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# **THE FANTASY OF THE FEMALE: GENDER CONSTRUCTION IN THE FANTASY GENRE**



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## INTRODUCTION

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I have always been an avid reader of fantasy fiction. I enjoyed, and still do, the infinite possibilities which its created worlds offered to explore and discover a new, different reality. However, as I grew older, I began to notice that the possibilities for female characters within these worlds were not as infinite as they initially appeared – perhaps because the fantasy worlds were not, themselves, so separate from reality as they appeared. While fantasy offers the possibility to create worlds where the rules of our own do not apply, no world of fantasy offered a world free of patriarchal rule: while I was asked to suspend my disbelief in order to enter this new, imaginary world, the female characters within it suffered experiences of abuse and discrimination which I recognized as all too real. This realization, brought on partly thanks to my background in literary studies, made me interested in analyzing the particularities of female representation within the fantasy genre – and hence the idea for this dissertation.

My choice of narratives for this study was influenced not only by what I had read and loved before, but also by my intention to fill what appeared to me as a void within literary criticism – the analysis of fantasy fiction in contemporary literature. Throughout my years of dedication to literary analysis, it stood out to me how focused literary criticism was in works from the twentieth century backwards, which of course makes sense: the twenty-first century has only just begun, and a measure of critical distance towards one's object of study undeniably helps perceive it with better clarity. Nevertheless, I do believe that more focus should be brought towards contemporary literary productions of the twenty-first century and, more concretely, towards other genres which are commonly regarded as less canonical, as is the case of fantasy literature. Perhaps the definition of literature ought even to be amplified so as to include contemporary forms of storytelling, such as visual novels, story-driven videogames (both

of which could be regarded as a form of interactive literature), or fanfiction. Literary theory has always been an attempt to better understand the workings and roles of literature, both within itself and within society, which is precisely why it is so important for it to concern itself with the products of our contemporary society, and with the ways we ourselves consume such products. Applying feminist, postcolonial, or queer forms of theoretical analysis to literature – and other modern storytelling media – would aid in raising awareness as to the possible problematic effects of the media that we nowadays consume. This is why contemporary works have been chosen as the case studies for this dissertation: two volumes from the unfinished trilogy *The Kingkiller Chronicle*, by Patrick Rothfuss (*The Name of the Wind*, 2007, and *The Wise Man's Fear*, 2011), and Naomi Novik's standalone novel, *Uprooted* (2015).

The argument which I aim to develop is that female representation in fantasy fiction has the potential to slowly yet steadily subvert the hegemonic patriarchal system, by reverting or avoiding the politics of specularly that rule said system. The two aforementioned case studies are therefore developed not only as a descriptive analysis of how female characters are represented in each work, but also as individual examples of how their representation contributes to – or avoids – the idea of woman as an opposite (or reflection) to man, of woman as man's Other, and therefore his inferior. In other words, this work examines the specular dynamic built by patriarchy, its relationship to the fantasy genre, and how it affects the representation of women in fantasy. To do so, and since there is not as of yet a formulated and grounded theory of representation, this dissertation builds an approach towards it which is then applied to the practical analysis of two different case studies.

Subsection 1.1 is dedicated to the building of this approach to representation theory through a mixture of theories regarding subjectivity and identification, in

combination with some feminist theories regarding the fictional representations of women. Taking Lacan's idea of the mirror stage as a starting point, the chapter explores the idea of visual identification and the image of the mirror as a basis to the workings of the process for the subject. The discussion then moves on to tackle the consequences which this specular dynamic has had for female subjectivity in particular, especially through the dichotomy subject/Other. In addition to this, the feminist understanding of woman as a mirror is discussed here, especially through the works of Luce Irigaray and Jacqueline Rose. This section finishes by explaining the significance of female representation in fiction: it details the consequences of its having developed within the patriarchal, specular order, and finishes with a proposal as to how it is possible for female representations to begin subverting the specular economy which entraps women, a proposal informed by Slavoj Žižek's theory of the gaze and Teresa de Lauretis' own take on gender representation theory.

The second part of the theoretical framework (subsection 1.2) develops a description of the fantasy genre, its historical origins and its characteristic features. Its objective is not only to provide an overview of the many definitions which the word *fantasy* has acquired throughout the years, but also to introduce its significance for this dissertation's objectives. This dissertation argues that fantasy functions in a very similar way to the process of identification, through the dichotomies real/fantastic (or imaginary, depending on the terminology employed) and subject/Other. This crucially links the fantasy genre to a subversive potential which threatens the hegemonic patriarchal system, and therefore leads to argue that this genre could be an ideal and accommodating place for women – both as writers and as characters – to begin the subversion of the aforementioned specular order.

