come from it. Feyre reflects on her companions' attitudes towards war, saying, "None of them enjoyed this [war], I realized. My friends—they had gone to war and back and had not found it worthy of glorification, had not let its memory become rose-tinted in the centuries following. But they were willing to dive into its hell once again for the sake of Prythian" (Maas, *Wings and Ruin* 352). The characters view war as a necessary evil, though it is not something that any of them desire. This representation of war as a necessary evil challenges the masculinized views of war present in many fantasy novels. Rather than using war as a means to earn honor and glory for the individual, Maas imagines a more feminized view of war where the needs of the individual are subsumed in order to protect the innocent collective.

Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is a real and present threat in the lives of women and girls around the world, as we all live in rape cultures propelled by the stains of patriarchy and toxic masculinity. Consider, for example, the present moment in time when, almost daily, another powerful man is

found to be the perpetrator of sexual harassment, assault, and rape.[12] In a vast majority of contemporary fantasy, especially in fantasy written for adults, sexual violence against women is portrayed as being more accurate to reality, even among fantasy that takes place completely in other realms.[13] George R. R. Martin, bestselling author of the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, has defended the many depictions of rape and sexual violence in his books: "If you're going to write about war, and you just include all the cool battles and heroes killing a lot of orcs and things like that, and you don't portray [sexual violence], then there's something fundamentally dishonest about that" (Barnett). For Martin, the threat of sexual violence against female characters is a fundamental aspect of fantasy, reflecting the assumption that magic and dragons are more plausible than a world without sexual violence. There is also a troubling and pernicious aspect to the perpetuation of sexual violence against women in fantasy in that it may serve as a feature rather than a fault. The belief surrounding sexual violence in fantasy, which is not unique to Martin, also assumes that sexual violence is a threat that only female characters have to face.[14] Maas, however, subverts all of these expectations of fantasy in the *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series. Although Feyre faces the threat of sexual violence several times throughout the series, sexual violence is not unique to the female characters. In fact, the two characters who experience rape are male characters at the hands of female characters.

---

[12] For example, accusations have been brought against men like Donald J. Trump, Harvey Weinstein, Mark Halperin, Michael Oreskes, Kevin Spacey, and Louis C. K., to name a few.

[13] However, I personally don't understand why authors feel the need to be "accurate to reality" in a fantasy that takes places entirely in a created world.. The willingness to be "accurate to reality" when it comes to patriarchy, but not when it comes to the existence of people of color, queer people, or disabled people is blatant hypocrisy.

[14] Some other fantasy authors who depict gratuitous rapes or treat rape in a casual manner within their fiction are Joe Halderman, Brandon Sanderson, Stephen R. Donaldson, Terry Goodkind, and Neal Stephenson, to name a few.

Throughout Maas's series, she demonstrates that rape is primarily an issue of power. Amarantha uses her influence as self-proclaimed High Queen of Prythian to control the sexual agency of others. Amarantha takes Rhysand as her consort and uses his magical powers as a weapon to control her subjects, which he complies with in exchange for the safety of his court and its people. Because of this perceived betrayal, the people of the rest of the courts commonly refer to Rhysand as "Amarantha's whore" (Maas, *Thorns and Roses* 341). Amarantha's acts of sexual violence against Rhysand influence his character development and allow him to relate to Feyre, since they are both survivors of trauma. Their mutual trauma creates a shared understanding, and this shared understanding allows both of them to begin to heal from the violence of their pasts.

Maas also shows the narrative consequences of rape for the perpetrators. In addition to Amarantha committing sexual violence against Rhysand, Ianthe, a temple priestess and Tamlin's friend, commits sexual violence against multiple men. As priestess, Ianthe uses her religious and social influence to coerce men into having sex with her. Feyre observes with distaste how Ianthe tries to coerce Rhysand, "seeing that hand again and again reach between his legs, the ownership and arrogance in that gesture" (Maas, *Mist and Fury* 235). In addition to her attempted coercion of Rhysand, Ianthe also tries to force Lucien into sexual situations on multiple occurrences. Ianthe's pursuit of Lucien culminates in restraining and preparing to rape him before Feyre intervenes. Feyre not only stops the rape from occurring, but also punishes Ianthe for her actions by forcing her to smash her own hand with a rock, enjoining:

> You will never touch another person against their will. You will never convince yourself that they truly want your advances; that they're playing games. You will never know another's touch unless they initiate, unless it's desired by *both* sides. […] And every time

> you look at that hand, you are going to remember that touching people against their will has consequences. (Maas, *Wings and Ruin* 87)

Feyre uses her magical powers to prevent Ianthe from committing violence ever again, disciplining her for an act that fantasy rarely, if ever, punishes narratively.

Although the only occurrences of sexual violence represented in the narrative are committed by women against men, a revelation which may invite readers to question the assumed responsibility for their own victimhood, Feyre must endure many threats of sexual violence. Three faeries accost Feyre during a festival and attempt to force her to take part in the fertility rituals before Rhysand stops them (Maas, *Thorns and Roses* 186). In the second book, one of Tamlin's reasons for keeping Feyre's powers a secret is to protect her from attempted rape by the other High Lords: "And if they [the High Lords] do not kill Feyre outright, then they might realize what *they* stand to gain if gifted with offspring from her, too" (Maas, *Mist and Fury* 118). The threat of sexual violence is present for Feyre throughout the narrative; though never a victim of sexual violence herself, Feyre must withstand the emotional toll of its threat. This representation of sexual violence against women is different from the sexual violence in many fantasy narratives, including narratives I will examine in the next chapter concerning the Hero of Ferelden.

Sexual Agency

Feyre's sexual agency is one factor of her identity as a girl that provides an important nuance to experiencing her as a female character and as a female hero. The Western literary tradition contains myriad examples of the Madonna/whore dichotomy, which essentially places women into two separate categories: virginal and good or promiscuous and evil. According to Jessica Valenti:

> women are led to believe that our moral compass lies somewhere between our legs. Literally. Whether it's the determining factor in our 'cleanliness' or 'purity' or the marker of our character, virginity has an increasingly dangerous hold over young women. It affects not only our ability to see ourselves as ethical actors outside our own bodies, but also how the world interacts with us through social mores, laws, and even violence. (13)

Women who are sexually active or have sexual desires are traditionally portrayed as villainous, not heroic. This dichotomy becomes complicated when looking at the female hero, because sexual activity or desire is an essential step in the hero's journey as defined by Campbell in the Meeting of the Goddess. Campbell writes: "The mystical marriage with the queen goddess of the world represents the hero's total mastery of life; for the woman is life, the hero its knower and master" (101). The hero's sexual agency, then, is symbolic of the hero's success and experience in life. It is thus impossible to reconcile Campbell's views of heroism with the traditional roles women occupy in literature. Of course, Campbell's absolutist claims about the nature of the hero are not true in all cases; however, they still influence much of contemporary fantasy. Feyre complicates both Campbell's understanding of the female hero and the female hero affected by society's sexual dichotomy because she not only experiences sexual desire throughout the series but also enjoys three different sexual partners. Additionally, unlike Campbell's idea of the hero, where sexuality is used to express mastery, Feyre's sexuality expresses different aspects of her character.

Feyre uses her sexuality as a form of escape from her impoverished life and as a distraction from her road of trials. Before beginning her journey, Feyre had a sexual relationship with a boy in the village, Isaac. She describes their relationship by saying, "I couldn't say our lovemaking was particularly skilled, but it was still a release, a reprieve, a bit of selfishness.

There was no love between us, and never had been—at least what I assumed people meant when they talked about love" (Maas, *Thorns and Roses* 31). By making it clear that she's just interested in sexual release, Feyre expresses a powerful commentary as a female hero. Not only does her heroism code female sexuality positively, it portrays girlhood sexuality positively. In the second book, Feyre acts on her desire for Rhysand, saying, "I want a distraction. […] I want—fun" (Maas, *Mist and Fury* 472). Although this relationship develops into an intense emotional and romantic bond, Feyre initially is only ready for a sexual encounter. Romantic love in this instance is portrayed as weightier or meaning more than sexual activity. It is rare for girls in literature to be so open and accepting of their own sexual desires; depictions of girls enjoying sex in literature are rare, even in YA novels. When there are representations of girls enjoying sex in YA fiction, the narrative typically punishes them in some way. In this way, the openness surrounding Feyre's sexuality presents a positive message for young adult readers. As a female hero, Feyre's exploration of her sexuality reinforces positive views of female sexuality and desire for female readers.

However positively Feyre reflects on her sexual desires, she nevertheless must contend with an aspect of sexuality that male heroes do not: pregnancy. Discussion of pregnancy and birth control methods for girls is rare in the US, as much of the country still relies on abstinence-only sex education, yet this fantasy series is quite straightforward with the issue. Anxieties about pregnancy permeate her sexual encounters. When she is with Isaac, birth control is at the forefront of Feyre's concerns: "Since I couldn't afford it, Isaac himself took the contraceptive brew. He knew I wouldn't have touched him otherwise" (Maas, *Thorns and Roses* 32). At this moment, her desire for birth control is at least in part informed by her social class; she cannot afford to provide for another person. Later, her anxieties about pregnancy have other

connotations. When she is in relationships with both Tamlin and Rhysand, who are both High Lords, she feels overwhelmed by the pressure to provide heirs. Class is also a factor in this anxiety, though for a different reason, as Feyre's social status has reversed; though she can now financially support a child, she feels the pressure of expectation upon her as the partner of a High Lord to provide heirs. For Tamlin, as the High Lord of the Spring Court, Feyre's eventual motherhood and provision of heirs is a given (Maas, *Mist and Fury* 118). As the partner of a High Lord, motherhood comes with a host of domestic responsibilities that Feyre feels pressured into, which ultimately feed into her rejection of Tamlin. Feyre's rejection of Tamlin sends the message that this type of partner should be rejected. While the social pressure to provide heirs for Rhysand is still there, he does not feed into this pressure. He says: "You are not expected to bear me *anything* […] I don't want you to have them [children] unless you want to—unless we *both* want to" (Maas, *Mist and Fury* 542). He relieves this social pressure of motherhood, serving as a model for desirable behavior in a romantic and sexual partner for adolescent girl readers attracted to men.

The Female Hero as an Artist

A significant dimension to Feyre's coming of age as a girl hero is her vocation as an artist, a highly unusual quality for a high fantasy hero. Although Feyre acts as both a huntress and a witch at different points in the narrative, she does not define herself by these roles; instead, Feyre's true passion is for painting, and she considers herself an artist. Painting is an expensive hobby, meaning that, traditionally, it is typically only reserved for the elite. Historically, painting was a male profession. While leisured women in pre-twentieth century Western culture learned to draw and sketch, painting was a masculine vocation. Therefore, even though the modern

reader might interpret painting as a feminine act, painting is rooted in both class and gender hegemonies.

Feyre's ability to paint is a reflection of her character development in her journey. Although, early in the series, she notices color, light, and texture throughout her day, her family cannot afford paints. In fact, Feyre longs for the day when both her sisters are married and she can stay home with her father and finally afford paints (Maas, *Thorns and Roses* 3). Feyre was able to paint once, using primary colors to decorate her family's house. These small paintings actually foreshadow Feyre's character development throughout the narrative of the series. Feyre shares a chest of drawers with her sisters and paints each sister's drawer with a picture to match their personalities, painting her own drawer with a depiction of the night sky. Her painting of the night sky foreshadows her ascension to the position of High Lady of the Night Court. Early on in the story, then, Feyre's painting prepares readers for her heroic journey.

Painting plays an important role in the development of Feyre's journey when she reaches Prythian and lives in the Spring Court with Tamlin. Because of the immense wealth of the Spring Court, Tamlin is able to provide Feyre with the material goods she has always wanted: paints and painting supplies. As feminist art historian Linda Nochlin writes, artistic greatness is not so much a matter of gender, but of opportunity: "The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education—education understood to include everything that happens to us from the moment we enter this world of meaningful symbols, signs, and signals" (231) Now that she does not have to worry about having enough for survival, Feyre is able to explore the part of herself that is creative rather than destructive and explore her role as a female artist. .

In the second book, Feyre's painting functions as a symbol of her greater agency as it allows her to heal. Feyre's initial inability to paint after escaping Amarantha's kingdom symbolizes the spiritual and psychological trauma she is undergoing as a result of the violence she experienced Under the Mountain. Although Tamlin was initially able to facilitate Feyre's desire to paint, when she transitions from human to fae, she initially loses this part of her that fueled her inspiration and desire. In terms of Joseph Campbell's heroic cycle, Feyre's inability to paint represents the stage known as the Belly of the Whale, where "the hero…is swallowed into the unknown, and would appear to have died" (74). In Feyre's case, her physical death and rebirth are more than symbolic. While her transformation took place by the end of *Thorns and Roses*, her emotional and spiritual death last for the majority of the events of *Mist and Fury*. To better understand the two strands of death and rebirth, we might introduce Murdock to our framework as well. While Campbell discusses the hero's physical death and resurrection, Murdock refers to spiritual and emotional transformation when discussing the Initiation and Descent to the Goddess. Murdock writes, "[The hero] experiences a loss of identity, a falling away of the perimeters of a known role, and the fear that accompanies loss" (90). Feyre died as a human and transformed as a fae, mourning her life as she knew it and recovering from the physical and emotional violence she experienced at Amarantha's hands. Upon visiting the Rainbow, the art district in the capital of the Night Court, Feyre remarks: "Artists. I'd never called myself an artist, never thought that far or that grandly, but… Where all that color and light and texture had once dwelled, there was only a filthy prison cell" (Maas, *Mist and Fury* 147). In this statement, Feyre acknowledges the emotional toll she feels after surviving Amarantha's tortures; though her body has healed, her mind has not. In this moment, she also mourns the artistic potential she never had the chance to explore. This emotional and spiritual death Feyre

experiences, along with her eventual rebirth, is closely connected to her activities as a painter; after embracing her role as a witch and developing her magical abilities, she begins to paint once again.

During her time in the Night Court after escaping Tamlin's abuse, Feyre begins to heal emotionally from what she has endured, and this healing can be seen through her revitalized interest in art. Initially, Feyre avoids visiting the Rainbow, an allusion to the LGBTQIA+ community, because it reminds her of what she is incapable of doing. Later, after Feyre has had time to heal and has realized that Rhysand is her mate, Feyre begins to paint again. After retreating to a cabin in the woods to sort out her feelings, she describes her work: "I'd painted nearly every surface in the main room. And not with just broad swaths of color, but with decorations—little images. […] But in between the intricate decorations, I'd painted them. Bits and pieces of Mor, and Cassian, and Azriel, and Amren…and Rhys" (Maas, *Mist and Fury* 508). Her emotional rebirth is solidified after having relations with Rhysand atop her work table, the act of procreation mixed with the tools of artistic creation. After rediscovering her identity as an artist, Feyre is able to defend the people of the Rainbow from attack, saying: "This was my home. These were my people. If I died defending them, defending that small place in the world where art thrived… Then so be it" (Maas, *Mist and Fury* 565). Whereas Joseph Campbell would identify this fight as one step on Feyre's road of trials, Murdock offers a more nuanced reading of this fight. After emerging from her descent, a female hero experiences the urgent yearning to reconnect with the feminine. She explains, "There is a desire to develop those parts of herself that have gone underground while on the heroic quest: her body, her emotions, her spirit, her creative wisdom" (Murdock 111). By identifying herself with these artists and using her abilities

to defend them, Feyre embraces the parts of herself that died in her transformation from human to fae.

