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Modern-Day Fantasy: The Progressive Role of the Active Female

Elizabeth Turello¹

*Abstract. Compared to other genres of literature, modern-day fantasy is often disregarded as Eurocentric and homogeneous. In this article, I argue such critiques fail to take stock of the influential and progressive role women have played within modern-day fantasy since its creation by J.R.R. Tolkien. This article primarily focuses on modern-day fantasy works from three decades that coincide with a wave of feminism, beginning with Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* in the 1950s and continuing with J.K. Rowling's early nineties and aughts *Harry Potter* series as well as Leigh Bardugo's mid-2010's duology, *Six of Crows*. This article discusses the direct correlation between each wave of feminism and the author's work and examines the active female role, in which the heroine makes her own decisions, relies on herself and overcomes the restrictions placed on her by a male dominated society. Theorist Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in which she recognizes the distinction between the portrayal of the active male and passive female in the media, is the basis for my argument. It is expanded upon, however, through the analysis of the character arcs of heroines such as Tolkien's Éowyn, Rowling's Hermione Granger and Bardugo's Inej Gafa. By completing internal and external journeys as well as redefining the stereotypical part of the princess, the heroines in these stories prove to be vital to the plot of their respective works, while simultaneously deconstructing the damsel in distress role previously used to formulate female characters.*

Keywords: feminism, fantasy literature, gender, J.R.R. Tolkien, J.K. Rowling, Leigh Bardugo

Introduction

Fantasy literature has traditionally split the roles of its characters "between [the] active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey 62). Conversely, modern-day fantasy, established in the 1950s, depicts women in active roles.

J.R.R. Tolkien, who published his three-volume *The Lord of the Rings* between 1954 and 1955 and is credited as the father of modern-day fantasy, first sought to move past the constraint that earlier fantasy literature had placed upon female characters. Tolkien is often dismissed as a traditionalist that exhibits little focus on underrepresented groups, meaning that critics tend to point to the lack of diversity among his fictional characters, particularly to his lack of female characters. Yet the idea that Tolkien was not progressive is a product of twenty-first century detractors comparing *The Lord of the Rings* to the contemporary standards of representation. Although Tolkien had already published *The Hobbit* in 1937, critics consider his later epic to be

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the foundation for modern-day fantasy as it surpasses a children's tale, focusing instead on adult concerns like corruption and suppression.

One such development is Tolkien's inclusion of powerful female characters, one of whom entered an active role. According to author Nick Bentley, "fiction of the 1950s attempted to articulate empowering discourses for marginalized groups that were not being adequately represented in contemporary intellectual and theoretical discourses" (81). This notion is present in *The Lord of the Rings* as Tolkien's heroine, Éowyn, a "shieldmaiden" who rides into battle, does not fill the passive damsel in distress role so common in medieval fantasy stories, such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's account of King Arthur in *The History of the Kings of Britain* (c. 1136) and Chaucer's "Clerks Tale" in *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1400). Instead, Éowyn relies on her own skill on the battlefield. While the inclusion of a single active female may seem anti-feminist from a contemporary viewpoint, Éowyn was a progressive character for the 1950s society in which Tolkien lived, which pushed a "domestic ideology" onto women (Neuhaus 529). Often, "discussion of the interwar and postwar periods occurs in terms of their relative lack of feminist activity or analysis, as compared with these other times" (Caine 10). This analysis, however, fails to account for the progressive changes occurring in literature, changes that Tolkien's legendarium exhibits. Novels such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, and *Six of Crows*, when situated within the patriarchal culture in which they were produced, have pioneered an important shift in the representation of gender in fantasy literature.