Section 2 is dedicated to the case studies themselves. Firstly, the chapter introduces a short description of the particularities which surround literature, a non-visual medium, within a system that is highly dependent on the visual. Here, Laura Mulvey's work as to the function of the camera is applied to literature, so as to translate her ideas regarding the workings of the gaze in cinema to a non-visual environment by equating the camera to the point of view in literature. This justifies the importance of considering who the narrator is, as the point of view determines how (female) characters within the story will be perceived by the reader. After this, subsections 2.1 and 2.2 are dedicated to the analysis of each case study, after briefly introducing the books' authors and plots. For the sake of conciseness, the dissertation focuses only on the two most prominent female characters of each work and discusses their representation employing the above-described methodology. In general, this analysis takes into consideration whether these female characters are represented in such a manner that allows for a female subjectivity outside of archetypal forms, and poses whether they contribute to the demystification of the image of women that is presented as an ideal by patriarchal standards.

# 1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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## 1.1 TOWARDS A THEORY OF REPRESENTATION

As mentioned above, this dissertation focuses on how the representations of women found in the selected cases of (fantasy) fiction works are the result of received conceptions of femininity, created within our culture through the processes of construction of “another” identity – in this case, the identity of woman, commonly defined in Freudian terminology as a “dark continent” (Irigaray 139). The objective for this section is to serve as an introduction to the way in which this process has mainly been understood in Western philosophy – that is, through the metaphor of vision and, more specifically, the mirror image.

### 1.1.1 THE DYNAMICS OF VISION: IDENTIFICATION AND THE MIRROR

The dynamics of vision have proven essential to Western philosophy in general and to theories of identification in particular. Though there has been criticism of these ocular-centric theories and even attempts to leave them behind, as Martin Jay explains in *Downcast Eyes*, the presence of visual metaphors pervades even the very nature of language (8-11), so that it becomes extremely difficult – if not impossible – to employ a discourse outside of the visual. So much so, that identification is widely considered to be a wholly visual process, as in identification with a given *image*. Jacques Lacan’s “mirror stage” is a prime example of this: following Freudian psychoanalysis, Lacan famously theorized that the child’s first grasp of itself as a subject and, consequently, of its ego, took place the first time it saw itself in a mirror, because the image “gives it the first sense of a coherent identity in which it can recognize itself” (Rose 53). Instead of losing interest upon finding out that the reflected image is their own self, children become even more fascinated with it because they imagine it to be “more complete, more perfect than they

experience in their own body”, thus seeing it as superior (Mulvey 17). As a consequence, the child “projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego, the alienated subject which, re-introjected as an ego ideal, prepares the way for identification with others in the future” (17). This first identification and consequent fascination with one’s perception of an ideal self was, for Lacan, crucial to the formation of subjectivity and to set the process of identification in motion. He justified the child’s depiction of the mirror image as ideal because, as explained by Laura Mulvey, this first identification took place “at a time when children’s physical ambitions outstrip their motor capacity” (17). However, the presentation of the image as a perfect reflection of the subject’s ideal ego required some further examination – after all, the subject appears to build his/her image of what he/she thinks is perfect according to internalized parameters, all of which stem from outward influences that have nothing to do with the subject’s own ideas.

Hence why Jacques Derrida criticized the idea of a perfect, identical reflection which Lacan’s theory suggested: he found it problematic because “the reflective interplay of apparently identical images is based on an inevitable disunity that already defines the first image [...]. Although the two images may be apparently identical, there is always a surplus, an invisible otherness, that necessarily disrupts their specular unity” (Jay 505). This implies that the original subject reflected by the mirror is already somehow split or disjointed; this disjoining could be pinpointed in any number of ways, for instance between the way the subject perceives his/herself and the way in which *others* perceive him/her. This disruption in the mirror image means, in turn, that the identity reflected back to the subject cannot be perfect or whole, even if it is idealized as such. In spite of these drawbacks, however, Lacan’s mirror stage turned out to be fundamental to identification theory – not only because it established a groundwork for future theorists to work on, even if through criticism, but also because it established the notion of the

“Other”, an entity created by the subject as a placeholder for what they seem to lack. As such, the Other can stand for the subject’s ideal qualities or for their innermost fears and flaws, so that it can either be a mystified, idealized identity or the exact opposite, marginalized and subjugated. This is why the idea of the “Other” has been employed as a concept to explain the relationship which a subject establishes in relation to those who are not like itself, marked by a fundamental difference; more often than not, it is employed in politically charged movements (such as post-colonialism and feminism) to explain the simultaneous rejection and fetishization endured by marginalized groups. Whichever option is chosen, this relationship between the subject and the Other is more often than not marked by the dehumanization, exploitation, and objectification of the latter, creating a power dynamic in which the Other always ends up as the oppressed party.