Literacy

Another aspect of Feyre's agency and coming of age as a girl hero is her access to literacy; unlike the rest of her family, she is illiterate, a major impediment to her identity as a female hero who labors to defeat Amarantha and save Tamlin and the Spring Court. Female literacy has always been an important goal within the feminist movement. Germinal first-wave feminist writings frequently focused on educating women.[15] Still today, literacy remains an issue for global feminisms, so it is important to consider representations of female literacy when analyzing YA fiction with a feminist framework.[16] Because her illiteracy is symbolic of her lack of knowledge about the world of Prythian, her acquisition of literacy represents the initiation stages of the hero's journey. As a human in a world of faeries, Fayre is barred from essential knowledge to navigate in Prythian. Her ability to gain knowledge about the world thus depends on the people surrounding her; however, once she gains literacy, she is able to learn about the world for herself. Maas's trilogy thus reinforces an insight from first-wave feminism: a girl's acquisition of literacy is a primary tool of agency and female emancipation.

Feyre's ability to become an agent in her own life through literacy is affected by the various male characters in her life. Tamlin again restricts Feyre's agency by subconsciously

---

[15] Some examples include Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and Hannah Mather Crocker's *Observations of the Real Rights of Women* (1818).

[16] Consider, for example, Malala Yousafzai's fight for girls' education in Pakistan and her memoir about her personal struggle against the government to get educated: *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* (2013). While Yousafzai's book is a personal account of one country's struggle for educational equality, Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn's *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* (2009) explores the issue of female education on a global scale.

keeping her from knowledge and experience in the faerie world through controlling her ability to learn and practice reading and writing. When Feyre tries to teach herself both activities in order to write a letter home to her family, Tamlin offers to write the letter for her: “Why should I mock you for a shortcoming that isn't your fault? Let me help you” (Maas, *Thorns and Roses* 117). Although Tamlin is not yet aware that reading will be a part of Feyre’s heroic journey, Tamlin symbolically removes the opportunity for heroism from Feyre by offering to complete the task for her. Instead of giving her the tools she needs to act as her own agent, he maintains and even encourages her dependence on him by attempting to complete the task himself. Rhysand, on the other hand, gives Feyre the tools to act for herself and be an agent of change in her own life through literacy. When Rhysand first takes Feyre to the Night Court, the first thing he does is insist she learn to read. By encouraging her knowledge and giving her the tools and challenges she needs for success, Rhysand is positioning Feyre to have agency in her own life.

Conclusion

As a girl hero coming of age in a world she does not fully understand, Feyre negotiates multiple heroic roles while finding agency in her sexuality, art, and literacy despite the trauma and threat of sexual violence she faces throughout the narrative. Maas demonstrates a complex form of female hero through Feyre, a hero who must operate within different heroic frameworks, such as the huntress, the romantic hero, and the witch as hero, often at the same time. In this, Maas comments on the sexual double standard that women and girls face. Girls and women cannot be defined by one aspect in order to be considered successful. In order to be perceived as equal to men, women and girls must do everything and be everything. In order to develop Feyre as a female hero, Maas engages with many different issues that have had been the focus of feminist inquiry, such as literacy, art, sexual desire, and sexual violence. Through the many

various facets of Feyre's identity and her struggle to achieve agency and power, Maas presents a vision of a feminist female hero in a high fantasy.

A girls' studies framework helps establish the significance of this reading of Feyre. The series not only depicts a teenage female hero overcoming class and gender barriers, but one whose coming of age is challenged by the experience of domestic abuse, graphic violence, sexual trauma, and mental illness. Feyre demonstrates that these experiences do not exclude one from being a hero. Additionally, the series offers clear distinctions for heterosexual and heteroromantic girls in how to identify and select a male romantic partner that will embrace, rather than suppress, female power. An intersectional girls' studies reading notes, however, that this series offers little in terms of a heroism specific to queer girls or girls of color. Thus, while Feyre may be an empowering, subversive female hero to some girls, she reinforces the norms for other groups of girls

I will continue to examine how representation of girls and the female experience in fantasy has the potential to affect girls' development and perceptions in the next chapter, which focuses on role-playing video games by analyzing BioWare's *Dragon Age*. The examination of role-playing games in the next chapter extends issues of sexuality, violence, and intersectionality raised in this chapter. Both *A Court of Thorns and Roses* and *Dragon Age* complicate notions about what is appropriate for teens and young adults to experience; while *A Court of Thorns and Roses* is aimed at ages fourteen and up, the violence and sexual content is just as explicit as it is in the *Dragon Age* series, which is rated M and yet still has a massive fan following among adolescents. Though different forms of media, both fantasy series complicate issues of agency, identity, and power as related to the female heroes.

HERO, CHAMPION, AND INQUISITOR: NAVIGATING GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN THE UNSTABLE NARRATIVES OF *DRAGON AGE*

As explored in the first chapter video games complicate fantasy's emphasis on identity, agency, and power, even as these questions are at the heart of fantasy role-playing games. Viewing video games from a literary lens allows scholars to focus on the narrative and mechanistic characteristics of the games to create meaning without having to rely on the experiences of the games' players. Although some video game scholars think that the player's identity affects the experience of the game, the player is little different from a reader in terms of character identification. Both player and reader bring their own intersectional identities and experiences to a narrative, allowing each to create meaning from that narrative. Some scholars claim that games with avatars as the playable character are somehow more accurate to the player's identity than games with pre-determined playable characters (Shaw 136). This view overemphasizes the role of the player. Additionally, some believe that it is in the player's ability to play the game that determines the agency or power for the playable character. However, like any narrative, the story, setting, and other characters also determine whether or not a character has agency. My reading of video games deemphasizes the role of the player in making meaning from a video game narrative. Rather than relying on the player to navigate questions of identity, agency, and power, I consider how the narrative of the game is doing that work itself.

Male heroes are still very much the norm in video games, especially in fantasy RPGs, although recently there has been an uptick in female heroes. Even when there are strong female characters in fantasy games, they usually occupy a supportive role to the primary male hero, which is similar to my assessment of the fantasy genre, discussed in the Introduction. Female characters in fantasy video games typically function as either damsels in distress or as objects for the assumed straight male player to enjoy. The trope of the damsel in distress can most easily be

seen through Nintendo's *Super Mario Bros*. (1985). In this series of games, the iconic plumber must rescue his beloved Princess Peach, who has been kidnapped by Bowser. Princess Peach, for the most part, serves no purpose in the game other than as a goal for the player to achieve.[17] Although there are many examples of women being objectified in video games, Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* franchise out of Eidos Interactive and later Square Enix is perhaps the best example of a female character who exists solely for the viewing pleasure of the presumed straight male player.[18] *Tomb Raider* (1996) is one of the first games to feature a woman as the main playable character. While an outlier to the norm of the male main character, Lara is hardly a symbol of female empowerment due to the sexualization of her character through her extremely short shorts, implausibly slim waist, and ample conical bosom.[19]

If, as demonstrated in the Introduction and Chapter One, the marginalization of women and girls is an endemic problem in the fantasy genre, then it is perhaps even more overt in fantasy video games than in fantasy literature because of the visuality of the medium. In fact, this may be true of most video games and not just those within the fantasy genre. While fantasy literature and video games both rely on tropes stemming from fairy tales, medieval romance, and the conventions of the fantasy genre, fantasy video games have the additional visual elements that overtly confront players with sexualized images of girls and women. Through these visual

---

[17] It is interesting to note that Princess Peach has been the hero in her own game, *Super Princess Peach* (2006). In this game, Mario and Luigi are kidnapped, and it is Peach who must save them from Bowser. However, despite this role-reversal, Peach's attacks are completely based on emotion. Activating one of four emotions, joy, gloom, rage, and calm, will unleash a different ability or attack, playing on the stereotype that women are more emotional than men.

[18] It is difficult to classify *Tomb Raider* within one genre. While it is considered an adventure game in the video game world, it has elements of both science fiction and fantasy that might make a science fantasy classification more appropriate.

[19] However, Lara in the reboot of the franchise (2013) is much more of a symbol of female empowerment than previous iterations of the character, in my opinion. While still conventionally attractive, her proportions are much more normal, and she wears pants rather than booty shorts.

elements, it is perhaps more clear when a woman or girl is being marginalized or sexualized. For example, one of the most prevalent tropes in fantasy video games in the metal bikini, which is essentially lingerie that serves as combat armor. The only purpose such armor serves is to sexualize and objectify the female characters for the straight male players. In this way, the visual elements of the game more overtly sexualize and objectify the female characters when compared to the methods literature has available to sexualize and objectify female characters.

Although some scholars believe that representation in video games is a tired, overdone topic, there are very few large-scale studies of representation in video games (Malkowski and Russworm 2). Representation of gender is perhaps the most common topic related to representation in video games and video game scholarship, though it is not prevalent overall. Girls' studies is vital to understanding the importance that representation plays in the analysis of video games. Feminist studies of video games and the representation of female characters in them have shown that many young girls are turned off of programming and computer science because of the negative portrayals of women in games (Kafai et al. xiii).

In this chapter, I argue that the *Dragon Age* series, albeit catering to the male gaze, has the potential to educate players with positive messages about gender and sexuality through the reward mechanisms under certain narrative circumstances, cultivating heroism through violence, action via quests, and a sisterhood of powerful female side characters. This argument is supported by my analysis of the gendered narratives present within the series, the sexualization and objectification of the female body throughout the games, and the potentialities for romance and sex for the female hero. This chapter draws on the video game scholarship of Ian Bogost, Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum, Adrienne Shaw, Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm, Shira Chess, and Anita Sarkeesian in addition to the scholarship surrounding heroism

and the female hero mentioned in the Introduction. First, I discuss the gendered narratives of the game by focusing on the origin stories in *Dragon Age: Origins,* the microaggressions female player characters experience, and the role of the woman in the world-building. Next, I analyze the visual depictions of the female body by focusing on the sexualization of the female side characters and the development of armor throughout the series. Finally, I discuss representations of queer genders and sexualities through the romance narratives and approval mechanics, focusing especially on Alistair, Zevran, Anders, Isabela, Dorian, and Krem. I conclude with the idea that these games not only have the potential to empower girls by seeing themselves in the hero but may enlighten a hostile audience of male gamers on feminist issues by placing them within the narrative.

Because of the narrative instability of the series, many scenarios discussed in this chapter are only possible within specific situational contexts. Additionally, playing through each possible outcome in each game would require an immense investment of time, as, in my experience, playing one of the *Dragon Age* games can take upwards of one hundred hours. Because of the complexity and variability of the narratives, my thesis focuses on a narrow scope of scenarios. That being said, I readily acknowledge that this project in no way encompasses all of the possible outcomes in the series and that many of the moments from the game I discuss may not appear in other gamers' playthroughs. For example, when my partner and I were discussing my ideas for this chapter, I mentioned that a certain character was an ex-slave and had been married before the events of the game, which shocked him because the character never revealed this information when he played the game. Additionally, performing a close reading of a video game is much more difficult than performing a close reading of a novel in terms of citation because it is much easier to flip to a specific highlighted or underlined passage in a book compared to

locating a snippet of dialogue from an NPC that occurred in the sixtieth hour of gameplay. The narrative instability and variability, while frustrating for scholars like myself, is one of the beautiful aspects of the game for players. The complex storytelling method also allows for many avenues of future research.

For my analysis, I will be focusing on the three main *Dragon Age* role-playing games produced by BioWare. The series includes *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009), *Dragon Age II* (2011), and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014).[20] The games each have four different levels of difficulty to accommodate different play styles, ranging from those who just want to experience the story to those who want the reward of overcoming a serious challenge. The games closely mirror the narrative structure of high fantasy through the hero's journey, as each game features a main quest with many side quests and collections set in a semi-open world environment. Each game also contains a team of companions that bring other skills, quests, and dialogue opportunities to the story.

Dragon Age: Origins focuses on the Grey Wardens, a secretive order tasked with defeating Blights. A Blight occurs when an Archdemon in the form of a dragon arises, commanding an army of mindless, goblin-like creatures called darkspawn. The player can choose whether to play as a man or a woman and then can choose between playing as a warrior, a rogue, or a mage. Depending on what class the player chooses, the player can then pick a race: human noble, Dalish elf, city elf, noble dwarf or casteless dwarf. Using race in this context does not refer to skin tone or physical traits but rather refers to different genetic, ancestral, and

[20] There is an expansion for *Dragon Age: Origins* called *Dragon Age: Awakening* that I will not be referencing, and I will not be referencing any of the spinoff novels, comics, tabletop games, or apps that are also a part of the franchise. I will also not be referring to any of the downloadable content (DLC) quests or DLC characters. An analysis of the franchise of that caliber would require more space than I am able to provide in this chapter.

cultural types of imaginary people groups. Some races are unavailable depending on what class the player chooses, based on the lore of the game's world. For example, a player cannot play as a mage and then pick a casteless dwarf character because dwarves are incapable of performing magic according to the game's canon. Any origin story the player picks leads the character to join the Grey Wardens as the Blight is beginning, though the initial plan to slay the Archdemon before the Blight becomes a real threat is thwarted when Loghain, commander of the king's forces, abandons the field, leading to the king's death and the eradication of all the Grey Wardens except for the player character and one other party member, Alistair. The player character, known later in the game's series as the Hero of Ferelden, must then stop a civil war from tearing apart Ferelden in addition to stopping the Blight.

The second game, *Dragon Age II*, takes place over a ten-year period of time, beginning in the middle of the Fifth Blight and following the Hawke family as they flee Ferelden for the supposed safety of the city-state of Kirkwall in the Free Marches. The player can play as either Garrett or Marian Hawke and pick their own class; the option of choosing a race from *Dragon Age: Origins* is gone. The game begins with Cassandra, an elite member of the church known as a Seeker, interrogating Varric, a dwarf who was supposedly friends with Hawke as they rose from obscurity to become the Champion of Kirkwall. The actual game played is what Varric is narrating to Cassandra as he tells of Hawke's journey to the Deep Roads, the discovery of Red Lyrium, defeat of invading qunari forces, and whether Hawke sided with the mages or templars in the Chantry explosion. The choices made in the first game affect this game in the form of available quests, characters, and dialogue options.