While J.R.R. Tolkien and his beloved male protagonists, including Frodo Baggins and Gandalf the Grey, are notable figures of pop culture, his female characters, though lesser known, are essential to the plot. Unlike previous fantasy classics like *Beowulf* (c. 1000) and *One Thousand and One Nights* (n.d.), in which female characters functioned as prizes to be won by the heroic male, Tolkien deviates from objectifying women in this way and instead depicts their abilities to wield knowledge, love, and sacrifice to influence the outcome of events. Although critics have pointed to Tolkien's fault of including only one female character in *Lord of the Rings* who has a complete character arc, such criticism overlooks the vital contributions of every female character within his legendarium. It is not only the heroine Éowyn, for example, but also the half-elf Arwen and the all-knowing royal Galadriel who demonstrate the importance with which Tolkien regarded women during a time when women were still oppressed

A modern fantasy story that rivals *The Lord of the Rings* in notability, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* reshaped the genre, as she expanded Tolkien's depiction of women by placing her primary female characters, rather than only one, in active roles. Furthermore, Rowling widened the genre's audience. Tolkien's earlier book, *The Hobbit*, focuses more on adventure than advancing real-life commentary, but *Harry Potter* appeals to adults as well as children and young-adults by attending to difficult and mature topics, including sexism and gender inequity. In this way, Rowling's work shapes the perception that younger people have of gender roles through her positive portals of complex and powerful female characters. Published roughly half a century

after *Lord of the Rings*, the cultural and societal differences between Tolkien and Rowling's historical moments are evident in these texts.

Coinciding with third-wave feminism, which sought to advance the ideals of second-wave feminism by questioning what defines femininity, Rowling writes about women who emphasized intersectionality (Drucker). Yet Rowling also lays bare the still prevalent discrimination against women, as her novels primarily feature men in leading roles such as the Minister of Magic and Headmaster of Hogwarts, while most subservient roles like secretaries are occupied by women. In spite of the increasingly progressive ideas about gender that informs Rowling's writing, she nevertheless reverts to some harmful stereotypes within her story that align more so with second-wave feminism of the 1960s. Her infrequent gender biases create a narrative conflict that the emergence of more recent modern-day fantasy novels has begun to resolve. On the whole, however, Rowling's female characters surpass Tolkien's in depth as they affect more of the story than just plot advancement.

A direct response to the current fourth-wave feminist movement that began in 2012 and considers "technological mobilization, intersectionality, empowerment, social activism and denunciation of sexual violence" crucial, Leigh Bardugo's Young Adult (YA) fantasy duology, *Six of Crows*, not only includes women within her world, as Tolkien and Rowling have done, but makes them and women's issues more broad focal points of her novels (Cabrera, et al. 418). These novels are written in the point of view of six separate characters, two of whom are female. Although the female perspectives represent a minority in these novels, the heroines exceed and deconstruct popular gender expectations. Members of an otherwise male-centric gang, the novel's two heroines, Inej and Nina, are uniquely vulnerable as a direct result of their gender, such as both being sold into prostitution. Through her work, Bardugo depicts women's ongoing struggle against sexualization and gender violence as they attempt to navigate a male dominated society.

Modern-day fantasy is a controversial genre. Besides its debated literary merit, the genre has been subject to the criticism that it lacks feminist qualities. For example, Melissa Hatcher McCrory notes that many "feminist critics . . . have been even harsher in their dealings with Tolkien" since his legendarium lacks robust representation of strong female characters (44). However, such criticism, I argue, has failed to examine these stories as products of the societies in which they were written, and to which they nevertheless pose significant challenges. It is erroneous to dismiss any of these three works as insufficiently feminist, a criticism that subjects fantasy literature to standards to which more established genres have not been subject. For instance, scholars have consistently and generously read canonical novels such as Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in the context of the harsh realities of the United Kingdom's Regency era, during which female choice was not valued and "women . . . saw their own hopes for even minor improvements in the education and social treatment of women disappointed" (Mellor 42-43). Scholars have praised Austen for her progressive representation of Lizzy Bennet's female

individuality despite her still conforming to societal norms of the time, such as her insistence that women are equal to men despite her marriage to Mr. Darcy, in which she loses her rights. It is also fallacious to ignore the conclusion these three works serve to enlighten: progress is not linear. Therefore, by analyzing *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter* and *Six of Crows* in the context of the societies in which they were written, as opposed to judging them against an ever-changing set of credentials, these works' feminist qualities can be uncovered and understood.

Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings*

Published between the years 1954 and 1956, Tolkien's legendarium reflected a society struggling to rebuild after two catastrophic World Wars. The period of the wars saw a "redefinition of gender that occurred in many Western countries" (Higonnet 1). When the men left to fight, the women stepped up and filled vacant jobs.

Although women could help on the homefront, their role in society is still considered traditional. This view fails to acknowledge that even during this seemingly traditional time, women's roles were progressing. Nick Bentley, author of *Radical Fictions: The English Novel in the 1950s*, suggests that "The fifties are consequently recycled in our popular imagination with conservative myths of order, social stability, moral decent and restraint - the period before the experimentation, liberation and decadence of the 1960s" (11). In other words, despite society collectively viewing the 1950s as a conservative time, there were still advances being made by women, regardless if they received recognition or not. Therefore, it is unquestionable that Tolkien drew influence from the postwar society in his great epic as his females struggle between conforming to conventional ideals and rising above them.

Tolkien is heavily praised for his creation, and yet, he is often condemned for his inadequate inclusion of commanding female characters. As Hatcher claims, however, "modern criticism has misread the role of women in Tolkien's epic" (44). Throughout the complex work, there are only a handful of female characters, none of which feature in the male-centric Fellowship. Yet, Hatcher argues, "we as readers in the 21st century, should not judge Tolkien by our modern feminist standards" (44). Rather, when analyzing *The Lord of the Rings*, the representation of female characters should be judged against 1950s society, in which women, although still confined by traditional ways, were beginning to grapple with society's expectations.

Departing from the passive roles of women, Éowyn, the White Lady of Rohan, completes her own character arc. Although Éowyn is the only female who fulfills the requirements of the heroic character arc by setting a goal and struggling before achieving it, her in-depth characterization reflects the 1950s developing idea that women more generally are complex beings with objectives. Furthermore, Éowyn manages to inaugurate this role for women who are determined to fight at the same time her feelings for the heir of Isildur, Aragorn, are a prominent feature of her character arc. Her narrative thus contrasts with the half elf, Arwen Undómiel, who, in falling for the heroic Aragorn, allows her affection to leave her in a passive role. The

dissimilarity is most pronounced when “Arwen waits at Rivendell for his [Aragorn’s] return from the war of the Ring,” while “Éowyn rides to battle with him” (Hatcher 46). At first glance, that Tolkien pits Arwen against Éowyn, who resists the traditional role of a woman who passively waits for a lover’s return, might seem anti-feminist. However, Arwen’s choice to value love and devote herself to Aragorn above all else is an active one. In a society beginning to give women a choice between the household, the work force or both, Arwen’s decision to love and marry Aragorn, which results in her forfeiting her immortality, is an example of a female exercising her right to choose her own fate. On the other hand, Éowyn determines that before marrying, she must fight against evil. During the Battle of the Pelennor Fields in *The Return of the King*, when attacked by one of the Dark Lord Sauron’s ring-servants, a Nazgûl, Éowyn, “with her last strength . . . drove her sword between crown and mantle, as the great shoulders bowed before her” (Tolkien 824). In this scene, Éowyn’s character arc reaches its climax as her goal of helping to destroy evil occurs, thus showing the audience that a female can be as powerful and necessary in places previously deemed only fit for men.