Lacan’s mirror stage is undoubtedly fundamental to the way in which identification has been understood, but it did not use specularity to its full potential. For instance, Lacan’s theory seemed to explain how the identification process began in children, but did not take into account how – or why – it continued into adulthood, a very important consideration to make because much of the identification process in adulthood does not, in fact, involve the subject being presented with his own image. It actually takes place very often as the subject consumes a piece of fiction, which must therefore function as the mirror in this case. Specularity undeniably informs the way in which we understand fiction, even down to the basic idea that it is – or should be, in the case of non-realist fiction – a mirror for reality. This position is what Toril Moi calls “extreme reflectionism”, which

posits that the artist’s selective creation should be measured against ‘real life’, thus assuming that the only constraint on the artist’s work is his or her perception of the ‘real world’. [... W]riting is seen as a more or less faithful *reproduction* of

an external reality to which we all have equal and unbiased access, and which therefore enables us to criticize the author on the grounds that he or she has created an *incorrect* model of the reality we somehow all know. (45)

This is a misconception which brings to the fore the problematic, consistent through much literary criticism, of considering reality as objectivity and absolute truth. The debate on this matter is far too broad to be discussed here, but it can be summarized as follows: it is impossible to equate reality to objective fact because “the real is not only something we construct, but a controversial construct at that” (Moi 45); each individual subject has a different, “over-determined” perception of reality, influenced by “many different and conflicting literary and non-literary determinants” (45), which means that their perception of reality is always filtered by their own subjectivity – and even that of other subjects. Of course, this set of perspectives imprints itself – consciously or not – within the process of textual production, which explains why a subject might find that their recognizable experiences have been misrepresented or represented differently than they know. Moi clarifies that considering reality as a subjective construct does not imply that fictional works can get away with misrepresentation, and they should in fact be criticized for “having selected and shaped their fictional universe according to oppressive and objectionable ideological assumptions”; however, this is not the same as “failing to be ‘true to life’ or with not presenting ‘an authentic expression of real experience’” (45-46).

Going further beyond this idea of reflecting (a) reality, fiction can also function as a mirror to the extent that it shows a reflection of its consumers (readers, viewers, players) through the representations it makes. This is important because, as Derrida’s criticism of perfect specularities suggested, our identities as subjects are permanently decomposed and imperfect; as the child turned to the mirror and saw reflected an ideal version of its ego, subjects turn to works of fiction which reflect a fully functional,

reducible identity back to us. In this way, the subject who sees him/herself represented in fiction can make up a fantasy of his/her identity as whole, complete, and therefore valid. This would partially explain why it is so important for people to be able to relate to and identify with the characters in the fiction they consume. However, it is still possible to give the idea a further twist and establish the consumers of fiction themselves as yet another mirror: not only because identity, as built by the subject, is based in the mirroring of societal images and impositions, but also because they project their own expectations regarding the representation they will find into the work itself. These do not only include the type of representation they expect to find according to certain parameters of the work (such as medium, genre, and other such factors, as outlined by Hans Robert Jauss' idea of the "horizons of expectation"); they also include the subject's – conscious or unconscious – expectation that they will be able to reconstruct their self-image through this representation, that they will find themselves reflected in it or be able to relate to it. As a mirror reflecting another mirror creates an infinite pattern of specularity, so the interplay between subject and fiction creates a complex process of identification which is influenced both ways – by the fictional work and by the subject; an intricate web of mutual influences that is extremely difficult to untangle.

### **1.1.2 SPECULA(RIZA)TION: WOMAN AS OTHER**

The identification process is, of course, carried out differently for each subject; however, the case of women in particular is problematic because, to put it simply, they are *not* regarded as subjects. The "othering" of woman is a consequence of the mechanics of the gaze involved in specularity: the gaze develops a power dynamic by which its *subject*, simply by being the one who looks, turns the one who is looked at into the *object* of the gaze; thus, the object immediately loses the agency and power which characterize the subject – the act of being looked at comes to be what defines, shapes, and determines their

being, as they model themselves according to what the gaze expects. This power dynamic translates in the shape of the patriarchal system, whereby men become the subjects, the *lookers*, and women the objects, the *looked-at*; further, women are precluded from looking, and therefore excluded from the benefits the gaze provides. As Laura Mulvey explains, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (19). Mulvey links this effect to the fact that woman, as an Other, remains passively “silent” so that man can impose his “his fantasies and obsessions” on her and live them out by projecting them into her image (15). In this way, much like the child in the mirror, man turns woman into an ego-ideal, so that her inferiority amplifies his better qualities in such a way that she acts rather as a magnifying mirror.

This is the idea that Luce Irigaray elaborates in *Speculum of the Other Woman*: if the male ego “is to be valuable, some ‘mirror’ is needed to reassure it and re-insure it of its value. Woman will be the foundation for this specular duplication, giving man back ‘his’ image and repeating it as the ‘same’” (54). Interestingly, though, Virginia Woolf had already made a very similar proposition in her 1929 essay *A Room of One’s Own*: “Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (55). Both of these statements summarize what man accomplishes by constructing and defining woman as his Other: he ensures his own superiority and simultaneously makes himself into the universal subject. Woman is thus “defined purely against the man” (Rose 74), as someone – *something* – who strives to be male, but *is not*: she is a negative space, a lack, a simple and inferior reflection. At the same time, this ensures that woman will not be able to leave this position of inferiority, because in order to be this mirror she must reject her difference

(*sexual* difference) as contemptible. She therefore acts out the “penis-envy” which Freud attributed to woman in general, and thus supplies everything man might need to complete and maintain this “specula(riza)tion” (Irigaray 54).