Dragon Age: Inquisition brings back the ability to choose a character's race, adding a new race, qunari, as an option. As war rages across Thedas between the mages and the templars,

the leader of the church gathers representatives from both sides to broker peace. However, there is an explosion and the leader of the church is murdered. The only survivor is the player character, later named the Inquisitor, who comes out of the explosion with no memories and a mysterious mark on their hand. The explosion also tears a giant rip, known as the Breach, in the Veil between the Fade, the realm of spirits and demons, and the real world. There are other, smaller rifts in the Veil throughout Thedas, and the mark on the player character's hand is the only thing that can close the tears between the worlds. The game follows the Inquisitor's quest to repair the Breach, stop Corypheus, the being who opened the Breach, from completely destroying the Veil, and choose a leader of the church before all order in Thedas is destroyed.

No Girls Allowed: Age and Gender in Hardcore Gaming

Fantasy role-playing games have been around since before the existence of video games themselves. In fact, the vast majority of fantasy role-playing video games still draw upon structures popularized by the tabletop game *Dungeons and Dragons*, as Anastasia Salter notes in her monograph *What Is Your Quest?: From Adventure Games to Interactive Books* (19). The first fantasy role-playing video games were text-based games, like *Dungeon* (1975).[21] As technologies developed, so did the fantasy role-playing game. Arguably one of the most popular and well-known fantasy role-playing games is Blizzard Entertainment's *World of Warcraft* (2004), an MMORPG. Other popular games that have influenced the genre include Nintendo's *Final Fantasy* series (1987), Bethseda's *The Elder Scrolls* series (1994), and FromSoftware's *Dark Souls* series (2011).These series of games all began on these dates but have continued to the present day.

[21] This game was actually based on *Dungeons and Dragons*.

A fantasy role-playing game involves the player embodying a character in the game, either through a customizable avatar or a pre-designed character, and completing a series of quests while following a main storyline. MMORPGs are unique among video games in that there is interaction between players of the game in the online setting, the quests often requiring cooperation between online players. Because of the added complications of interactions between players in MMORPGs, this chapter will be focusing solely on single-player RPGs.

The relationship between children and video games has always been fraught because of parental anxieties surrounding game content and the marketing shift that effectively excluded girls. Video games did not have ratings until 1994, when the Entertainment Software Review Board (ESRB) formed to assign ratings for games to help parents make informed choices about the types of games their children play. The big issue at stake that partially prompted the creation of the ESRB was that of violence in video games. However, as I mentioned in the Introduction, approximately half of all early adolescents play rated-M games despite the rating. Even as debates about whether playing violent video games causes children to behave more violently is a tired one, a scholar of games cannot write about children and video games without acknowledging this sensationalized public issue. The question of video games causing violent behavior in children has been around since the early 1980s, reaching a peak in the 90s and early 2000s.

The height of parental anxieties around game content and the creation of the ESRB roughly coincide with the marketing shift. After the video game crash of 1983, companies, starting with Nintendo, began to market video games as a toy rather than as a family activity. At this point, marketers focused their attention on boys, mostly leaving girls behind in the new era of video games. By leaving out girls from video games at large, relegating them to a few pink-

packaged options, these companies have, to some extent, contributed to the lack of female programmers, as many male programmers cite video games as their first source of inspiration to pursue the field (Kafai et al. xii).

Now, the split between casual and hardcore gaming has redefined what games are supposedly for girls and women and what games are for boys and men. There is a perception that girls and women play casual games, while boys and men play hardcore games, though of course this is not universal or even entirely accurate. Hardcore games are typically the ones designed by large studios for consoles like Xbox or PlayStation that have large production budgets, also known as AAA games. These games usually require a large investment of time and skill in order to complete. Many fantasy RPGs are prime examples of hardcore games, and the *Dragon Age* series is no exception. Other so-called hardcore games include *Dark Souls, World of Warcraft,* and *The Elder Scrolls* series. Casual games, on the other hand, are usually, but not always, apps that are designed to be played in small slivers of time and that supposedly take little skill to complete. Examples of casual games include *Candy Crush Saga, Diner Dash,* and *Temple Run*. Because of their supposed easiness, casual games are often denigrated by the very industry that creates them. According to Chess, " 'Casual,' the terminology as well as the technology, has politics. The term itself implies a group of dilettantes who do not require the dedication or the skills necessary to be *real* gamers. […] In these ways, the space of 'women's games' remains both stereotypes and marginalized" (15-16). However, this distinction is largely arbitrary, as many girls and women also play hardcore games, which is one of the many reasons why it is important to do feminist analyses of hardcore games under a girls' studies framework.

Other Scholarship on *Dragon Age*

BioWare is a Canadian game developer that has been around since 1995. They have created some of the most popular and critically-acclaimed role-playing games in the world. The company prides itself on creating games that have "rich stories, unforgettable characters, and vast worlds to discover" (About"). In addition to *Dragon Age*, BioWare is probably best known for the series *Knights of the Old Republic* (2003), a role-playing game set in the *Star Wars* universe before the events of the films, and *Mass Effect* (2007), a role-playing game set in space. Most of the scholarship focusing on BioWare's games focus on *Mass Effect*, though the reason for this is unclear to me, as many of the notable features in *Mass Effect* also appear in *Dragon Age*, which has received considerably less scholarly attention. Though relatively ignored by scholars, *Dragon Age* has received numerous awards as a franchise from various video game publications, including multiple Game of the Year awards.

Currently, there are very few works of scholarship that focus exclusively on the *Dragon Age* franchise, and only a fraction of those works center their analysis on representation. Many articles and book chapters that mention the series only mention it in passing during larger discussions of BioWare's other popular RPG franchise, *Mass Effect*. There are only four articles and book chapters that analyze *Dragon Age* at the time of this project. Thus, there is plenty of work to be done in analyzing the *Dragon Age* series on a large scale, especially in terms of the games' representations of gender and sexuality.

One of the first articles written about the *Dragon Age* series focuses on the narrative structure of the first game in the series and how that structure can help teach new kinds of literacy. The article, "Digital Competence and Literacy: Developing New Narrative Formats in the Dragon Age: Origins Videogame" (2011) by Amando Lopez Valero, Eduardo Encabo

Fernandez, and Isabel Jerez Martinez, analyzes the complex narrative structure of the game and argues that it should be used in teaching digital literacies. They establish that digital competence and digital literacy are necessary in the increasingly technology-based society in which we live. The authors reflect on the complexity of the game and claim that it is more intensive than the average fantasy novel and thus offers a new avenue for narratives. Discussing the instability of the narrative, they write: "In the case of *Dragon Age Origins*, the story will vary depending on the instructions given by the user, as will the number of characters involved and even the plot itself. Interactive fiction requires the text-analysis skills of a literary scholar, so the skills are developed by means of a different format" (Valero et al. 167). In this way, they compare the skills developed by playing a narratively complex video game to the skills of a literary scholar. They also argue for the game text's importance in its intertextuality with other fantasy texts, not from concrete references but from the inspiration it draws from classic high fantasy series such as *Lord of the Rings*.

The next article deals with issues of representation, though it is different from my project in that it is from the perspective of race and contextualized within fan culture. Helen Young's article " 'It's the Middle Ages, Yo!': Race, Neo/Medievalisms, and the World of Dragon Age" (2013) analyzes the fan community's perceptions of race and racism in the *Dragon Age* universe and how much of the discussion relies upon invented notions of a pre-race medieval period. She addresses fans' concerns about or dismissals of racism or lack of representation in the game series and their requests for or dismissals of including more racially diverse characters in future games. She states that much of this debate is centered around historical accuracy to a supposed medieval period. However, based on the game world, she claims that the *Dragon Age* world is not historically medieval but rather neomedieval, containing both elements and inspirations from

medieval Europe and fantasy. Regarding those who claim that racially diverse characters are historically inaccurate, the author writes: “their imagined constructions of medieval England are both mutually exclusive and united by nostalgic desire for a never-extant pre-race era which more closely resembles romantic medievalism than the neomedievalisms of the games themselves” (Young 3). The author argues that this debate is grounded in an inaccurate view of the medieval period, a setting with which the games do not necessarily align anyway.

Another scholarly work on representation in *Dragon Age* focuses on the mechanistic aspects of representations of religion and faith. Editors Heidi A. Campbell and Gregory Price Grieve included Kevin Schut’s essay “They Kill Mystery: The Mechanistic Bias of Video Game Representations of Religion and Spirituality” in their book *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* (2014). This chapter examines how religion is represented in two games, the *Civilization* series and the *Dragon Age* series, arguing that video games tend to represent religion in a mechanistic way. However, the author notes that the *Dragon Age* series presents faith in a more organic way, as he shows different characters interacting with the world’s various religious systems and exercising varying levels of belief or piety. Schut says:

> *Dragon Age* does not assert which religion in its world is correct, so it is up to players (if they care) to figure out how that all works. This means that the religious elements of a game may become organic and non-mechanistic in terms of the player’s actual understanding; the fictional world is, in a sense, only limited by the player’s imagination. (271)

The religious aspects of *Dragon Age* and the players’ level of involvement with the religion in the game world thus contribute to the games’ narrative instabilities.

The article that comes closest to my project is "Powerful Elderly Characters in Video Games: Flemeth of Dragon Age" (2015) by Elisabeta Toma, which also analyzes representations of gender and age in *Dragon Age*. Toma does this by focusing on an elderly female mage that appears in all three games, arguing that the character defies many common tropes of both women and the elderly in video games. The author analyzes all of the individual cut scenes that Flemeth appears in to determine how the character constructs gender and age. She compares Flemeth's representation to several well-known tropes of elderly women and magic users, finding that, overall, Flemeth subverts many of these gender and age stereotypes or uses them to serve her own purposes. The author concludes that Flemeth is a strong character, possessing agency not typically seen in elderly characters in video games:

> Flemeth disrupts stereotypical portrayals of old women and mothers in video games, as the funny grandma or the old woman concerned with her or others' death. Due to the ideological potential of texts and video games, subversive stories like Flemeth's are important, as they can challenge dominant ideologies and contribute to a more inclusive society. (63)

Toma's work is the closest to the work done in this thesis, as she analyzes the intersections of gender and age in *Dragon Age*. However, rather than focusing on girlhood, she focuses on the elderly, another infrequently studied age group within feminist discourse. She also restricts her analysis to one single character, while I extend the analysis to the games more broadly.

(En)coding Representation: Analyzing Gender and Sexuality in Video Games

Unsurprisingly, game studies is fairly new, even newer than investigations into fantasy or children's and young adult literature. Feminist interventions into the field are even more recent, the first feminist studies of video games and gamer culture occurring in the late 1990s.

Intersectional feminist work concerning video games is more recent still, with that work taking place only in the last several years, though this area of inquiry is quickly proliferating. Feminist interventions into game studies as a field have mainly been concerned with questions regarding female players rather than representation. One of the aspects previous scholarship has addressed is how to get more girls to play video games and become interested in computer programming. Next, scholars have engaged with the ways that female players and creators are treated by male gamers, both in play and in the industry as colleagues. Finally, scholars have investigated the idea that male and female players play video games differently or are drawn to different types of games.[22] Very little scholarship has focused exclusively on representations of women and girl characters in the games themselves other than the ways in which those characters are presented visually. There are two main exceptions that encompass large-scale studies of representation in games, which I will discuss more specifically later on in this chapter.

As with the previous chapter, scholarship about heroism and the female hero is relevant to my analysis. Because of this, I will continue to draw on the ideas of Joseph Campbell, Robert Segal, Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope, Maureen Murdock, and Lori M. Campbell in this chapter in order to analyze the *Dragon Age* series. There is a lot of crossover between the history of fantasy and the history of video games in the general focus on male characters and male heroism. However, because of the nature of video games themselves, the hero in games is not as broadly envisioned as in heroism at large and is not as stable, given the many different

[22] Some of the works that engage with these questions are the essay collection *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (2000) edited by Justine Cassel and Henry Jenkins, its pseudo-sequel *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming* (2008) edited by Yasmin B. Kafai, Carrie Heeter, Jill Denner, and Jennifer Y. Sun, Adrienne Shaw's monograph *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (2015), and Shira Chess's *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity* (2017).

potentialities and choices the player has at their disposal. The hero in video games is still very much defined through rank, achievement, and violent conquest, especially in fantasy role-playing games.

Video games have the power to educate or influence players' opinions on certain issues by their very nature. In his groundbreaking book on the rhetoric of video games, Ian Bogost argues that video games possess what he calls "procedural rhetoric," which he defines as the act of persuasion based on the medium's procedurality:

> procedural rhetoric, then, is a practice of using processes persuasively. More specifically, procedural rhetoric is the practice of persuading through processes in general and computational processes in particular. […] Procedural rhetoric is a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created. (Bogost 3)

In other words, both the act of inputting commands into a video game as well as the results of these commands have persuasive power. He focuses his application of procedural rhetoric in video games on three fields: politics, advertisement, and education. Essentially, he argues that the representative video games he talks about have the power to persuade someone to make political choices, buy certain products, or teach someone a skill. I extend Bogost's idea of procedural rhetoric to consider how video games influence players' views on social justice issues such as gender equality based on the way the player must progress through the story and interact with other characters, which I will discuss later on in this chapter.

Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum extend Bogost's idea that games can make arguments in their book *Values at Play in Digital Games* (2014). In this book, Flanagan and Nissenbaum outline their heuristic for Values at Play, a method of game design that is conscious

about how games articulate values to society. They claim that, whether designers or players like it or not, video games impart values just like every other form of media. Because of this ability to impart values, the authors argue that considering the impartation of values should be of high importance when making a video game. Flanagan and Nissenbaum outline fifteen different aspects of video games that are capable of imparting values, including:

> Narrative premise and goals, characters, actions in game, player choice, rules for interaction with other players and nonplayable characters, rules for interaction with the environment, point of view, hardware, interface, game engine and software, context of play, rewards, strategies, game maps, and aesthetics. (33-34)

The heuristic itself involves three steps: discovery, implementation, and verification. Essentially, this system asks game designers to discover values that are important to them or to the game, implement those values using as many of the methods of game-making as possible, and verify that the impartation of values was successful. My thesis analyzes characters, actions in game, player choice, and rewards specifically.

Adrienne Shaw's book *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (2014) is one of the few studies of representation in video games. In this book, Shaw examines the importance of representations of gender, sexuality, and, to a lesser extent, race in video games by using interviews as a research methodology. She interviews thirty people, all but two occupying identities other than that of straight, white males. Although she posits going into this study that representation of marginalized perspectives will be important to her interview subjects, she finds that most of her interviewees do not profess to care about representation in video games. She finds that, while her interview subjects appreciate when representation of diverse identities is included in a game, diverse representation is not something

that proves especially important to them. The conclusion drawn by the interviews contradicts the idea that "media texts provide us with source material for what might be possible, how identities might be constructed, and what worlds we might live in. […] Representation provides evidence for what forms of existence are possible," though this premise may still be true (Shaw 4). Although the title suggests the book focuses only on gender and sexuality, it deals a lot with race as well. Shaw begins by examining race, gender, and sexuality through the history of video games before questioning the way players are supposed to identify with the playable character. She moves on to a discussion of playable characters versus avatars and how the difference affects identification. Finally, she closes with a chapter on whether games function as realism or escapism and how the game's function affects identification with the characters.