Tolkien also demonstrates how female power can operate just as meaningfully out of public view. The female counterpart to the Great Wizard Gandalf, one of the greatest Elves in Middle-Earth, Galadriel, uses her foresight abilities and her superior knowledge to guide the Fellowship on their journey. Unlike Éowyn who is present throughout the story and partakes in battle, Galadriel is “textual[ly] absent [in order] to be effective” (Carter 71). Only appearing a handful of times throughout the legendarium, most of the aid provided by Galadriel occurs behind the scenes. For instance, it is revealed to the reader when the Great Wizard returns as Gandalf the White, that he was saved by the giant eagle Gwaihir, sent to rescue him on behalf of Galadriel. In contrast, Gandalf’s role within Tolkien’s world is to prompt the adventure of heroes by presenting a threat that needs to be addressed. He then travels with the heroes for a brief time before disappearing, only to return during the climax of the story. Gandalf’s off-screen presence thus acts in a different way than Galadriel’s. Whereas the memory of Gandalf’s sacrifice motivates members of the party to persevere through their journey, Galadriel manipulates the plot so that the heroes have a better chance of succeeding. Gandalf can be credited with affecting the outcome of the quest; however, Galadriel’s veiled work presents a challenge to reading Gandalf as the dominant actor. As Susan Carter notes, “only after Galadriel has gone, and upon reflection, we might wonder how much of the action was her responsibility, and to what extent she, even more than Gandalf, held pre-knowledge” (Carter 73). While Gandalf works to motivate the Fellowship and understands the necessity of his self-sacrifice in fighting the Balrog, Galadriel’s foresight provides her with the knowledge of what must happen on Frodo’s journey, which surpasses Gandalf’s abilities. She is the guardian of the Fellowship as she intervenes throughout the story from offstage, such as when she sends the imperative message to Aragorn that they must take the Path of the Dead, which enables him to gain the assistance of the army of the dead, a necessary component in defeating the Dark Lord Sauron.

Through the characterization of Galadriel, Tolkien presents women as having an omniscience that trumps men's onstage agency. While Galadriel's position may be reflective of the 1940s in which women aided the men at war from an offstage position without which they could not have been successful, her character also resembles women in a restrictive post-war society. Since women were not permitted advancements and were denied acknowledgement for the minimal progress they had made, Tolkien's inclusion of the mysterious Galadriel demonstrates that women have power, while simultaneously exploring where that power resides. In this regard, Tolkien imagines women's power and influence in its concealed form, which ultimately impacted the next wave of feminism.

Rowling and *Harry Potter*

The sexism and domestic hardships that J.K. Rowling experienced, such as being left a poor, single mother in the early 1990s, translates into her seven-book series, *Harry Potter*. After her divorce, Rowling, raising a young daughter alone, relied on welfare and battled depression while writing the first *Harry Potter* novel. (Gillett). These difficulties were compounded by the fact that Rowling also faced discrimination from her publishers as a result of her sex. At the time, the middle-grade fantasy genre was targeted at young boys, who, the publishers believed, would not be inclined to pick up a fantastical story written by a female. Afraid the series would not sell, Rowling's publishers required her to use initials rather than her name "in order to disguise her gender in a bid to appeal to a wider audience" (Barns). Although she complied, the publication of the *Harry Potter* series has reshaped a generation's perception of female roles in both society and literature.

Nevertheless, literary critics and the public alike have criticized the *Harry Potter* series for reinforcing gender inequality through harmful stereotypes. Elizabeth Heilman acknowledges that although *Harry Potter* features "multiple, contradictory, and even transgressive representations of gender," the series relies on too many gender stereotypes to be considered a feminist work (140). Written in the third person with a limited viewpoint that focuses on Harry Potter, "the boy who lived," it is questionable as to why Rowling chose a male protagonist instead of a female when almost every fantasy book at the time did the same. Yet critics like Heilman fail to acknowledge the inevitable misogyny each person internalizes as a result of societal teachings. Focusing on Rowling's minimal shortcomings regarding gender portrayal is a failure to criticize the integration of male chauvinism by which each person is affected. The notion that her novels are inherently anti-feminist serves as a discredit to the boundaries Rowling pushed regarding the expectations set for women in the western society of the 1990s and early aughts. These decades saw the rise of third-wave feminism; yet progress the progress women had achieved suffered as they were also commercially sexualized and frequently faced hostility in their attempts to bridge the wide gender gaps in education and the workplace. Rowling's women, particularly Harry's best friend Hermione Granger and his love interest Ginny Weasley, reject the stereotypes surrounding

beauty and love that drove sexualization and repudiate the notion that without either, women cannot be successful.