In this manner, woman is turned into “a total object of fantasy” (Rose 74), while her own essence, “the feminine *as such* [...] is repressed; it returns only in its ‘acceptable’ form as man’s specularized Other” (Moi 134). This construction of gender difference which renders female subjects into objects is undoubtedly at the core of the systematic oppression of women throughout the centuries, and to blame for women’s internalization of their own inferiority, since they are from their very childhoods conditioned to think of themselves in this way, as man’s mirror. Moreover, Jacqueline Rose realizes that woman’s image, “seen to be flawless”, is what serves to uphold “the particular and limiting opposition of male and female” (232). Put in simpler terms,

[...] we know that women are meant to *look* perfect, presenting a seamless image to the world so that the man, in that confrontation with difference, can avoid any apprehension of lack. The position of woman as fantasy therefore depends on a particular economy of vision [...]. (Rose 232)

Therefore, to abandon this “economy of vision” would destroy or somehow disturb the position of woman as reflection; to do so, however, it would be necessary to find a way to operate outside of the boundaries of the mirror – to shatter it entirely, or to move to its other side, much like Alice went through the looking glass in Lewis Carroll’s story, though nowhere near as easily. This system of patriarchal specularity has been, and continues to be, in construction for centuries, so that it would take centuries of painstaking work to undo it and its effects. Perhaps, then, the issue needs to be *looked at* (pun intended) differently, or rather conversely: by tackling the image of woman directly and individually, instead of attempting to overturn the entire system.

### 1.1.3 THE PROBLEMATIC OF FEMALE REPRESENTATION

In this regard, the theory of Teresa de Lauretis is particularly interesting. She proposes that “[t]he representation of gender *is* its construction” (3) and that, as such, it “is the product of various social technologies, such as cinema, as well as institutional discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices” (ix). In this sense, she recognizes the hegemony of male discourse and male sexuality, which goes on in gender representation as well, and so develops the theory that alternative constructions of gender are possible by operating “*in the margins of hegemonic discourse*” (De Lauretis 18, emphasis in original). This would mean seizing woman’s enforcedly liminal position as Other and subverting it to work in her favor, instead of against her, to create a “view from elsewhere” that counteracts patriarchal social discourse (25). De Lauretis also holds that it is not that we have not been able to create these representations of woman as of yet, but rather “that what we have produced is not recognizable, precisely, as a representation” (25), because its effects cannot be perceived on the system as a whole and only affect a smaller scale, at the level of the “micropolitical practices of daily life and daily resistances that afford both agency and sources of power” (De Lauretis 25). Precisely by operating from the margins and slowly but surely chipping away at the base, a cracking of the mirror may become a real possibility – or at least, a ripple of discomfort in the prominence of man’s image.

If we accept the premise that fiction works in the same way as a mirror, it follows that fictional representations will reflect the position of woman as Other; indeed, fiction is perhaps the clearest evidence of how woman’s representation and self-representation have been denied to her. Virginia Woolf had already realized the fact that woman was a “very queer, composite being”, due to the contrast between the importance of woman in fiction and her position in real life: “Imaginatively she is of the highest importance;

practically she is completely insignificant” (66). However, there is no denying that many times such an importance translates into catastrophe and punishment for the woman or those around her, or otherwise may translate into a disproportionate idealization. Female representation throughout history thus demonstrates the typical (and often contradictory) ambivalence attached to the role of Other:

[Woman] will be neither inside nor outside, neither known nor unknown. It is this position that has enabled male culture sometimes to vilify women [...] and sometimes to elevate them [...]. Needless to say, neither position corresponds to any essential truth of woman, much as the patriarchal powers would like us to believe that they did. (Moi 167)

This explains how archetypal opposites such as the evil temptress and the pure mother are able to coexist within the same image of woman. At the same time, it also betrays the inability of the patriarchal system to represent woman in a way that is not reductive, objectifying, or imposing of an ideal image (a repetition of the male).

As has been discussed, fictional representations are significant for individual subjects because they can trigger an identificatory process similar to that of the child in Lacan’s mirror stage, which serves to validate the subject’s identity and experiences; also, De Lauretis specifies that the “sex-gender system” of “representation [...] assigns meaning (identity, value, prestige, [...] status in the social hierarchy, etc. to individuals within the society”, and therefore “for someone to be represented and to represent oneself as male or female implies the assumption of the whole of those meaning effects” (De Lauretis 5). By taking this into account, one can grasp the extent of the consequences of the patriarchal inability to represent woman as a subject, instead of as an Other: women are denied a positive differentiation from man and prevented from achieving a real subjectivity, unable to recognize their difference as anything other than an undesirable

lack indicative of their inferiority, and unable to define their identities outside of man's Other. It becomes clear that representations outside of the specular economy are deeply necessary for women – the problem is *how* to provide these. Taking into account the problematic of the real which was described earlier, it becomes clear that there is no such thing as one single reality to be represented, and the same must apply to the reality of woman: though it is clear that reductive archetypes do not respond to any particular truth of herself as a subject, the “essential truth of woman” which Moi speaks of is not easy to outline – because it may well not even exist. Both philosophy and biological science remain unable to demonstrate that there is any biologically or psychologically determined “essence” to woman's being – or to man's, for that matter. What difference there is between them is nothing but the result of the artificial construction of gender as it has been outlined throughout this whole section, and as such, the representation of woman as a mirror – and with it, consequently, gender difference – could very well be *deconstructed*.