The other major work regarding representation in video games has been collected in Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm's anthology of essays *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games* (2017). This edited collection focuses on intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in video games, specifically dealing with issues of representation. The collection is divided into three sections: gender, race, and sexuality. The book is heavily slanted towards gender and race, with only three essays about sexuality present in the book. The editors begin the book by examining the history of the study of video games, noting that very little work has been done on representation because most scholarship is more concerned with the technology and procedural rhetoric of games. Arguing that representation is quite literally coded into video games, they maintain, "representation is not fully separate from the implicitly hard-core elements of games: it is achieved through and dependent upon player and machine actions, on code, and on hardware, not just on surface-level images and sounds" (Malkowski and Russworm 3). They also argue that games studies should be

inclusive of the narrative and visual elements of games and that games studies would be dangerously out-of-touch if it does not address issues of representation.

One book that studies how games marketed expressly towards female players differ from mainstream games intended for male players is Shira Chess's *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity* (2017). In this book, she argues that game designers are not making games for actual female players but are rather making games for a stereotypical vision of female gamers, which she calls a "designed identity." This hypothetical version of the ideal female player is what Chess calls "player two." She stresses that any group could have a designed identity, but that she is focusing on the designed identity of female players in this project. She begins by interviewing actual game designers who either work for firms that make games especially for female players or who have worked on games marketed towards female players, asking them what features they put into these games. From these interviews, she identifies a multitude of features commonly associated with so-called female games: "Thematic congruence, collaborative/social, time positive, low risk, creative expression, lush aesthetic, non-sexualized characters, avatar choice, low violence, [and] low harassment potential" (Chess 51-2). The most important of these features, according to Chess, is thematic congruence, meaning that the games include the themes designers identified as being distinctly female. Chess says that "among game designers, the most commonly discussed themes included fairy tales, supernatural, mystery, bucolic, animals, cooking, and fashion" (43). Setting aside for the moment the biological determinism inherent in some of these categories, it is interesting that fairy tale and supernatural games are among the most popular for female players when, as discussed later in the chapter, women are supposedly "turned off" by games featuring war or dragons, common elements in many fantasy games. As I have demonstrated in the Introduction, fantasy is

inexorably tied to earlier fairy tales and supernatural stories. How is it that these two categories, fairy tales and fantasy, are so similar, and yet one is for women and one is for men? Perhaps this imaginary differentiation between the two genres is yet another way for marketers to unnecessarily gender products in order to make sales in a patriarchal, capitalistic society.

Anita Sarkeesian brought the problematic representation of women and girls in video games to the forefront with her video series on *Feminist Frequency, Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*.[23] Many of the tropes that she examines in her series will also be a part of my analysis of *Dragon Age*. Some of the tropes I will tracking in my own analysis include the damsel in distress and the sinister seductress. There are eighteen videos in total, and they focus on a wide variety of tropes.[24] Based on these videos, it is clear that there are many sexist tropes that video games often draw upon in crafting video game narratives and characters. A few of the videos in this series also focus on sexually promiscuous outfits, sexualized animations, body diversity, exoticization of female characters of color, and objectifying camera angles. Finally, there are two videos in the series which focus on positive representations of women in video games. She discusses *Dragon Age* in her two-part episode on women as background decoration. In the first episode, she cites the moment in *Dragon Age: Origins* when the player can purchase time with a prostitute in the capital city's brothel.[25] In the second episode, while discussing the violence of the city elf origin narrative that I discuss later on in this chapter, she says, "Developers regularly utilize the brutalization of women's bodies, and especially the bodies of female prostitutes, as an indicator of just how harsh, cruel and unforgiving their game worlds are" (Sarkeesian). This

[23] The video series can be found on *Feminist Frequency*: https://feministfrequency.com/tag/tropes-vs-women-in-video-games/.
[24] The tropes she discusses are the damsel in distress, the disposable woman, the woman in the refrigerator, the Ms. Male Character, women as background decoration, women as reward, grotesquely female characters, the sinister seductress, and the lady sidekick.
[25] This mechanic also occurs in the second game, though she does not mention it.

narrative tool is similar to the widespread use of sexual violence in fantasy fiction that I analyzed in Chapter One, though the representation of sexual violence in *Dragon Age* and other games is perhaps more immediate given the visual nature of the medium.

"How about you stop thinking of me as a woman?": Gendered Narratives in *Dragon Age*

Sexism is encoded into the origin narratives of the playable character in *Dragon Age: Origins*, who is known as the Warden or, by the end of the game, as the Hero of Ferelden. In this game, the player can choose one of six different origin narratives for the playable character, each of which are dependent upon the race and class the player also chooses. These origin narratives consist of human noble, Dalish elf, city elf, dwarf noble, dwarf commoner, and circle mage. The mage storyline is the same regardless of whether the player chooses a human or elf character. These six origin narratives all have different implications surrounding race and class within the fantasy world. However, the individual narratives also change subtly depending on whether the player chooses a male or female playable character. In the city elf storyline, for example, a female playable character is in the middle of her wedding when the arl's son interrupts and kidnaps the playable character and her female cousin to be used as sexual entertainment for a party. The playable character breaks free, fighting off her attempted rapists, and then frees her cousin, who has been raped by the arl's son. The playable character then kills him and is recruited by the Grey Wardens to escape punishment for killing a noble. A male playable character, however, must rescue his stolen bride and cousin. His betrothed is killed, and he kills the arl's son in revenge (*DA:O*). Both of these narratives rely on sexist tropes and use sexual violence as an impetus for heroism. For the female playable character, the threat of sexual violence is used to motivate her to heroism, implying that she could not have been a hero without it. The male playable character traffics in the damsel in distress trope and the woman in the

refrigerator trope.[26] He must rescue his bride and cousin, two underdeveloped female characters, and then his bride's murder provides his motivation for killing the arl's son and ultimately joining the Grey Wardens. The city elf narrative contains the most drastic gendered differences, but the other origin narratives contain heteronormative dialogue options that allow a female character to imply sexual relationships or flirt with NPCs, while the male playable character does not have these possibilities.

In addition to the larger story imposing sexism onto the individual narratives, NPCs and party members enact microaggressions against the playable character depending on the character's gender and race. The game takes an essentialist view of race, in that people are not discriminated against based on skin color but on the type of person they are; for example, elves are considered second-class citizens in human-dominated societies in *Dragon Age*. Many of these casual sexist or racist remarks establish the fantasy setting as abiding by the same prejudices and norms of the real world. Towards the beginning of the first game, when the Warden is introducing herself to the other recruits, one of the recruits remarks, "I was not aware they permitted women to join the Grey Wardens" (*DA:O*). Additionally, throughout all three games, adversaries will call the female Warden a bitch during fights, which is not the case with a male Warden. In addition to the casual instances of sexism, the threat of sexual harassment is very real, as Isabela reminds a female Hawke in *Dragon Age II*: "Keep your wits about you. You're nothing but tits and ass to the men in this place and they won't hesitate to grab at both" (*DA:2*). The games establish Thedas as a world that is unsafe for women, in which they must

[26] The name of this trope comes from the *Green Lantern c*omics, but it has been around long before then. This trope occurs when a female character is killed in order to move the male character's story forward, using her as a plot device rather than a developed character.

work harder to prove themselves in male-dominated professions and where they are at constant risk for sexual violence.

The game world privileges human characters and discriminates against elves, dwarves, and qunari. Characters will sometimes call the playable character by racial epithets like "knife-ear" or "oxman" (*DA:I*). The use of racial epithets tends to act as an easy way for the game designers to establish the character who uses the slurs as difficult to work with or adversarial. Occasionally, the characters will also make racialized assumptions about the playable character. For example, when meeting the quartermaster as an elf, she says, "If you're here to clean, Hess can get you a bucket and a broom" (*DA:I*). The playable character is likewise aware of how others perceive them based on their race. When chosen as the Inquisitor, a non-human playable character can question this decision by saying, "But I'm not even human!" and then after the Inquisition members express their approval, the playable character can say, "An elf/dwarf/qunari will stand for us all" (*DA:I*). Rather than using the same story for all characters, the game designers modify the narrative in order to allow the playable character to experience sexism or racism during their heroic journey.

Despite the sexism inherent in certain aspects of the narrative, figures in both the human and elven religions exhibit feminine power. The human religion of Thedas, Andrastianism, is an overt analog to Christianity in its monotheistic view of a distant but omnipotent Maker and its views on the creation of the world and the sin of mankind. Yet the Christ-figure for whom the religion is named, Andraste, is a woman who was supposedly the bride of the Maker. Andraste becomes an influential prophet before being betrayed and killed by her earthly husband. The humans of Thedas worship and deify her, structuring the organized religion of the Chantry to center around women. Within the organized church, women are the only ones allowed to preach

and lead congregations, and the religion even has a female version of the pope known as the Divine. Likewise, within the pantheistic elven religion, there are many gods and goddesses representing different aspects of life, modelled loosely on the Greek pantheon. In the elven religion, the pantheon is headed by a male and female couple, Elgar'nan and Mythal. Yet within the context of this religion, Mythal is the more respected, as she is goddess of justice, and the elves view her as their protector, invoking her in times of danger. Despite the immense spiritual power that women hold within this fantasy world, parts of the narrative still subjugate the female hero or show how women are still oppressed or viewed as lesser by companions, NPCs, side quests, and flavor text. Thus, while women possess immense religious and spiritual power, they lack social power in this created world.

Dragon Age: Origins: The Warden, the Hero of Ferelden

Within the context of the hero's journey as discussed in the Introduction, the female hero in *Dragon Age: Origins* tends to occupy a more traditional and goal-oriented type of heroism. As demonstrated in the Introduction, modern heroes do not necessarily have to accomplish physical goals, earn heroism through violent means, or embark on a physical journey; heroism can also take place in the home and within the self. The Hero of Ferelden, however, functions as a more traditional hero in that she goes on a physical journey in order to accomplish quests through violence. Whether a mage, warrior, or rogue, the Hero of Ferelden will either use weapons or spells in order to kill her enemies. The more enemies she kills, the better she becomes at fighting, earning experience points and leveling up. Killing enemies is the primary way that the Hero of Ferelden can be heroic in this game. Although she can attempt to persuade or intimidate enemies with her words, it is much more difficult to accomplish, as these skills can only be improved every three levels as opposed to improving her prowess with weapons every time she levels up.

Because the primary means of leveling up is through killing enemies, performing violence ultimately becomes the main mechanism of success in the game. This mechanism of violence is typically for many video games and is widely critiqued both in public and academic spheres. Unlike Maas in the *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series, *Dragon Age: Origins* presents a view of the hero in which violence and heroism are intertwined; the effects violence has on the hero's mental well-being are not questioned, the game instead reinforcing the glory and rewards of warfare and violence.

The female Hero of Ferelden is not a hero in a vacuum; many strong female characters enable her heroism as party members or by providing vital information or items that allow the Hero of Ferelden to complete her quests. Perhaps the most important women in the Hero of Ferelden's journey are Flemeth and her daughter, Morrigan. Flemeth gives the Warden the treaties that allow the Warden to assemble an army to fight the Archdemon, also insisting that Morrigan join the Warden on her quest. The reason for this is revealed later on in the game, when Morrigan presents the Warden with the option of conducting an illegal blood magic ritual that will allow the Warden to kill the Archdemon without being killed by the act. This is important because the Grey Warden who kills the Archdemon always dies upon committing the act. Allowing Morrigan to conduct her ritual is the only way to ensure that no one in the party dies while simultaneously allowing the Warden to complete her quest.

In addition to these two characters, there are several other female characters throughout the game that serve major roles in the Hero of Ferelden's journey. Leliana and Wynne are the other female party members. As a bard, Leliana provides the Warden with background information about the places they visit, and Wynne uses her magical abilities to protect and heal

the party from darkspawn attacks, as well as offering the Warden advice. [27] There are two queer characters in this game, and only one of whom, Leliana, is a woman. Within the quests themselves, women will often step up and grant political power to the Hero of Ferelden. The Warden can choose to side with the werewolves instead of the elves and gain the assistance of their female master in fighting the darkspawn. Additionally, the female dwarven smith crafts an item necessary to win the dwarves' favor and assistance in fighting the darkspawn. Finally, if the Warden appoints Anora as Queen of Ferelden, she will officially back the Grey Wardens and lend Ferelden's support to the fight against the Archdemon. All of these instances reveal the power and importance of female characters working together to save their peoples.

Dragon Age II: Hawke, the Champion of Kirkwall

Although violence is still key to Hawke's development as a hero, her class identity is what ultimately sets her up for success in the city-state of Kirkwall. As a Ferelden refugee during the Blight, Hawke and her family are relegated to the slums of Kirkwall, though Hawke dreams of eventually amassing enough gold in order to reestablish her family as part of the nobility of Kirkwall, an interesting parallel to Feyre's social situation discussed in Chapter One. After reinstating her family's noble status, Hawke uses her social and economic power to influence the politics of Kirkwall to support either the mages or the templars. This political support directly sets up the events of the third game. Like the Hero of Ferelden, Hawke's primary mode of heroism is through violence and the killing of enemies. Killing enemies is the main way that Hawke increases in levels, and it is the main way that Hawke solves conflicts and interacts with the world around her. Likewise, the game mechanics changed from the first game, and the

[27] Leliana's status as a bard is in itself interesting to note, given bardic traditions in Ireland. In this culture, women who aspired to be bards would bring a curse upon the next seven generations of her family.

abilities to persuade and intimidate are no longer skills that can be leveled up, reinforcing violence as the only means of solving conflict in this world. The game does include other types of the quests that are not contingent on violence, such as gathering a certain number of items or finding and speaking to a specific character. However, these quests are few in comparison to the quests that rely on violence.

Like the Hero of Ferelden, Hawke is surrounded by powerful women who support and enable her heroism, in addition to facilitating her heroism by being her primary antagonist. Unlike the first game, in which the Archdemon is the primary enemy to be defeated by the end of the game, Meredith, the Knight Commander of Kirkwall's templars, is the main enemy Hawke must face if Hawke sides with the mages. Throughout the majority of the game, Hawke fights against Meredith using her economic and political influence to stop Meredith's cruelty against the mages. Meredith's extreme attitudes and actions against the city's mages motivate Hawke to action in many cases. It is only in the final moments of the game when this battle of words develops into a violent altercation. Meredith is a powerful female figure in that she commands an army of mostly men and the entire city-state by the end of the game. Unlike the Archdemon, she is not wholly evil; her fear of mages and her desire to protect the citizens from illegal magic is supported by her personal experience, although her methods are too harsh and too broadly applied, inadvertently punishing innocents in cruel and often inhumane ways.