In this way, Hermione and Ginny exemplify the way in which Rowling satirizes the stereotypical character qualities associated with gender. Often, when writing women, fantasy authors rely on what is called “the princess dramatic persona,” which sees female characters comply with a sexist arc in which the “princess” waits for the male hero to rescue her (Lin 86). Rowling both nods to and disrupts this arc in having Hermione refute the beauty of a princess and Ginny reject the helpless damsel ideology.

Hermione’s appearance undergoes a transformation that alludes to but also critically deviates from the transformation narrative of a familiar archetype, Cinderella. When she is first introduced, Hermione is described as having “a bossy sort of voice, lots of bushy brown hair, and rather large front teeth” (*Sorcerer* 105). Her description does not equate to that of other heroines who, despite their heroics, still aspire to beauty standards, as is evident in even Tolkien’s traditionally beautiful Éowyn and Galadriel. In a sense, Rowling parallels young Hermione to “pre-ball” Cinderella as both are considered “outcasts” from the stereotypical beauty standards that have been used to define womanhood. Ming Hsun Lin argues that Rowling carries the “obvious similarities [that] exist between Hermione and Cinderella” into the fourth book, *The Goblet of Fire*, as “both girls’ appearances change so drastically that their acquaintances do not recognize them” (Lin 90). In the classic fairytale, Cinderella, with the assistance of her fairy godmother, becomes so beautiful that she captures the prince’s attention. While there is no “royalty” in *The Goblet of Fire*, Hermione attends the Yule Ball with the famous Quidditch athlete, Viktor Krum. Whereas Hermione had captured Krum’s attention before her transformation, the change in her outward appearance is still notable, as the rest of the school, including her best friends Harry Potter and Ron Weasley, fail to recognize her upon her arrival to the ball. During the ball, Ron becomes jealous of Krum as he spends the night as Hermione’s date. His rejection of Krum combined with snarky remarks leave Hermione disappointed, alluding to the idea that happiness and beauty do not equate.

Despite the initial similarities between the two, Rowling chooses to enact a different ending to the Cinderella trope. At the end of Cinderella’s tale, despite turning back to her former self for a brief period of time, the prince discovers who she is and they marry, her outward appearance returning to the beauty she exhibited during the royal ball. On the other hand, at the conclusion of the Yule Ball, Hermione sheds the beautiful exterior she had for the night and once she returns to her former self, remains as such. Unlike Cinderella, Hermione’s “refusal to expand effort on her appearance can be feminist recognition that beauty cannot guarantee happiness as it does for the fairy tale princess,” as is evident by Ron’s treatment of her throughout the ball (Lin 90). Instead, Rowling is progressive in her depiction of Hermione as, like many women during Rowling’s time, she claimed ownership of her looks instead of allowing men and society to define her beauty.

Whereas Hermione's restoration to her unmanipulated beauty exposes traditional beauty standards as oppressive, Ginny shatters the equally oppressive expectations of the love story. Although Ginny's transition into a young woman mirrors "the emblematic glass symbol" from the Cinderella story as it leads to her capturing the attention of the male hero, "there is no direct link between the conquests Harry makes through the series and his marriage to Ginny" (Lin 86). Despite being introduced in the first book, it is not until the second book, *The Chamber of Secrets*, that Ginny comes to play a vital role. Throughout the novel, the threat of an unknown attacker looms over Hogwarts. Students, mainly muggle-born, or people born to non-magical parents, begin to fall victim to the mysterious attacker as one by one, they start to become petrified in a coma-like state. Even while fear spreads through the school, purebloods such as the Weasley's do not fear paralysis as their group has not yet been targeted. However, while eavesdropping on a conversation between faculty members, Harry and Ron learn that Ron's little sister Ginny has been the first student to be taken into the Chamber of Secrets. Upon hearing that "her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever," Harry decides to rescue Ginny (293). Although both Harry and Ron enter the Chamber intending to save her, due to their backfired magic, the path becomes blocked for Ron. Continuing the quest, Harry proceeds to rescue and revive Ginny, narrowly escaping from the grips of evil, echoing a hero and damsel plot device of older stories. Yet the similarities between the two plots ends here, as Harry's rescue of Ginny ultimately has no impact on their future relationship.