In this same vein, Slavoj Žižek has a very interesting theory regarding the power of representation and images which was not necessarily made with women in mind, but that turns out to be essential to understand the way in which representation works. He notes in the first place that identification is usually understood as “imitating models, ideals, image-makers” (117); this is, however, misleading, because “the feature, the trait on the basis of which we identify with someone, is usually hidden – it is by no means necessarily a glamorous feature” (Žižek 117) and in fact many times people identify closest with characters who manifest flaws or hidden fears similar to their own. On the other hand, “imaginary identification is always identification *on behalf of a certain gaze in the Other*” (Žižek 117), meaning that if the subject is imitating a model or “‘playing a role’, the question to ask is: *for whom* is the subject enacting this role? Which *gaze* is considered when the subject identifies himself with a certain image?” (117-118). Of

course, in the case of women, this would be the male gaze which Laura Mulvey described as “determining” for the woman’s role in fiction: “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (19). The male is thus in control of the gaze, of which the woman becomes the passive object to be tailored after what the gaze seeks in them. Importantly, though, “the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters [...] are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude” (Mulvey 19); this means that whatever the spectator’s gender, they are prompted to identify with the male protagonist. Though Mulvey is thinking specifically of cinema in her essay, the concept of the male gaze can be applied to every form of fiction: the specificities of the camera’s point of view which Mulvey describes can easily be applied to the technology of the narrator and focalizer in literature. This does not only mean that every fictional representation of woman is at risk of being pervaded by the male gaze, and therefore the result of the hegemonic specular order, but also that woman is “symbolically identified with the gaze for which [she] is playing [her] role” (Žižek 118).

This symbolic identification with the gaze creates an idealization of *the version of the subject which enacts the wishes of the gaze*, an idealization which serves “to legitimize” the rule of the oppressive system (Žižek 118) – in this case, of patriarchy. Žižek explains this with an example:

[... The] idealized image of the working class is staged for the gaze of the ruling Party bureaucracy – it serves to legitimize their rule. That is why Milos Forman’s Czech movies were so subversive in mocking small, ordinary people: in showing their undignified ways, the futility of their dreams... [...] Forman did not want to

destroy the bureaucrat's imaginary identification; he wisely preferred to subvert his symbolic identification by unmasking the spectacle enacted for his gaze. (119)

This is what everything else, every theory outlined in this section, comes down to: in order for female representation to escape the patriarchal order, woman must unmask “the spectacle enacted for [her] gaze”. The elevation and classification of woman within a series of archetypes that she must fit (the alternative being, at all practical effects, non-existence) works in favor of patriarchy and maintains its specular economy. By showing a non-idealized, down-to-earth female experience, by demystifying the image of woman, by showing the crippling flaws and the ugliness and every single difference which are present within her – in short, by showing everything which the patriarchal system attempted to conceal by modeling woman after its own image; therein lies the key to subverting the specular system and avoiding its influence. Therein lies the key to a better representation of woman – perhaps not as rounded and perfect and varied as those of man, but as Teresa de Lauretis said, work must begin “at the ‘local’ level of resistances, in subjectivity and self-representation” (18). Even a single image of woman which is far enough from the workings of the specular male gaze is a solid basis for women to build their subjectivity and difference upon in a positive and healthy manner, and therefore is, in itself, progress.

The theories and ideas shown throughout this section serve as theoretical framework to the current study, as it will attempt to detect how the representations found in the following case studies are informed by patriarchal specularity or, on the contrary, subvert its typical manifestations. Such manifestations would include, mainly: the male gaze, the use of woman as magnifying mirror to man's qualities and ego, her portrayal within a submissive or insignificant role (by contrast to her male counterparts), her sexual

objectification as a fantasy (and/or wish fulfilment), and her idealization to satisfy a male-given ideal.

## 1.2 THE FANTASY GENRE

The aim of this subsection is to examine the formal and ideological features of the fantasy genre, and to motivate its selection as the object of study for this dissertation. Before going any further, it is necessary to define what is commonly understood by *fantasy*; however, because of its very close relationship and even intersection with other genres, as well as its complexity and variety of form and content, to come to a clear definition of fantasy is not an easy task. An overview of the genre and the characteristics it was associated with throughout the years, using some prototypical examples to illustrate them, is therefore provided in order to better understand the history behind its blurry boundaries.