In addition to fighting against a female villain, Hawke is supported by several female party members or side characters. Bethany, Hawke's sister, supports Hawke in her efforts to elevate their family's social status, and Leandra, Hawke's mother, provides Hawke's motivation as she seeks her mother's approval and desires to provide for her mother. Aveline, Kirkwall's guard captain, Isabela, a pirate captain, and Merrill, an elven blood mage, all provide assistance

to Hawke throughout her quests and even provide her with quests of their own. Of these characters, only one is a woman of color, which is still more than the first game contained in terms of party members. Unlike the first game, all four potential romantic partners are queer, meaning that there are two queer female characters instead of one. It is also interesting to note that the beliefs of the party members do matter in terms of how the plot is enacted, and if Hawke has not cultivated a good enough friendship with the characters, they will side against her if her decision to support the mages at the end of the game goes against their personal beliefs.

Dragon Age: Inquisition: The Herald of Andraste, the Inquisitor

Like the Hero of Ferelden and the Champion of Kirkwall, the Inquisitor mainly uses violence in order to become a hero, although the third game in the series supports a more feminine form of heroism as envisioned by Murdock, than the previous games. In this game, nonviolent options like exploration and the collecting of items are heavily emphasized, and many of the side quests involve doing favors for people in order to help their physical or emotional well-being, functioning as the female work of emotional labor in many cases. The Inquisitor's gender and racial identity are much more important to the story than in either of the other two games. If the Inquisitor is female, Cassandra, who founded the Inquisition, remarks: "Think of it. Like Andraste long ago, once again the fate of Thedas will be determined by a woman. It makes me proud to know you" (*DA:I*). In this game, if the Inquisitor is a mage or a non-human, the people of Thedas more heavily resist her leadership. The game mechanics support this; a non-human or a mage will have a much more difficult time gaining the approval of the Orlesian court during the major quest "Wicked Eyes and Wicked Hearts." A non-mage human begins the quest with forty-five approval points, while mages, elves, and dwarves begin with thirty points, and qunari begin with twenty-five. The Inquisitor can gain or lose approval throughout the quest, and

if the approval of the court reaches zero, then the Inquisitor fails the quest. This demonstrates that the chances of success are dependent upon racial identity.

While the majority of the Inquisitor's heroic journey consists of traditionally masculine endeavors through the form of violent altercations, the Inquisitor's journey to retrieve her memories through the realm of dreams known as the Fade is both a vital element of her development as a hero and a moment of distinctly feminine heroism. Female heroism is often envisioned as being an internal or emotional struggle, while traditional masculine heroism is more physical, as demonstrated by the scholars cited in the Introduction. Up until this point in the game, no one knows how the Inquisitor received the mark on her hand allowing her to close rifts, and there are rumors that Andraste herself saved the Inquisitor and divinely ordained her to save Thedas. The Inquisitor has no memory of these events, and must eventually retrieve her memories from the Fade. In the Fade, the Inquisitor meets Divine Justinia, who was killed in the same explosion that gifted the Inquisitor with her powers and who offers the Inquisitor a different perspective on heroism:

> Inquisitor: If I was chosen, I just don't understand why. Why me? Why this?
>
> Divine Justinia: You are not the first to ask such questions. Did Andraste not question when the Maker charged her with an impossible task? Did she not feel unworthy? Her questions did not lessen her heroism.
>
> Inquisitor: So now I'm a hero?
>
> Divine Justinia: Not yet. Perhaps not ever. The choice will be yours. (*DA:I*)

Indeed, the Inquisitor's memories reveal that it was only by pure chance that she received the mark on her hand and survived the blast; she was not chosen by some higher power as the world's savior. In this way, the game changes the nature of heroism. One does not become a hero

by being chosen, one becomes a hero by choosing to be a hero, a common motif in much of contemporary fantasy fiction. This moment in the game demonstrates a feminine form of heroism because it relies on the Inquisitor searching her own inner being to recover a part of herself that was lost, a process described by Murdock and Pearson and Pope. This lost part of herself ultimately causes a shift in the way the Inquisitor identifies herself as a hero

Like the previous two games, the hero is surrounded by female characters that enable her heroism. There are more female characters in this game than in the previous two games, and many of them tend to take on leadership roles within the Inquisition's hierarchy or within the governmental and religious structure of Thedas. The Inquisition itself was an idea that Divine Justinia, arguably the most powerful woman in Thedas given her control of religious life, came up with in order to restore order to Thedas during the war between the mages and the templars. Both of Divine Justinia's assistants are female: Cassandra is the Right Hand, a warrior protecting the Divine, and Leliana is the Left Hand, using her connections and ring of spies to defend the Chantry's leader and gain information to use as leverage. [28] Within the Inquisition's hierarchy, there are four female leaders—the Inquisitor, Cassandra, Leliana, and Josephine—and only one male leader. Josephine is a woman of color serving as the Inquisition's ambassador, using her powers of persuasion and influence with the nobility of Thedas to gain favor for the Inquisition. The women all demonstrate very different strengths: the Inquisitor's power lies in her magical mark, Cassandra's is in brute force, Leliana's is in knowledge and ruthlessness, and Josephine's is in rhetoric and patience. These different strengths among the Inquisition's female leadership demonstrates that there is no one type of female heroism. In addition to these female characters, there are two other female character's within the Inquisitor's inner circle: Sera, a gay working

[28] This is the same Leliana who was a party member for the Hero of Ferelden in *Dragon Age: Origins.*

class elf, and Vivienne, a mage of color who has worked her way up through the Chantry's hierarchy to be one of the most powerful mages in Orlais. There are more women of color as supporting characters in the third game than in the previous two games, and more queer characters in this game than in the others. Based on this alone, there is at least a larger quantity of marginalized voices represented as the series progresses. However, even though there are eight potential romantic partners, there are still only two queer female characters and four queer characters overall. So, while it may appear that there is more queer representation in the third game because it has a larger focus and cast of characters, there are no more queer characters than in the second game.

Beyond the Metal Bikini: Visual Rhetoric and Female Bodies in Fantasy RPGs

Dragon Age, like the vast majority of other video games, sexualizes female characters in terms of visual representation. In novels, the sexualization of women through character descriptions is not necessarily as immediate or powerful as a video game's visual depiction of the female body and all its parts. Because the hero in each of the three games is an avatar that the player designs, the physical features of the hero's facial features, skin color, and hair are not stable. However, there is only one body type for the games' female heroes, and that is slender with large breasts and wide hips. The animation of the female heroes in *Dragon Age* also sexualizes the characters to some degree, as the hero's hips sway unnecessarily when running. These swaying hips are especially prominent on a female Hawke in *Dragon Age II*. Additionally, depending on the armor chosen, the female hero shows off more skin. The mages in all three of the games tend to have more limited options when it comes to armor; the majority of items for the mages reveal significantly more skin than the armor for rogues or warriors. This feeds into the long-standing sexual stereotypes surrounding the witch that I discussed in Chapter One.

Although the player can control, to an extent, the sexualization of the female heroes in the *Dragon Age* series, the games will frequently sexualize the female side characters. Controlling the sexualization of the female side characters is possible to a certain degree in *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* because the player can decide what armor they wear, though the initial designs of the characters are fixed. In *Dragon Age II*, the player cannot control the sexualization of the female characters, as the player cannot change the characters' armor. In many cases, the female side characters' initial designs reveal stereotypical ideas about women and the roles they occupy. The first game feeds in to the tropes surrounding the sexual power of the witch in a visual way through the character of Morrigan (see fig. 1).

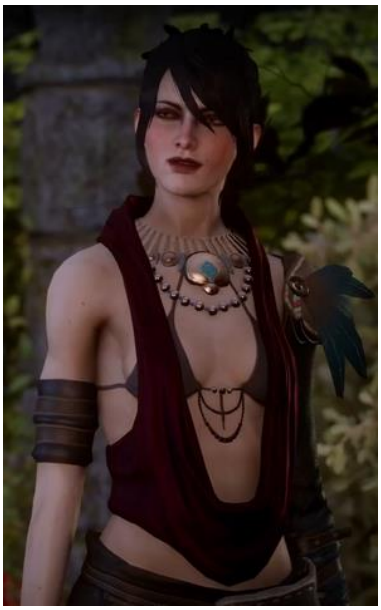

Fig.1. Still of Morrigan from DA:I, wearing the same outfit from DA:O; www.heroes-villains.wikia.com/wiki/Morrigan(Dragon_Age).

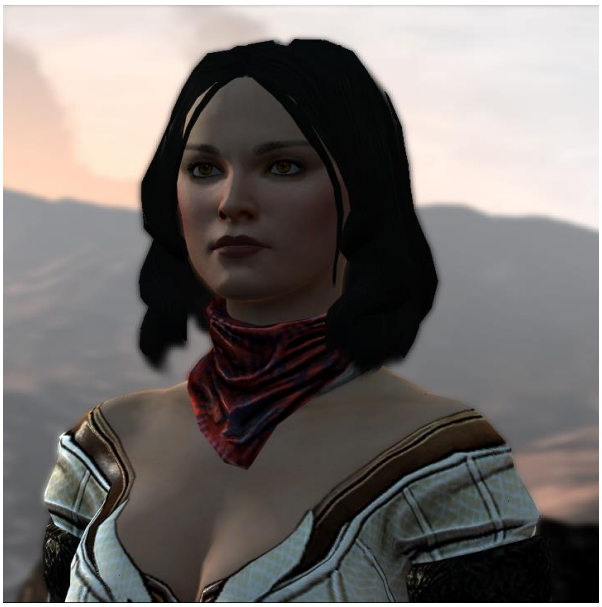

Fig. 2. Still of Bethany from DA:2; www.da2risingtide.wikia.com/wiki/Bethany_Hawke.

The second game also embraces this trope through the character of Bethany, Hawke's mage sister, by making her buxom and having her wear sexually-revealing clothes, even when she is not supposed to be drawing attention to herself as an illegal magic-user (see fig. 2). The second game also introduces an interesting change in the character designs of two characters that recur from the first game, Flemeth and Isabela. In the first game, Flemeth is depicted as a hag-like

elderly woman, while the second game has her embrace the trope of the sexually powerful witch (see fig. 3). Likewise, in the first game, Isabela is both white and less sexually provocative than in the second game, which changes her skin color and makes her much more curvaceous and scantily clad (see fig. 4).

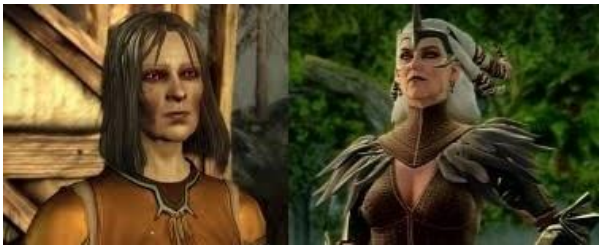

Fig. 3. Stills of Flemeth in *DA:O* vs. Flemeth in *DA:I*; image created by author.

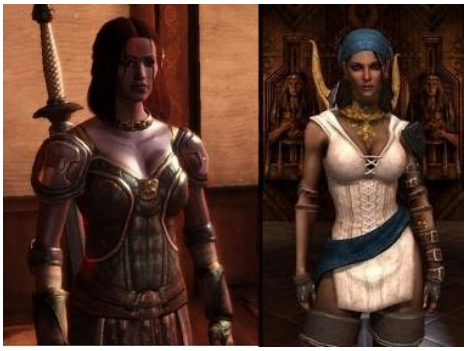

Fig. 4. Stills of Isabela in *DA:O* vs. Isabela in *DA:2*; image created by author.

The second game not only sexualizes both characters, but changes the skin color of one. By both darkening Isabela's skin tone and making her more sexually revealing, the designers exoticize and fetishize the woman of color. The third game continues its sexualization of women of color and its extension of the witch trope through Vivienne, a mage who wears low-cut and skintight bodysuits (see fig. 5).

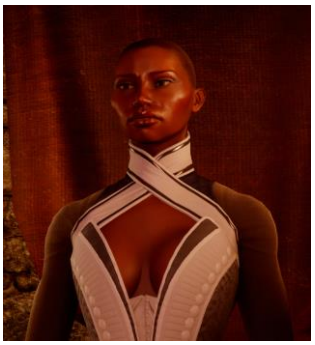

Fig. 5. Still of Vivienne from *DA:I*; www.de.dragonage.wikia.com/wiki/Vivienne.

There are very few major females of color in *Dragon Age*, and nearly all of the ones who are in the games are sexualized through their visual representations. The games also perpetuate the stereotypes associated with witches by sexualizing nearly all of the female mage characters.

As stated earlier in the chapter and in the Introduction, certain visual depictions of female characters are so common in video games that they become their own tropes. In fantasy games especially, armor is used to sexualize the female characters through what is commonly referred to as the "metal bikini." The metal bikini describes a type of armor that looks like skimpy lingerie and yet functions as protective body armor within the context of the game. What makes the metal bikini even more frustrating is that, in some games, attempting to put the same armor on a male character transforms the metal bikini into a full suit of armor. Although the armor differences in *Dragon Age* are not nearly as dramatic, there are some clear differences in putting the same armor on a female character versus a male character (see fig. 6).

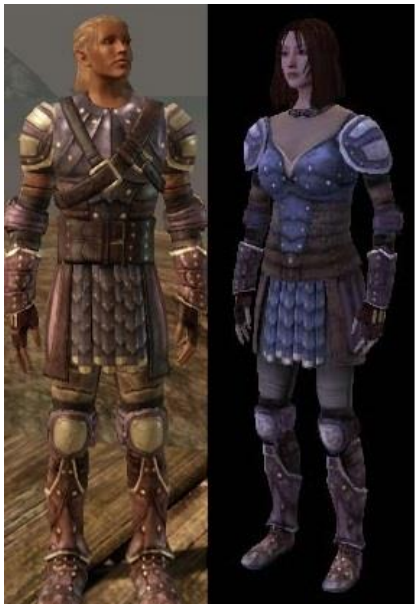

Fig. 6. Comparison of Zevran wearing Wade's Superior Drakeskin armor set vs. a female Hero of Ferelden wearing the same set; image created by author.