After well placed hints of admiration between two friends, their romantic relationship only forms four books later in *The Half-Blood Prince*, after Ginny is responsible for the win of their underdog Quidditch team. Harry, who has been internally wrestling with his feelings for Ginny, is so elated, that he kisses her, which leads to their dating. However, upon breaking up because of the role Harry must play in defeating Voldemort, Ginny once again demonstrates a lack of correlation between Harry's heroism and her love for him in the final book. Here, Rowling breaks the societal idea that women are weak creatures in need of defending as Ginny, only sixteen and not permitted to fight by her mother, disobeys and joins the fight against evil in the Battle of Hogwarts, the dramatic conclusion to the end of the series. Although it may be expected that at some point during the battle that Harry will once again save Ginny from imminent danger, Rowling deviates from the princess pattern. Instead, both become heroes in their own right as they fight against Voldemort and his supporters, the Death Eater, their paths never crossing throughout the war. And, as Harry fights without Ginny directly by his side, he never doubts her abilities to protect herself, instead only focusing on his love for her and sadness that he may not see her again as a result of his own fate.

Through Ginny's independence, Rowling conveys that women do not need to rely on men, an idea that the pervasive princess arc, internalized starting in childhood, has prevented many men and women from realizing, starting in childhood.

Bardugo and *Six of Crows*

While Leigh Bardugo's *Grishaverse* was introduced in her 2012 novel *Shadow and Bone*, it did not gain acclaimed prominence until the publication of her 2015 novel *Six of Crows*. Set in the same universe but detailing the lives of different characters, *Six of Crows* and its sequel, *Crooked Kingdom*, explore real-world problems such as opposition to diversity. Contrasting Tolkien and Rowling before her, Bardugo writes through the eyes of not just one, but two female characters, enabling her readers to experience their hardships firsthand and not through the perspective of an observer. During the time Bardugo was writing, postfeminism, which "assumes that any choice a woman makes is a feminist choice," was emerging as a dominant feminist discourse in Western society, as is reflective in her novels (Brown). Through the exploration of the differing racial identity and the shared trauma of the two girls, Bardugo successfully writes two powerful heroines while simultaneously depicting the unique obstacles of abuse and injustice they must face as women.

Set in a fictionalized Amsterdam, *Six of Crows* begins in the trade capital of Bardugo's world, Ketterdam. The story details the lives of six criminals and outcasts: one who has singlehandedly restored the reputation of the now feared criminal group, the Dregs; another with a serious gambling problem working to pay off his debts; an ex-military man; a runaway pursued by his father; a girl sold into slavery; and another looking to avenge her people. Offered riches beyond measure, the unlikely gang takes on a mission to infiltrate the Ice Court, home to the *drüskelle*, a military group, where they must free a captive. Along the way, the crew, already hardened by street life, is exposed to perils they never imagined as they uncover secrets that threaten their world.

In her duology, Bardugo pieces together tragic backgrounds for her two heroines, Inej Ghafa and Nina Zenik, both of which have resulted in sexual trauma. Belonging to subjugated ethnic groups, Inej is kidnapped and taken from her home while Nina, although eventually ending up captured, initially leaves her homeland as a *solider*. Inej is a Suli, a group of nomadic people from the fictitious country Ravka. A central theme of the duology, Inej is taken unwillingly and sold into prostitution, a market sector in Ketterdam that heavily relies on the appeal of foreign girls. Even though Bardugo provides this background in part as a political comment about discrimination based on race and religion, the violence Inej experiences is also gender-based. In 2016, the same year the sequel *Crooked Kingdom* was released, the International Labour Office estimated that 4.8 million people, 99% of which were females, were victims of forced sexual exploitation that year. Bardugo explores the idea of women being seen as sexual objects in today's world through the tragedy bestowed upon Inej.