The origins of fantasy as a genre can be traced as far back as the traditional fairy tale, particularly the German *Märchen*, which are some of the earliest instances of supernatural creatures and events that remain unexplained and must thus be taken in stride without question as part of the tale's world. The fairy tale itself, of course, is a product of legends and folklore, which in turn "seem to be akin to epic and myth, deriving from them or evolving alongside" (Attebery 4). This crucially links the genre – and, by extension, fantasy – to culture, given that many times the fantastic, supernatural, or imaginary elements present in the tale are inspired by each country's particular lore. This ancestry is reproduced in a characteristic writing style, as fantasy authors "look back very markedly" to the fairy tale tradition "with profound admiration tinged with a longing to imitate the simplicity of the form" (Manlove 4). The association of fantasy with childhood, innocence and childish imagination can also be traced back to the fairy tale, although this also means that some pejorative associations carried by its ancestor can and will be reproduced in fantasy: critics often consider it an "irresponsible evasion of

reality”, and are critical of the “unquestioning acceptance” it seems to promote and the “absolute fulfilment of desire” it appears to aim at (Hunter 56, 57).

As for defining fantasy, one of the first attempts to do so was Tzvetan Todorov’s: In a world which is indeed our world, [...] there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses [...] and [the] laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. (25)

Todorov holds that the fantastic lasts for as long as this uncertainty does, and that once we make a choice between the two given options, we are making a move into the “neighboring genres” of “the uncanny or the marvelous” (Todorov 25). Considering this, Todorov links fantasy to the genre of the grotesque, of which E.T.A. Hoffmann is a distinguished representative. He is, in fact, often credited as “the inventor, or at least first distinguished artist who exhibited the fantastic or supernatural grotesque in his compositions” (Sir Walter Scott, quoted in Cornwell 5). However, Hoffmann’s disturbing *Nachtstücke* are far from being the only instance of fantasy’s intersection with other genres.

During the eighteenth century, fantasy evolved into “a modification of the Gothic novel into ghost and horror story, as in the writings of Edgar Allan Poe or J. Sheridan Le Fanu” (Manlove 4). This marks a change in both readership and style, the latter leaving behind childhood, imagination, and the friendly simplicity of fairy tales, which up until this moment had been considered defining characteristics of fantasy. Adult fantasy did not enjoy “the special dispensation given to children’s literature” (Attebery 109), so that it had to radically change tone in order to include supernatural elements and blend them

seamlessly with our familiar world. Another branch of this new fantasy for adults was the extremely popular Gothic novel, which was also linked to fantasy in its inclusion of supernatural elements, as well as in its “revival and consolidation” of a style present in a “variety of mythological, folkloric and literary traditions” (Cornwell 45). However, it was also fundamentally differentiated from fantasy in that most Gothic tales – following Ann Radcliffe’s models – employed the *surnaturel-expliqué* or “supernatural explained”, meaning that the supposedly supernatural elements of the tale were, in the end, always given a rational explanation which effectively took away their otherworldliness. The horror tales following Poe’s line, on the other hand, increased their ability to produce fear and create a feeling of uncanniness by never offering any logical explanation for the terrors shown in them.

This refusal to explain away the magical or supernatural elements of the tale seems to be one of the few consistent elements within the definitions of the fantasy genre. J.R.R. Tolkien establishes such a requirement very clearly in his theory of fantasy: nothing within the narrative must suggest that the “story is a figment or illusion”, even if the reader clearly knows this is the case, because if suspension of disbelief is broken, “the magic, or rather art, has failed” (52). The twentieth-century fantasy tradition which Tolkien himself initiated represents an interesting departure from Todorov’s definition, which established that fantasy defied our preconceptions regarding the workings and laws of the known world, but that this experience always took place *within* this known world. Such a thing clearly does not apply to twentieth-century fantasy, as Tolkien explains in his seminal essay *On Fairy Stories* (1947):

He [the writer] makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is “true”: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore

believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken [...]. You are then out in the Primary World again. (52)

Following Tolkien's theory, in order to escape the Primary World we normally inhabit, the reader must suspend their disbelief and enter the Secondary World created by the author, which may be a completely different one, or look exactly like the Primary World except for the magic within it. Whatever the case, the tale's Secondary World is always free "from the domination of observed 'fact'", and as such full of elements "not to be found in the primary world" (Tolkien 60). Of course, a prototypical example of a world like this is Tolkien's construction of Middle-Earth, from his own trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*; this alternative reality is where the experience of the fantastic takes place.

A mention to Tolkien's literary work is obviously unavoidable, as one of the most influential authors and critics within the fantasy canon. Brian Attebery goes as far as to assert that "[i]ndeed, no important work of fantasy written after Tolkien is free of his influence" (12), since his work is of such scope and significance that it "seems to reshape all definitions of fantasy to fit itself" (12). Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is the first instance of what is nowadays known as "high fantasy", a subgenre that can, as such, be "described more fully than can the field of fantasy as a whole" (Attebery 12). High fantasy always creates a different world "in which the fantastic or magical becomes the expected and normal", but which at the same time employs familiar elements, commonly inspired by the medieval ages, "to evoke [...] a nostalgia for the never-was" (Attebery 12). It presents a hero who is most commonly a human, and therefore "ordinary" and "limited [...] in the unlimited realm of fantasy", while those around the hero are not held back by such limitations and "may be as extraordinary as imagination permits" (Attebery 12, 13). Importantly, works of high fantasy also exhibit a "strong polarization of good and evil" (13), often represented in two forces at odds against each other that ultimately engage in

a battle which is decisive for the future of the world. These consistencies show up in Tolkien's work as well as in that of his countless successors; in fact, *The Lord of the Rings* embedded itself so deeply within the fantasy canon that it managed to make these features *into* the canon, so that high fantasy has become the most widely recognized form of fantasy in spite of being only one of its many subgenres.