This issue only occurs in *Dragon Age: Origins*, where putting armor or mage robes on a female hero reveals more cleavage, legs, or stomach than the same armor on a male hero. *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, however, fixes this issue to an extent. The design of the armor stays the same whether it is on a female or male hero, but some mage armor will still shift into something more revealing for Vivienne.[29] The issue surrounding the impracticality of female armor in fantasy games is actually addressed, somewhat humorously, in the game itself. Cassandra and Iron Bull, both warriors, have this conversation regarding armor:

> Iron Bull: Hey, that's some good armor.
>
> Cassandra: Are you referring to me?
>
> Iron Bull: Some high-ranking women wear ornamental crap with tits hammered into it. One good shot, and all that cleavage gets knocked right into the sternum. Real messy. Good on you for going practical.
>
> Cassandra: I aim to please.
>
> Iron Bull: Leaves something to the imagination, too. (*DA:I*)

Despite the initial critique of the sexualization of female armor, the conversation still returns the sexual appeal of female armor. The male gaze is so pervasive in the industry that merely including normal armor and not wildly impractical metal bikini have prompted some fans to assume the game is feminist based on this point alone. This assumption is based on nothing more than the armor styles, ignoring the many other factor that influences whether or not a game has

[29] In some instances, the fact that the armor stays the same results in some humorous combinations. There is a set of DLC armor called antaam-saar that is essentially a bikini top with harem pants, and it will stay that way on male characters as well. Being able to put this armor on male characters illustrates how ridiculous these kinds of revealing armor really are.

feminist messages.[30] Overall, it seems that, over time, the sexualization of the female characters has decreased. The main exception would be for the women of color, contributing to the harmful fetishization and exoticization of women of color. The games also have not moved beyond the trope of the witch as a being of sexual power because of the way every female mage character is sexualized. Thus, even while challenging some industry tropes, the games ultimately still utilize the heavily ingrained fantasy trope of the witch as an emblem of female sexual power.

"Have you ever licked a lamppost in winter?": Romance, Sexuality, and the Female Hero

One of the primary game mechanics is the ability to initiate romantic encounters with other characters in the game. The player is not able to woo every character; in each game, there are a certain set of party members or NPCs that can be romanced, and these romances depend on sexuality and, in some cases, race. Unlike many other games with romance options, the majority of the *Dragon Age* romances are dependent on both the player character's identity and the romanceable character's identity; there is no "gay button," as Adrienne Shaw describes the mechanics of games like *Fable* that allow any character to be wooed by anyone regardless of the player character's identity (34). The so-called gay button is a term used by Shaw and other scholars to describe gaming mechanisms where the player becomes responsible for finding queer representation rather than having that representation as an organic aspect of the narrative. Essentially, then, if a player is not explicitly looking for the representation in games with this mechanism, then it isn't there. *Dragon Age*, on the other hand, includes queerness organically in many aspects of the narrative.

[30] My favorite and certainly the most explicit example of this discussion is a thread about *Dragon Age Inquisition* on GameFAQs, a popular gaming message board, entitled "Can you give the females sexy armor or is the game feminist?"

The romances in the games operate on a system of approval based on dialogue choices or flirting in conversations, making decisions in the game that align with the characters' beliefs, and gifting specific items found in-game. Each romance proceeds differently, and some of the sexual encounters are more explicit than others. Indeed, some of the pairings involve no sex at all, leading some fans to interpret these characters as asexual, though there is no explicit evidence that this is the case. Each game essentially uses the same mechanics, with only slight differences between the games. *Dragon Age II* makes gift-giving less important and allows a romance to proceed whether a character loves the hero or hates her, both options offering different relational dynamics. The third game removes gift-giving entirely and also makes approval stats invisible, making it much more difficult to determine how the other characters perceive the hero and her actions.[31] A male playable character can also participate in romances in the games. Analyzing the ways in which a female player character can conduct romantic narratives with other characters in the game in addition to how the game represents the female partners of male heroes reveals how female sexuality is represented in the game.

The approval mechanism, which is the heart of romance in this series, is problematic because it both functions as a form of emotional labor and because it mechanizes romance. Because the player character needs to have high approval with a potential romantic partner, it is the responsibility of the player to manage the potential partner's emotions. This often means adjusting play style in order to achieve certain narrative outcomes that the potential partner will

[31] In the previous two games, there were specific menus for each character that outlined their approval ratings, making approval a visible stat. From this menu, a player could determine approximately how much a character liked the player character and could modify their gameplay in order to achieve specific outcomes with that character. Reaching certain levels of approval then initiated different stages in a romance arc. By making approval an invisible stat in the third game, it becomes much more difficult for players to change their gameplay in order to raise the approval of certain characters.

like, in addition to performing extra quests and giving certain items. This mechanism of play actually functions as a form of emotional labor because "emotional labor is labor where the worker is forced to sublimate his or her emotions and take on the burdens of another person's emotional state" (Chess 95). This game mechanic functions as emotional labor because it is the player character's job to complete quests in a way that specifically pleases a potential romantic partner. This mechanism is especially significant given that emotional labor is considered to be "women's work." Work thus subsumes play for female players in this instance. Additionally, this mechanistic view of romance does not reflect real-life romance because it does not take into account mood, compatibility, attraction, or desires. It assumes that a romantic relationship can occur if the player character says the right things and showers the potential partner in gifts. Other games, such as *Galatea* or *Butterfly Soup*, offer a less mechanistic approach to romance by taking mood, the player character and potential partner's body language, and conversation topic into account in addition to the more mechanistic aspects like those included in *Dragon Age*.

Romance in Dragon Age: Origins

Because of the straightforward approval system in the game, when trying to romance a character in *Dragon Age: Origins*, the characters' approval often influences players' gameplay and dialogue choices. The choices that the characters approve of reveal certain attitudes about female desire and sexual experience in addition to queer sexualities. When trying to enter a relationship with Alistair, who explains that he is a virgin, the player gains his approval by choosing the dialogue options that imply the player character is sexually experienced. These two options gain one approval point, while the other options either result in no approval changes or negative approval changes. There are a few ways in which this exchange can be interpreted. Alistair's approval of the Warden's sexual experience could be interpreted as sex positivity;

however, sex positivity also includes respecting those who choose not to have sex, making his neutral attitude towards an answer of inexperience questionable. In another interpretation, Alistair's approval of the Warden's sexual history might illustrate the desire to have a partner with more experience. Either way, by not judging a female Warden with more sexual experience, the game reaffirms positive attitudes around female sexuality by refusing to engage in slut-shaming.

If the player wants to initiate a romance with Zevran, the queer assassin, the Warden must discuss his sexual history and preferences: "Let me start by saying that my history is varied, indeed. It has also not been restricted to women. Does…that offend you?" (*DA:O*). His reluctance in asking this question, demonstrated by the pause indicated by the ellipsis, reveals that he expects to be challenged regarding his identity as a queer man. Expressing offense at his sexual preferences results in massive approval losses, ranging from thirteen to fifteen points, depending on the options chosen, whereas approving will bring small approval bonuses. Disapproving of his queerness will end the relationship and cannot be reinitiated. Following Flanagan and Nissenbaum, who invite gamers to consider how values can be expressed by what the game rewards, we can see how the game rewards those who are accepting and open-minded about different sexual preferences and histories, based on the way approval works for both Zevran and Alistair.

Romance in Dragon Age II

Because the approval system was overhauled for the second game, romance and the characters' self-expressions of sexuality become a bit more complex. Unlike the first game, which required full approval points to complete a romance arc, the second game allows for a romance to ensue at either max approval or max rivalry. The relationships at max rivalry become

primarily about sex and sexual attraction rather than romance and affection. There are four romance options: Anders, Fenris, Isabela, and Merrill. All are able to be romanced by either male or female heroes, though only some of the characters will actually discuss their sexualities with the player character. This overall lack of identification establishes the problematic trope of the "gay button," as Adrienne Shaw discusses (34). Additionally, the game adds a new mechanic to the dialogue, indicating the mood each option expresses: diplomatic/helpful, humorous/charming, aggressive/direct, and flirtatious. The player character can thus flirt with essentially all of the other characters, though only a few will reciprocate. In some cases, a character will only start flirting with the player character if the player character initiates; however, both Anders and Isabela will flirt with the player character regardless of the player character's gender, though the lines of dialogue do differ slightly between male and female player characters.

Like the first game, *Dragon Age II* gives the players the opportunity to express open-minded views regarding queer sexualities by using approval as a rewards mechanism. With a male hero, Anders will flirt even if the hero does not. By choosing the diplomatic dialogue options—in other words, by just being kind to him—he will start flirting with the male hero and explain his sexual history: "I've always believed people fall in love with a whole person, not just a body. Why would you shy away from loving someone just because they're like you? Does it bother you that I've…been with men?" (*DA:2*) This explanation and the following question are only given to male heroes; Anders does not mention his attraction to men to female heroes. Additionally, his approval takes a massive hit if the male hero expresses disapproval with Anders's sexuality. The reward mechanism of this dialogue decision becomes complicated, however, because characters can still be romanced if they are rivals, lessening the severity of

incurring rivalry points. However, since rivalry is only earned through judgment of queer sexualities, perhaps this point is moot. Compared to the previous game's already low standard of punishing homophobia by severing relational potentialities, the corresponding lesson to homophobic players is a weak one.

It is significant to note that female heroes do not have the option to express approval or disapproval of queer sexualities, even for the two potential female love interests. Although both Merrill and Isabela are queer, they do not openly discuss it in the way that Anders does with a male hero. Isabela is the most open with her sexuality, as she flirts with a Hawke of either sex without prompting: "There might be something I could do for you. And I have a room at the Hanged Man if you're looking for…company later" (*DA:2*). Though Isabela openly flirts with almost all of the other characters in the game, she does not make a direct statement about her sexuality, as Anders does. Additionally, there is no option for the female hero to question the female characters' sexualities as there is for a male hero to question Anders's. This implies some assumptions regarding the beliefs of the audience by the game designers. The game mechanics in the conversation with Anders will reward the player by granting approval for choosing the accepting dialogue options. By setting up a reward or punishment scenario for male player characters only, there is the implication that male players need to be educated about social justice issues surrounding sexuality while female players do not, since there is no corresponding conversation between a female player character and any of the queer characters. This is a significant assumption on the designers' part, not only because it assumes that female players are already knowledgeable and accepting of marginalized identities, but because it also assumes that any male players are heterosexual. Thus, even in a moment where the game is trying to be

inclusive of marginalized sexual identities, it still assumes a norm in which the normative is a straight male player.

Romance and Gender in Dragon Age: Inquisition

The dynamics between romance, sexuality, and approval become even more complex in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* because, as mentioned previously, approval becomes an invisible stat to create a more realistic method of play. Thus, it is, by design, difficult to keep track of how much approval a specific character has for the player character without the player keeping careful track themselves and doing a lot of addition and subtraction. The effect of this change encourages players to make choices more naturally, rather than consulting guides to achieve a certain outcome.[32] In addition to making approval an invisible stat, the game also removes rivalry romances, meaning that romance arcs can only begin once a character has reached a high enough approval rating. The romance also becomes complicated because of different characters' sexualities or personal preferences. There are eight total romance options in the game, and two characters, Solas and Cullen, will only enter relationships with female heroes of specific races. This endogamous practice bars potential relationships for any female dwarves or qunari. Additionally, for the first time in the series, there are two strictly gay characters to add to the other queer and straight characters.[33] Dorian will only enter a relationship with a male hero, while Sera will only enter a relationship with a female hero. Interestingly, even if the player character does not enter into a relationship with either of these characters, their sexualities are

[32] Yet, consulting guides is still widely practiced. There are many different ways to access guides, from collaborative wikis to those created by professional game journalists to YouTube videos uploaded by players. These guides, or walkthroughs, help the player achieve specific outcomes or complete quests. The guides for *DA:I* are just less clear about how much approval is earned or lost based on dialogue or plot decisions.

[33] I use the word "queer" throughout these sections because it is unclear whether the characters are bisexual or pansexual.

unavoidable, as they will begin relationships with other side characters, if the conditions permit, or discuss their sexualities with the player character.

Whether the player character is a male or female hero, there is a separate companion quest revolving around Dorian's sexuality and how it affected his relationship with his family. In this quest, during an encounter with his estranged father, Dorian reveals that he is gay and that his father attempted to perform a magical ritual on him to change his sexuality.[34] This encounter triggers a conversation that allows the player to express approval or disapproval at Dorian's sexuality, again replicating the mechanism that rewards acceptance of queer sexualities. Interestingly, this conversation includes another line of dialogue where a female Inquisitor who has been flirting with Dorian can question him for leading her on, and this option on the dialogue tree results in no approval changes and closes off the previously discussed dialogue options. This again reinforces the assumption that male players need to be educated about queer identities and female players do not.

In addition to the representation of queer sexualities in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, there is also a transgender character, a marginalized identity that is rare to find in both fantasy and video games. Cremisius Aclassi, affectionately called Krem, is the lieutenant in Iron Bull's mercenary company. He was a soldier for the Tevinter Imperium's army, but fled when his sex was discovered and he had to choose between slavery or execution for falsifying military documents. Although it was not illegal to be transgender, it was illegal both to falsify military documents and to serve in the army when female. Krem does not come out to the player character until about halfway through the game, in the form of a joke to Iron Bull regarding Iron Bull's lack of shirt: "Let me know if you need help binding. You could really chisel something out of that

[34] To me, this is a clear reference to contemporary conversion therapies.

overstuffed look" (*DA:I*) . After this joke about breast binding, a common way for transgender men to pass, there are four possible responses to Krem revealing his identity: asking if he is a woman, asking when he knew he was transgender, asking about the rest of the crew, and asking why he passes. Though none of the responses result in approval changes, Krem's response will be different for each choice. After the hero's response, Krem and Iron briefly discuss Krem's identity as a trans man, revealing Iron Bull's unwavering acceptance of Krem and his gender identity:

> Iron Bull: In Qunandar, Krem would be an aqun-athlok. That's what we call someone born one gender but living like another.
>
> Krem: And qunari don't treat those "aqun" people any differently than a real man?
>
> Iron Bull: They are real men. Just like you are. (*DA:I*)

After the cutscene, the player character has the opportunity to question Krem about his family, his background, and his gender, asking invasive and inappropriate questions that one should generally never ask a trans person. Although these questions would be inappropriate in a real social setting, the addition of them into the game serves to educate players on basic trans issues; the Inquisitor must ask why Krem decided to live as a man in order to move on to other dialogue options, to which Krem replies: "I didn't decide anything. I've been like this my whole life (*DA:I*). The Inquisitor then brings up the idea of using magic to transition, the fantasy-world equivalent to surgical transitioning in the real world, to which Krem vehemently denies wanting: "I don't want any magic like that within ten yards of my body. […] Nice armor and a well-placed sock, and I'm happy" (*DA:I*). The mechanism of approval in the cutscene and in the conversation afterwards does not apply to this conversation. What is interesting is that, unlike with the previously discussed conversations regarding sexuality, asking the rude questions is

how the player progresses in the game and does not incur any penalties. There is also no question of acceptance; Krem merely educates the Inquisitor about his gender identity. This mechanical difference implies that the audience should already be educated about issues related to sexuality and can then be rewarded or punished based on their acceptance of queer sexualities while also implying that the audience probably knows very little about trans issues and must be educated about them first in a low-stakes environment.