That the blatant racial hatred that the other female protagonist, Nina, faces ultimately also becomes a comment on her gender suggests that the inequality between men and women, especially in regard to sexuality, is persistent. As a Grisha, a group of people classified as "the elite of Ravka...[who] manipulate matter at its fundamental levels," a magical ability that allows

each Grisha to have power over one type of element such as metal and to therefore control it, Nina is hunted and despised by the drüskelle. According to the drüskelle, the Grisha's existence is offensive as they come from "a land of blasphemers and barbarism" and thus, in the eyes of the warriors, need to be exterminated (*Crows* 234). By focusing on Nina and her personal experience of being captured by the drüskelle, Bardugo is once again making a commentary on the subservient role society expects of women. Although the Grisha practice gender equity, the drüskelle are all men. By showing the hatred the drüskelle have for the Grisha from Nina's point of view, Bardugo uses the racial tensions between the two to ultimately reflect the power men think they have over women. Once she is captured, Nina is forced inside a cage aboard a ship where "she'd been one of a group of prisoners – filthy and frightened" facing inevitable execution (*Crows* 233). When describing the commander, Bardugo writes, "like all of them, he was tall, but wore a tidy beard and his long blond hair showed grey at the temples" (*Crows* 111). Emphasizing Nina's and the commander's vastly different physiognomy, Bardugo links racialization and racial violence with sex and gender-based violence, resonating our contemporary emphasis on an intersectionalism that argues that discrimination based on race perpetuates discrimination based on gender, class, and sexual orientation, and vice versa. However, rather than allowing her to remain in a submissive position, Bardugo creates a powerful intersectional heroine that mirrors today's feminist aspirations and social climate as she eventually breaks free from drüskelle control.

While the abuse suffered by Inej and Nina is used as a plot device by Bardugo, it is also a commentary on the prevalence of sexual assault in today's society. Women today are still at an unnervingly high risk of experiencing sexual abuse. According to the NSVRC, one in five women will be raped at some point in their lives, with 81% reporting they experienced either short-term or long-term PTSD as a result. Bardugo does not shy away from detailing the effects of the heroines' traumas. Although Inej is free by the time *Six of Crows* begins, the aftereffects of her abuse continue to loom over her. Not only does the person who bought her initial freedom, Tante Heleen, continue to threaten Inej's liberty, but Inej must serve the gang who bought her "freedom," the Dregs, until her debt is paid off. However, Inej is not free as the readers and other characters are led to believe. While working for the gang turns out to be a better alternative to prostitution, Inej has only been transferred from one slavery to another.

Throughout all of this, Inej has also not had the proper time to cope with the traumatic experience she endured. In "What is Trauma?" Karen McClintock defines trauma as "a life-threatening experience that overwhelms our ability to use ordinary, cognitive, emotional, and physical coping strategies" (14). Since Inej is never given the time to heal after her trauma, she suffers from PTSD symptoms like intrusive thoughts and intense distress when faced with symbols that trigger her trauma. Thus, Bardugo is questioning the possibility of freedom and whether or not women will ever escape the confinements placed on them by society.

The reader is given a glimpse into the sexual trauma the girls face as, during the beginning of *Six of Crows*, Nina is still serving one of the Houses responsible for prostitution. The silky garments and sensual demeanor she must use when with her customers, however, is a disguise, as Nina, at this point in her story, is working undercover for the Dregs and is not being forced into sex work, but rather uses her powers of healing to help others. Still, the dress she wears and the unwarranted flirtatious fashion in which Nina is addressed by certain patrons provides a glimpse into the abuse other girls like Inej are forced to endure. Once both Nina and Inej leave their respective Houses, Bardugo does not allow this memory to fade. Instead, she highlights the presence these Houses have and even though they are abusive places, their abuse is endorsed by society. While the Houses exist in a harsher part of the city, they are still permitted to run freely, advertise and serve clients of high status, like the many Councilmen of the city, who have the power to shut them down. However, because they are profitable and enjoyable for the rich, the Houses are left to operate without restrictions or regard for the girls forced into servitude. As a result, Bardugo successfully alludes to the blind eye that society continues to turn to blatant sexual abuse.