This canonization goes as far as to create the misconception that fantasy *is* high fantasy – that is, the whole genre is commonly and wrongfully reduced to works that follow the high fantasy model, like George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996) or, more recently, Patrick Rothfuss' *The Name of the Wind* (2007), which is one of the case studies chosen for this dissertation. However, nowadays fantasy has become more varied than ever before, most especially thanks to the exponential growth of young adult literature. Though the label encompasses as many genres as “adult” literature does, the most popular is undeniably fantasy, as shown by the humongous success of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* saga. Young adult fantasies have contributed to heterogenizing the fantasy genre with works of incredible originality and variety in scope, world-building, and character, which very often reinvent or subvert conventions created by canonical writers. Examples would be Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), whose secondary world is inspired by the culture of the African Yoruban tribe, or Naomi Novik's *Uprooted* (2015), which draws inspiration from Polish and Slavic language and folklore. Both works turn many Tolkienesque features on their head from the very start, and the latter will be the second case study discussed in this dissertation.

The rediscovered heterogeneous nature of fantasy makes it difficult, perhaps even unproductive, to attempt to delimit the fantasy genre, since the definitions of fantasy are many, and are each, in a different sense, *all* correct. This is why, instead of attempting to exactly define what constitutes fantasy, critics have more recently resorted to establishing

some overarching characteristics which serve to separate fantasy from other genres, without being overly exact in its definition to avoid exclusion. William Plank asserts, for instance, that fantasy is marked to some degree by textual linguistic determiners:

I propose [...] that there is a language of fantasy, and that the author gives signals to readers that prepare them for the way they are to understand the text. This language of fantasy may be distinguished by things such as exotic vocabulary, variation in the sequencing of perceptions, the presence of the narrator as evident narrator [...], and the use of code phrases [...]. There is, then, in structuralist terms, a *signifiant*, a signifier or set of signifiers for the *signifié*, that is fantasy.

(79)

Though these textual features may well appear in texts that do not fall within the fantasy genre, their habitual presence together within the same work can indeed be a good indicator as to what type of text one is faced with. I am of the opinion, however, that Attebery's proposal as to the defining characteristic of fantasy is the most useful one:

Any narrative which includes as a significant part of its make-up some violation of what the author clearly believes to be natural law – that is fantasy [...]. And fantasy treats these impossibilities without hesitation, [...] without any attempt to reconcile them with our intellectual understanding of the workings of the world or to make us believe that such things could under any circumstances come true.

(2)

Though the definition comes across as too simple and all-encompassing, this is precisely what makes it more advantageous, as it leaves “more room [...] for subclassification and evaluation” (Attebery 3) and avoids limiting the genre “by over-exact definition, giving the name fantasy to what is only a minor subtype of fantasy” (3). It does not seem useful

to take the definition of the genre any further unless one is trying to specify the particular characteristics of a subgenre.

One commonly cited trait and appeal considered specific to fantasy is escapism and the sheltered escape from reality it provides: however, this characteristic is not particular to the genre, but shared with the vast majority of fiction. Every fictional story, however realistic, immerses its consumer into a situation that is not their own, in the skin of a character that is not themselves, and so enables them to escape their reality. Rather, one of the specific appeals of fantasy is the “sense of wonder” it creates “by making the impossible seem familiar and the familiar seem new and strange” (Attebery 3). This exploration of unknown elements is a great part of what makes fantasy interesting, and “that interest alone can carry an otherwise undistinguished work” (Attebery 3) – meaning that a good, original world-building can, on its own, be enough to keep the reader interested through a mediocre writing or a dull storyline, because of the curiosity it provokes and the way it caters to our wishes. However, the fact that fantasy is so often credited as an escape from reality brings to the fore the interesting question of how it works in relation to it.

In this sense, Rosemary Jackson is often quoted because she established the worlds of the fantastic and the real “to be mutually dependent” (Cornwell 25): “Fantasy re-combines and inverts the real, but it does not escape it [...]. The fantastic cannot exist independently of that ‘real’ world which it seems to find so frustratingly finite” (Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, quoted in Cornwell 25). This binary conception of fantasy/real as interdependent interestingly mirrors that of the relationship subject/Other, which means that both our perception of the world and the mechanics of fantasy function through a dualistic conception, one pole of which is the negative of the other. Thus, much in the same manner as the Other is that which is *not* a subject, the

fantastic is that which is *not* real. Where the mechanic of specularity functions to explain the relationship between the subject and the Other, some critics establish imagination as the bridge which relates fantasy and the real:

If we admit that the existence of *fantasy* is as one term of the dialectic fantasy/reality, we must also admit [...] that the two terms find their synthesis in the imagination. *Imagination*, that is, the ability of the human mind to create images by means of which it explains the world to itself, is the epistemological basis for perceptions of reality. These images, produced by the image-creating cognitive apparatus, are the manner in which that apparatus constructs the world as world, whether that world is the world of [...] science, the world of poetry and creative literature in general, or the world of dreams and fantasy. (Plank 79)