Conclusion

Over the course of its first three installments, the *Dragon Age* series educates players about gender and sexuality through the reward mechanism of approval under certain narrative circumstances, cultivating heroism through quests often contingent on violence and a sisterhood of powerful female party members and side characters. This chapter demonstrates this idea through an analysis of the gendered narratives within the game, the visual rhetoric of the characters' appearances and clothing, and the game mechanics of romance and sex. Although much of the series still caters to the male gaze and traffics in the inevitability of sexual violence for girls and women, it provides many powerful female characters with whom female players can identify. The series also represents a variety of queer sexualities and genders, oftentimes rewarding players for being open to those identities. In this way, the games have the potential to educate hostile or ignorant audiences about queer identities. Overall, this series represents a forward step in an industry that perpetuates anti-feminist tropes by engaging in some feminist thought concerning gender, sexual, and racial identity.

Dragon Age was not necessarily made with girl or women gamers in mind, but that does not negate the fact that the series does have a significant female fanbase. Like many hardcore games, *Dragon Age* was designed for the normative gamer: the straight, white, cisgender male.

However, that does not mean that the series has nothing to say about gender, sexuality, or race. A girls' studies analysis of hardcore fantasy role-playing games like *Dragon Age* is important because it determines what kinds of messages about femininity and sexuality girls are receiving, in addition to revealing aspects of the mechanics and the narrative that otherwise may appear to be unimportant. Unlike in *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, *Dragon Age* presents a form of female heroism predicated on violence, which, though patently problematic, can be empowering for girls and women to see their own gender represented in in warriors or soldiers typically envisioned as men. Additionally, a girls' studies framework reveals the gendered aspects of the narrative and the sexualization of the female characters within the game, showing the gradual progression from negative to positive in certain instances over time. Over the three games, the gendered narratives take a somewhat drastic shift from negative to positive; the first game's gendered origin story of sexual assault progresses to a female hero's success via interiority by the third game. The female characters, overall, become less sexualized, though the women of color and the female mages are still objectified in the games. Additionally, the amount of queer characters increases throughout the course of the games, and the third game even includes a transgender character, a rarity in both fantasy and video games. A girls' studies method of analysis also demonstrates the way that certain mechanics of the game function as emotional labor, which blurs the distinction between work and play for female players. Because so much of video game scholarship that expressly studies gender in games focuses either on casual gaming or on girls and programming, it is necessary to see what narrative and ludic messages about gender, sexuality, and heroism are being presented, perhaps unknowingly or unintentionally, to girl gamers in hardcore games such as *Dragon Age*.

There are many differences between *A Court of Thorns and Roses* and *Dragon Age*, but there are many similarities as well. Beyond the obvious difference in medium and audience, each series presents a different view of female heroism. These differences demonstrate the variability in the female experience and present multiple visions of what is possible to girl readers and players. Both series, to a degree, allow female readers and players to explore their sexualities in a way that is safe and accepting of both female desire and queer sexualities. *A Court of Thorns and Roses* also explores the challenges unique to a hero with mental illness, while the heroes of *Dragon Age* must often confront the racism of the people they are trying to help. In this way, each series offers yet another vision of the nonnormative hero as these identities intersect with the female hero's already fraught experiences with gender identity. Neither of these series is unproblematic, as no piece of media is; however, both series do present some positive messages about gender, sexuality, race, class, and ability. Compared to many of these series' predecessors, they represent an overall positive step in the fantasy genre as a whole.

FIGHT LIKE A GIRL: THE FUTURE OF RESEARCH ON GIRLS AND FANTASY MEDIA

Although I have been a lover and consumer of fantasy for many years, finding feminist fantasy media is a quest in and of itself. As the culmination of my personal and academic interests, a feminist study of fantasy teaches us, once again, the profits of taking a feminist approach to a male-dominated genre. An analysis of the fantasy genre through a girls' studies lens helps us see that diverse representations of girlhoods and femininities through female heroes and other female characters have the potential to empower girls despite the genre's patriarchal roots. To support this argument, I analyze representations of gender and sexuality in two works of fantasy fiction, the series of young adult novels *A Court of Thorns and Roses* by Sarah J. Maas and BioWare's role-playing video game series *Dragon Age*.

In the Introduction, I describe a brief history of the fantasy genre, locating its roots in fairy tale and the medieval romance. Next, I describe the relationship between fantasy and women and girls, connecting the genre to young adult literature's contemporary feminine centrality. After discussing women and girls' relationship to fantasy, I focus on their relationship to video games, both in the gaming industry and within the content of video games. Then, I move in to a discussion of girls' studies scholarship in order to craft a lens through which to view these literary and game texts. The scholarship I mention includes Catherine Driscoll, Anita Harris, Andi Zeisler, Mary Celeste Kearney, Linda Duits and Liesbet van Zoonen, and Elline Lipkin. After contextualizing these scholars' works with literary feminist ideas of representation, I move to a study of the female hero and heroism in general through literary history. The scholars I draw upon in this section are Joseph Campbell, Robert A. Segal, Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope, Maureen Murdock, and Lori M. Campbell. After this historical analysis, I justify my selection of

YA fiction and RPGs by citing Joshua Peery, Jeremy M. Downes, and Anastasia Salter's work on the quest and alternative literacies.

Chapter One examines *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, arguing that Maas cultivates many visions of the female hero through Feyre while negotiating issues of identity, agency, and power central to Feyre's heroic transformations in way that is empowering to certain girlhoods. In addition to drawing on the theories of heroism and girls' studies from the Introduction, I contextualize Feyre's heroism in scholarship by Zoe Jaques, Catherine M. Roach, Joanna Ludwikowska, and Marsha M. Sprague and Kara K. Keeling. There are four different hero types that Feyre embodies over the course of the series: an unlikely hero, a huntress, a romantic hero, and a witch as hero. To examine these different forms of heroism which Feyre develops throughout the series, I track her agency, intersecting identities of gender, sexuality, class, and ability, experiences with violence and trauma, creative expression through art, and literacy. The chapter concludes by connecting Feyre as a female hero to her feminist potential to inspire certain types of girl readers and shape their attitudes about gender, sexuality, and heroism.

In Chapter Two, I focus on the *Dragon Age* series, arguing that, although the series does cater to the male gaze, the games become more progressive over time in their gendered narratives by educating players in certain circumstances about queer identities and cultivating heroism through a sisterhood of female side characters. In addition to the scholarship about girls and the hero from the Introduction, I draw upon video game scholarship that articulates how representation can function in video games from Ian Bogost, Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum, Adrienne Shaw, Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm, Shira Chess, and Anita Sarkeesian. First, I examine the gendered narratives in the series and how the narrative will change subtly or even drastically depending on the player character's gender and race. In

this section, I also focus on how female heroism is frequently constituted through violence, though more feminine forms of heroism are available as the series progresses. Next, I analyze the visual rhetoric of the armor for both male and female characters as it develops across the games. Finally, I focus on the approval mechanism and how this mechanism both functions as a form of emotional labor and as a way of mechanizing romance. Within this section, I focus on how the queer characters in the game educate the player in certain instances about queer sexualities, rewarding the player for progressive or accepting views. The chapter concludes that that, though the series is hardly perfect, it is overall a positive step forward in an industry and genre steeped with misogynistic traditions and practices.

The importance of looking at fantasy media with a girls' studies lens is illustrated by the increasing popularity of the fantasy genre in all forms of media and the increasing focus on girl characters and girl heroes. One prime example of popular fantasy media that would benefit from a girls' studies analysis is HBO's *Game of Thrones* (2011), based on George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996) series. Martin, as mentioned in Chapter One, has expressed deeply problematic views about sexual violence in fantasy, in addition to ignorant views of people of color in fantasy and people of color in medieval Europe. The show, in many regards, replicates and even extends these misogynistic and racist values and beliefs. One fan actually tallies the amount of rapes or rape acts that occur in the show up through season five. The fan notes that in the fifty episodes released at that point, fifty rapes or rapes acts occurred, averaging one rape per episode (tafkar). One of the worst instances of rape on the show, which did not occur in the book, is the rape of Sansa Stark, who is seventeen at the time of her rape by her husband Ramsay Bolton. With such an explicit portrayal of rape against a girl in addition to the numerous other instances of sexual violence on the show, *Game of Thrones* quite clearly illustrates the

importance of a girls' studies analysis of fantasy media. Media that perpetuates the normality of sexual violence contributes to society's overall dismissal of rape as a serious offense and its belief that victims are somehow culpable. One way that society can improve is by shifting media that propagates harmful beliefs about gender and sexuality, and one way that change can happen is if scholars and critics point out the problems in media.

There are many places that scholars can go to do this sort of work, as fantasy is becoming increasingly present in popular culture in literature, film, television, and gaming. Within the works on which I focus in this thesis, there is still much more work to be done. There are many facets of each series that I wanted to touch on but could not due to time and space constraints. Indeed, a version of the research in Chapter One and the scholarship on the hero in the Introduction is going to be presented at the 2018 Children's Literature Association conference with a special focus on how bathing represents Feyre's heroic journey. If I were to develop the research in this thesis into a longer work, I would like to focus on girls from fantasy across decades, such as Susan and Lucy Pevensie from C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Eilonwy from Lloyd Alexander's *The Chronicles of Prydain*, Tenar from Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Tombs of Atuan*, Alanna from Tamora Pierce's *The Song of the Lioness*, Sansa Stark from George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones*, Aloy from *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, and any number of other girl protagonists in contemporary YA fantasy literature, television, film, and gaming. I would also be interested in looking at women protagonists in fantasy media consumed by girls, such as the women of Westeros and Middle-earth. There are many possibilities for future research in this area for myself and other scholars, and new media is coming out all the time.

Indeed, during the writing of this thesis, new iterations of both the *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series and the *Dragon Age* series have been announced. Sarah J. Maas will be publishing a short novel called *A Court of Frost and Starlight* bridging the *A Court of Thorns and Roses* books with an as-of-yet unnamed series featuring the same characters. The book comes out May 1, 2018. Based on the trajectory of the series, I anticipate that Maas will continue to cultivate different forms of female heroism as Feyre adjusts to her role as High Lady and ruling the Night Court. Likewise, the executive producer of the *Dragon Age* series announced that people are working on the next game in the franchise (@BioMarkDarrah). The next day, BioWare's general manager confirmed this message, stating that the game would be "story & [sic] character focused" (@CaseyDHudson). Based on this account and the trajectory of the series thus far, I would speculate that the game will continue educating players about queer identities via conversations with side characters and potential romantic partners. Additionally, I would venture a guess that there would be less sexualization for female characters overall, except for any potential female mages. Hopefully, Krem will return in the fourth game under certain narrative circumstances to have a larger role than in the third game, or another transgender character will have a larger role in the narrative or even act as a potential love interest for the hero. Whatever happens, I am sure that the two series will continue to develop visions of female heroism that will shape, for better or worse, girls' views of identity, agency, and power.

If someone had told the nine-year-old girl emerging from the theater after *The Return of the King* that she could make a career out of reading, writing about, and teaching others fantasy, she probably would not have believed them. I wish I could go back in time to tell that little girl sitting by herself in the park with her elf ears and fantasy trade paperbacks that there would be a place for her someday. That a girl reading about other worlds and heroes and swordfights wasn't

a “freak.” That a girl who dreamed of archery lessons to be like Legolas was just as valid as the girl who wanted to take ballet lessons or play softball. I wish I could tell that girl who stopped gaming because her boyfriend teased her for being “bad at video games” that she would be invited to give a lecture on video games. Hopefully, the work of this thesis and the work of other scholars will help show the problems in the fantasy genre so it can begin to change, and girls can move beyond the expectation that they do not belong in the story or that their only role is that of the damsel in distress, the trophy in someone else’s story. After all, as Amanda Lovelace says:

> Once upon
> a time,
> the princess
> rose from the ashes
> her dragon lovers
> made of her
> &
> crowned
> herself
> the
> motherfucking
> queen of
> herself.” (105)

It is this type of fantasy that scholars must encourage by performing analyses of fantasy media in all of its pitfalls and promises.

WORKS CITED

"About." *BioWare*, 2017, www.bioware.com/en/about/. Accessed 26 Dec. 2017.

"About the Romance Genre." *Romance Writers of America: The Voice of Romance Writers*, www.rwa.org/romance. Accessed 5 Nov. 2017.

"ACOTAR Novella." *Sarah J. Maas*, www.sarahjmaas.com/acotar-novella/. Accessed 29 Sep. 2017.

"A Court of Thorns and Roses." *Sarah J. Maas*, www.sarahjmaas.com/court-of-thorns-and-roses/. Accessed 18 Sep. 2017.

Attebery, Brian. *Stories About Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

---. *Strategies of Fantasy*. Indiana University Press, 1992.

Auden, W. H. "The Quest Hero." *Understanding The Lord of the Rings: The Best of Tolkien Criticisms*, edited by Rose A. Zimbardo and Neil D. Isaacs, Houghton Mifflin, 2004, pp. 31-51.

Barnett, David. "George R. R. Martin Defends Game of Thrones Rape as Portraying Reality of War." *The Guardian*, 4 June 2015, www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jun/04/george-rr-martin-game-of-thrones-rape-reality-of-war. Accessed 23 Oct. 2017.

Benstock, Shari, Suzanne Ferriss, and Susanne Woods. *A Handbook of Literary Feminisms*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

@BioMarkDarrah. "Halfway through my trip to Barcelona! I'm here showing Anthem internally to EA. I am EP of BOTH DA and Anthem working with @Bio_Warner as Game Director Anthem's up next but there are people hard at work on both franchises and I

look forward to sharing more in the future." *Twitter*, 24 Jan. 2018, 10:38 AM, www.twitter.com/BioMarkDarrah/status/956189419748450304. Accessed 22 Mar. 2018.

Bogost, Ian. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games*. The MIT Press, 2007.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 3rd ed., New World Library, 2008.

Campbell, Lori M, editor. *A Quest of Her Own: Essays on the Female Hero in Modern Fantasy*. McFarland, 2014.

Cart, Michael. *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*. 3rd ed., Neal Schuman, 2016.

@CaseyDHudson. "Reading lots of feedback regarding Dragon Age, and I think you'll be relieved to see what the team is working on. Story & character focused. Too early to talk details, but when we talk about "live" it just means designing a game for continued storytelling after the main story." Twitter, 25 Jan. 2018, 6:04 AM, www.twitter.com/CaseyDHudson/status/956498118803185685. Accessed 22 Mar. 2018.

Chess, Shira. *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Intersectionality and Identity Politics: Learning from Violence against Women of Color." *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, edited by Wendy K. Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski, 3rd ed., McGraw Hill, 2010, pp. 482-91.