Even when Nina and Inej are removed from the Houses, they cannot escape its presence and effect on their lives, demonstrating the harmfulness of false freedom. During their mission, Inej and Nina must dress the part of the prostitutes they once were in order to sneak into the Ice Court, which has invited the Houses to bring prostitutes from Ketterdam for the drüskelle celebration. While in the garments, Inej notes that the men view them “not [as] people, not even really girls, just lovely objects to be collected” (*Crows* 209). During this instance, Inej’s PTSD resurfaces, as she is reminded of the negative feelings associated with being trapped by Tante Heleen. However, while past trauma influences their characters, Bardugo refuses to let it define them.

In the sequel, Inej is being held as a hostage. While her inner dialogue runs through her predicament, Inej affirms that “she would not quiver like a rabbit in a snare” (*Kingdom* 42). In this situation, the reader sees the mental progress that she has made as she no longer fears being trapped, even as her physical circumstances recalls her past enslavement. By making Inej and Nina independent and powerful women who struggle in a male dominated society, Bardugo comments on the strength of women, despite society’s tendency to dismiss them and their trauma.

Although women may be granted freedom of the mind by overcoming such traumas, the same cannot be said for their bodies in the current social climate. Even in the age of the Me-too movement, allegations of sexual assault are ridiculed and discharged, aimed at discrediting the woman “ruining” the man’s life. Therefore, by suggesting that women’s minds may become free but their bodies will always be subjected to vulnerability, Bardugo’s characters depict the inescapable challenge women must face.

Conclusion

The progression of the female character within the modern-day fantasy genre is intertwined with socio-historical shifts, as evident in *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter* and *Six of Crows*. Tolkien set a precedent for other fantasy writers when he portrayed women as having, and making, independent choices, whether their choices adopted traditional or progressive values notwithstanding. During the 1950s, Tolkien saw how the World Wars drastically changed women's social and economic roles, as they began to enter positions that would have previously been inaccessible to them. While the representation of women in his legendarium is limited, the characters set the foundation upon which future writers would build. Rowling's unparalleled series, *Harry Potter*, draws on this tradition while distinctly being a product of the late twentieth century as her female characters, specifically Hermione and Ginny, are more essential to the advancement of the plot while simultaneously defying sexist narrative arcs. Within the story than Tolkien's women. By parodying the princess dramatic persona, Rowling demonstrates that womanhood is more complex than and cannot be measured against the standards of beauty and romance popular media perpetuate. Evidentially impacted by the fourth wave of feminism, Bardugo's contemporary YA fantasy, *Six of Crows* features female characters who represent, to date, some of the most progressive thinking on gender roles in fantasy literature. They refuse to identify as victims of gender violence and instead demonstrate the ways in which women continue to powerfully contest harmful norms in a male-dominated society. Her characters experience sexual abuse and trauma, a subject that has gained more attention than ever as a result of the Me-too Movement. Nonetheless, the Me-too Movement has become a new source of backlash as people hesitant of the movement begin to question the validity of victims, therefore demonstrating the importance of spreading awareness about sexual trauma through media such as modern-day fantasy literature (Gutiérrez Almazor et al. 1).

The progressiveness in which modern-day fantasy authors write female characters is often tarnished by needless criticism. The failure to analyze a work in comparison to the time period in which it was produced ultimately disregards the lack of linearity in progress narratives that these texts reveal. While women began to enter the labor union during Tolkien's time, for example, they were also set back once the wars ended and the men resumed working. Although Rowling herself is a female writing amidst third wave feminism, her internalized misogyny made apparent within her novels reflects the inevitable contradictions of gender roles, despite advancements. Bardugo explores heavy but realistic topics women deal with every day, including sexual abuse, and yet, mirroring the women of today, her characters remain trapped, despite their promised "freedom."

The lack of linearity we must face in reading Tolkien, Rowling and Bardugo raises the question for critics of modern-day fantasy as to who gets to decide what is and is not feminist, thus demonstrating that although they are flawed, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter* and *Six of Crows* are all essential novels that exemplify feminist characteristics.

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