Dewey, Caitlin. "The Only Guide to Gamergate You Will Ever Need to Read." *The Washington Post*, 14 Oct. 2014, www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/10/14/the-only-guide-to-gamergate-you-will-ever-need-to-read/?utm_term=.cd76348960ff.

Douglas, Susan J. *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*. Three Rivers, 1995.

Downes, Jeremy M. “Romancing the Quest: Quest Narratives in Changing Contexts.” *The Hero’s Quest*, edited by Bernard Schweizer and Robert A. Segal, Salem Press, 2013, pp. 56-79.

Dragon Age II. Designed by Mike Laidlaw, Electronic Arts, 2011.

Dragon Age: Inquisition. Directed by Mike Laidlaw, Electronic Arts, 2014.

Dragon Age: Origins. Designed by Brent Knowles, Mike Laidlaw, and James Ohlen, Electronic Arts, 2009.

Driscoll, Catherine. *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*. Columbia University Press, 2002.

Duits, Linda and Liesbet van Zoonen. “Against Amnesia: 30+ Years of Girls’ Studies.” *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2009, pp. 111-14.

Flanagan, Mary and Helen Nissenbaum. *Values at Play in Digital Games*. The MIT Press, 2014.

Frederick, John T. “Hawthorne’s ‘Scribbling Women.’ “ *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 2, 1975, pp. 231-40.

Frye, Northrop. “Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths.” *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton University Press, 1957, pp. 131-239.

Harris, Anita, editor. *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*. Routledge, 2004.

Hillman, Judith. “Imaginary Worlds of Fantasy.” *Discovering Children’s Literature*. 3rd ed., Pearson, 2002, pp. 159-82.

Jaques, Zoe. “ ‘This Huntress Who Delights in Arrows’: The Female Archer in Children’s Fiction.” *A Quest of Her Own: Essays on the Female Hero in Modern Fantas*y, edited by Lori M. Campbell, McFarland, 2014, pp. 150-71.

Jane, Emma A. *Misogyny Online: A Short (and Brutish) History*. SAGE, 2016.

Jones, Maggie. "What Teenagers Are Learning From Online Porn." *The New York Times*, 7 Feb. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2018/02/07/magazine/teenagers-learning-online-porn-literacy-sex-education.html.

Kafai, Yasmin B., Carrie Heeter, Jill Denner, and Jennifer Y. Sun, editors. *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming*. The MIT Press, 2011.

Kearney, Mary Celeste. "Coalescing: The Development of Girls' Studies." *NWSA Journal*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2009, pp. 1-28.

Levy, Michael and Farah Mendlesohn. *Children's Fantasy Literature: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Lewit, Meghan. "Why Do Female Authors Dominate Young-Adult Fiction?" *The Atlantic*, Aug. 2012, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/08/why-do-female-authors-dominate-young-adult-fiction/260829/.

Lipkin, Elline. *Girls' Studies*. Seal Press, 2009.

Lovelace, Amanda. *The Princess Saves Herself in This One*. Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2017.

Ludwikowska, Joanna. "Uncovering the Secret: Medieval Women, Magic and the Other." *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2014, pp. 83-103. *Literature Resource Center*, www.doi.org/10.2478/stap-2014-0009.

Maas, Sarah J. *A Court of Mist and Fury*. Bloomsbury USA Childrens, 2016.

---. *A Court of Thorns and Roses*. Bloomsbury USA Childrens, 2015.

---. *A Court of Wings and Ruin*. Bloomsbury USA Childrens, 2017.

Malkowski, Jennifer and TreaAndrea M. Russworm, editors. *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*. Indiana University Press, 2017.

Murdock, Maureen. *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness*. Shambhala Publications, 1990.

Nochlin, Linda. "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Amelia Jones, Psychology Press, 2003, pp. 229-33.

Olson, Cheryl K. et al. "Factors Correlated with Violent Video Game Use by Adolescent Boys and Girls." *Journal of Adolescent Health*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2007, pp. 77-83.

Pearson, Carol and Katherine Pope. *The Female Hero in American and British Literature*. R. R. Bowker Company, 1981.

Peery, Joshua. "Game Writing in Practice - MMORPG Quests." *Play/Write: Digital Rhetoric, Writing, Games*, edited by Douglas Eyman and Andrea D. Davis, Parlor Press, 2016, pp. 347-61.

Roach, Catherine M. *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture*. Indiana University Press, 2016.

Salter, Anastasia. *What is Your Quest?: From Adventure Games to Interactive Books*. University of Iowa Press, 2014.

Sarkeesian, Anita. "Women as Background Decoration (Part Two)." *YouTube*, uploaded by feministfrequency, 25 Aug. 2014, www.youtu.be/5i_RPr9DwMA.

Schut, Kevin. "They Kill Mystery: The Mechanistic Bias of of Video Game Representations of Religion and Spirituality." *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell and Gregory Price Grieve, Indiana University Press, 2014, pp. 255-75.

Segal, Robert A., editor. *Hero Myths: A Reader*. Blackwell Publishers, 2000.

Shaw, Adrienne. *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*. University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

Sprague, Marsha M. and Kara K. Keeling. “Fantastic Females: Strong Girls in Fantasy and Science Fiction.” *Discovering Their Voices: Engaging Adolescent Girls with Young Adult Literature*. International Reading Association, 2007, pp. 111-42.

tafkar. “Rape in ASOIAF vs. Game of Thrones: A Statistical Analysis.” *tafkar*, 24 May 2015, 12:01 PM, www.tafkarfanfic.tumblr.com/post/119770640640/rape-in-asoiaf-vs-game-of-thrones-a-statistical

Tolkien, J. R. R. “The Fellowship of the Ring.” *The Lord of the Rings*, HarperCollins Publishers, 1994.

Toma, Elisabeta. “Powerful Elderly Characters in Video Games: Flemeth of Dragon Age.” *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2015, pp. 51-65.

Valenti, Jessica. *The Purity Myth: How America’s Obsession with Virginity Is Hurting Young Women*. Seal Press, 2009.

Valero, Amando López, Eduardo Encabo Fernández, and Isabel Jerez Martínez. “Digital Competence and Literacy: Developing New Narrative Formats in the Dragon Age: Origins Videogame.” *Comunicar*, vol. 18, no. 36, 2011, 165-70.

Walker, Jeanne Murray. “High Fantasy, Rites of Passage, and Cultural Value.” *Teaching Children’s Literature: Issues, Pedagogy, and Resources*, edited by Glenn Edward Sadler, Modern Language Association, 1992, pp. 109-20.

Young, Helen. “ ‘It’s the Middle Ages, Yo!’: Race, Neo/Medievalisms, and the World of Dragon Age.” *The Year’s Work in Medievalism*, vol. 27, 2013, pp. 1-9.

Zeisler, Andi. *Feminism and Popular Culture*. Seal Press, 2008.

WORKS CONSULTED

Bardugo, Leigh. *Six of Crows*. Henry Holt and Company, 2015.

Barefield, Laura D. *Gender and History in Medieval English Romance and Chronicle*. Peter Lang, 2003.

Bayonetta_. "Can You Give the Females Sexy Armor or Is the Game Feminist?"*GameFAQs*, 6 Nov. 2014, 8:25 AM, www.gamefaqs.gamespot.com/boards/718650-dragon-age-inquisition/70507194.

Beowulf. Translated by J. R. R. Tolkien, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014.

Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. Knopf, 1976.

Bogost, Ian. *How to Talk about Video Games*. University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

Butterfly Soup. Designed by Brianna Lei, 2017, www./brianna-lei.itch.io/butterfly-soup.

Candy Crush Saga. King, 2012.

Cassell, Justine and Henry Jenkins, editors. *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*. The MIT Press, 1998.

Chokshi, Roshani. *The Star-Touched Queen*. St. Martin's Press, 2016.

Civilization. Designed by Sid Meier and Bruce Shelley, MicroProse, 1991.

Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. Scholastic Press, 2010.

Coulthurst, Audrey. *Of Fire and Stars*. Balzer + Bray, 2016.

Dark Souls. Directed by Hidetaka Miyazaki, FromSoftware, 2011.

Defoe, Daniel. *Moll Flanders*. Penguin Classics, 1989.

Depression Quest. Designed by Zoe Quinn, 2013, www.depressionquest.com.

Dickerman, Charles, Jeff Christensen, and Stella Beatríz Kerl-McClain. "Big Breasts and Bad Guys: Depictions of Gender and Race in Video Games." *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2008, pp. 20-9.

Diner Dash. Designed by Nicholas Fortugno, PlayFirst, 2004.

Dungeon. Written by Don Daglow, Digital Equipment Corporation, 1975.

Dungeons and Dragons. Designed by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, Tactical Studies Rules, 1974.

Eyman, Douglas and Andrea D. Davis, editors. *Play/Write: Digital Rhetoric, Writing, Games*. Parlor Press, 2016.

Fable. Designed by Peter Molyneux, Microsoft Game Studios, 2004.

Final Fantasy. Created by Hironobu Sakaguchi, Nintendo, 1987.

Galatea. Designed by Emily Short, 2000, www.pr-if.org/play/galatea/.

Game of Thrones. Created by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, Warner Bros. Television Distribution, 2011.

Haase, Daniel, editor. *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*. Wayne State University Press, 2004.

Helbig, Alethea K. and Agnes Regan Perkins, editors. *Myths and Hero Tales: A Cross-Cultural Guide to Literature for Children and Young Adults*. Greenwood, 1997.

Heller, Dana A. *The Feminization of Quest-Romance: Radical Departures*. University of Texas Press, 1990.

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Robert Fagles, Penguin Classics, 1999.

Jackson, Deirdre. *Medieval Women*. The British Library 2015.

Kristof, Nicholas D. and Sheryl WuDunn. *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*. Vintage Books, 2010.

Lerer, Seth. *Children's Literature: A Reader's History, from Aesop to Harry Potter*. University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Lewis, C. S. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. HarperTrophy, 2002.

Lieberman, Marcia R. " 'Some Day My Prince Will Come': Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale." *College English*, vol. 34, no. 3, 1972, pp. 383-95.

Maas, Sarah J. *Throne of Glass.* Bloomsbury USA Childrens, 2013.

Martin, George R. R. *A Game of Thrones*. Bantam Spectra, 1996.

Marz, Ron. "Forced Entry." *Green Lantern*, vol. 3, no. 54, 1994.

Mass Effect. Directed by Casey Hudson, Microsoft Game Studios, 2007.

McRobbie, Angela and Jenny Garber. "Girls and Subcultures." *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain*, edited by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, 2nd ed., Routledge, 2006, pp. 177-88.

Mendlesohn, Farah. *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Wesleyan, 2008.

Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman*. Penguin Books, 1976.

Nodelman, Perry. *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*. John Hopkins University Press, 2008.

Partner, Nancy F., editor. *Studying Medieval Women: Sex, Gender, Feminism*. Medieval Academy of America, 1993.

Quinn, Zoe. *Crash Override: How Gamergate (Nearly) Destroyed My Life, and How We Can Win the Fight Against Online Hate*. PublicAffairs, 2017.

Riordan, Rick. *The Lightning Thief*. Hyperion Books for Children, 2005.

Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Scholastic Press, 1998.

Schanoes, Veronica L. *Fairy Tales, Myths, and Psychoanalytic Theory: Feminism and Retelling the Tale.* Routledge, 2014.

Schweizer, Bernard and Robert A. Segal, editors. *The Hero's Quest*. Salem Press, 2013.

Shakespeare, William. *As You Like It.* Edited by Alan Brissenden, Oxford World's Classics, 1998.

---. *Much Ado About Nothing.* Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, Folger Shakespeare Library, 1995.

---. *Twelfth Night.* Edited by Roger Warren and Stanley Wells, Oxford World's Classics, 2008.

Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic. Directed by Casey Hudson, LucasArts, 2003.

Super Mario Bros. Designed by Shigeru Miyamoto and Takashi Tezuka, Nintendo, 1985.

Super Princess Peach. Designed by Takayuki Ikeda, Nintendo, 2005.

Tahir, Sabaa. *An Ember in the Ashes*. Razorbill, 2015.

Temple Run. Imanji Studios, 2011.

The Elder Scrolls: Arena. Directed by Vijay Lakshman, Bethseda Softworks, 1994.

The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King. Directed by Peter Jackson, New Line Cinema, 2003.

Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Hobbit*. Houghton Mifflin, 2002.

---. *The Lord of the Rings*. HarperCollins Publishers, 1994.

Tomb Raider. Designed by Toby Gard, Eidos Interactive, 1996.

Tomb Raider. Directed by Noah Hughes, Daniel Chayer, and Daniel Neuburger, Square Enix, 2013.

Virgil. *The Aeneid*. Translated by Robert Fagles, Penguin Classics, 2008.

Warner, Marina. *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995.

Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. 2nd ed. Dover Publications, 1996.

World of Warcraft. Designed by Rob Pardo, Jeff Kaplan, and Tom Chilton, Blizzard Entertainment, 2004.

Yousafzai, Malala. *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*. Back Bay Books, 2015.

VITA

Saffyre Louise Falkenberg was born February 23, 1994 in San Francisco, California. She is the daughter of Bob and Zeta Falkenberg, the sister of Sy Falkenberg, and the wife of Jack Larsen. After graduating from a home education program in 2012, she enrolled in Collin College, where she received her Associate of Arts in General Studies in 2014. Afterwards, she transferred to Texas Woman's University, where she earned her Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in English and a minor in history in 2016.

After graduation, she began graduate study at Texas Christian University. While working on her Master of Arts degree in English with a graduate certificate in Women and Gender studies, she held a Teaching Assistantship from 2016-2018. Her appointments included acting as the managing editor for *descant* and serving as a teaching assistant in two sections of Girls' Studies and one section of Introduction to Literature. She is a member of the Children's Literature Association.

Saffyre has three cats.

ABSTRACT

BEYOND DAMSELS IN DISTRESS:
FEMALE HEROISM IN YOUNG ADULT FANTASY FICTION AND FANTASY ROLE-PLAYING VIDEO GAMES

by Saffyre Louise Falkenberg, MA, 2018
Department of English
Texas Christian University

Karen Steele, Professor of English and Chair of the Department

This thesis argues that an analysis of the fantasy genre through a girls' studies lens reveals that diverse representations of girlhoods through female heroes can empower girls despite the genre's patriarchal roots. To support this argument, I analyze representations of gender and sexuality in *A Court of Thorns and Roses* and *Dragon Age*. The first chapter argues that Maas cultivates many visions of the female hero through Feyre while negotiating issues of identity, agency, and power central to Feyre's heroic transformations that empowers certain girlhoods. The second chapter argues that *Dragon Age*, although catering to the male gaze, becomes more progressive over time in its gendered narratives by educating players about queer identities and cultivating heroism through a sisterhood of side characters. The importance of looking at fantasy media with a girls' studies lens is illustrated by the popularity of fantasy media and the increasing focus on girl characters.