Plank is careful, however, to avoid the connotations of “nonexistent, false, invalid” which the term *imaginary* has picked up throughout the centuries, and therefore suggests substituting it for *imagic*, which “could be more in line with the *imaginaire* in the psychology of Jacques Lacan, that activity whereby the self becomes a self in the Lacanian psychogenesis” (79). This idea establishes a link between the specular process of identification undergone by the subject and the *imagic* process of constructing reality, which I think is interesting to consider because it implies that both cases are pervaded by the image of the looking glass: we construct the world through *images* that resemble it – reflect it – and help us make sense of the reality around us, much like the subject builds an image of the Other after his/her own perceptions of what it should be – a reflection of the subject. In both cases, the constructed images may or may not be accurate to the factual experience which is offered back to us, because they are always construed from a subjective perspective and therefore cannot operate universally, though patriarchal discourse would have it so.

Furthermore, there is the fact that many writers hold that fantasy is not actually so far removed from the so-called Primary World as it might initially seem. Colin Manlove declares that “[i]ndeed several writers of fantasy [...] see the worlds of fantasy as no less real than their own or any other” (xii), and a great many “modern fantasies seek to show that the natural and supernatural orders are not so divided as might be thought”, though “they do start from the assumption that the two are considered to be separate in the minds of their readers, as they are initially for their protagonists” (Manlove 45-46). Attebery also insists on the close impact which fantasy has on the real world, “not in disordering, but in reordering reality. It reinforces our awareness of what is by showing us what might be, and uses the imaginary laws of the created world to postulate hidden principles on which our own might be organized” (36). This would mean that fantasy’s removal from reality does not preclude it having an effect over it, which gives the genre a power that – as Lynette Hunter points out – has made some academics uncomfortable. Hunter explains that the generalized concern with the relationship between fantasy and reality is actually, at its core, a concern “with power, authority, and control”, and hence why some critics “attempt to move fantasy into the non-authoritative by cutting it off from reality, denying all connections” (Hunter 37).

If giving fantasy the capacity to influence reality means subverting a power dynamic, it is then safe to assume that the parallel between fantasy and the Other as the negatives of a dualistic pair is not at all coincidental, as neither cannot be rid of the political implications of such a position. As Plank puts it,

The mind’s ability to create images is the basic epistemological behavior of the human mind: the assignment of truth or validity to these images is the role of a politics of the intellect, a politics that is certainly related to the [...] power of a culture. Politics is the study of power, and it is the political, technological power

of a culture that defines what is real and what is fantastic. Reality therefore becomes an exercise in politics, and the fantastic is the realm of the powerless and the disaffected. (80)

Since the political rule is able to define what reality is and give it power in order to reassert itself as the dominant force, the fact that fantasy changes reality and turns it into something unknown makes it dangerous for the status quo. The very existence of a negative implies the possibility of revolution, of subversion of the current order. This threat is embodied in society by the figure of the Other, the one who must be kept under submission. In the same manner, fantasy is a threat because it “takes us into ‘another world’, beyond the looking-glass or the grave, removed in time or space, but a world that is a mirror image of, a revelation of, an analogy for, the everyday one” (Yarrow 84); this is why, as Hunter said, it must be kept submitted by ensuring its fakeness, separating it from reality as much as possible, because “[p]ower [...] validates itself through its claim to being real, true, and right” (Plank 80).

Traditionally, realism has been praised as the most prestigious literary form due to such an association of reality with righteousness and truth, and its representations valued as closer to the true human experience than any other; a good representation was, therefore, considered to be that which was closest to reality, so that the “demand for new, realistic images of women takes it for granted that feminist writers should want to use realist fictional forms” (Moi 5-6). However, realist discourse has thus far only taken one reality into consideration: that of man, so that fictional representations of woman have constantly proven to be inaccurate to the real experiences lived by real women. Furthermore, in Ralph Yarrow’s words, “[a]s long as we go on ‘reading’ the same language we go on seeing the world in the same way” (84), meaning that it is impossible to break with a situation of inequality by employing the same kind of discourse which

was used to enforce such inequality in the first place. This is precisely where the importance of fantasy resides: as a genre of subversion. The particularities of its language, and the workings of fantasy itself, allow to construct an alternative way of understanding our reality, and hence might serve to slowly create a way of seeing – and hence, of thinking – which is not informed by the traditional economy of specularly and dualistic conceptions; as Yarrow had put it, fantasy has the capability to take us “beyond the looking-glass” (84). Man has appropriated a reality where he exists as the universal subject and woman only as his negative, his Other; as discussed in the previous section, woman cannot break the mirror or go beyond it as long as she keeps working within the same limits of discourse – which is now revealed to be the discourse of the real. The transformative power of fantasy opens up a world of possibilities which is not available to woman otherwise: it allows her to create a rebellion within the system without needing to attempt to subvert it in its entirety. It allows her to imagine a reality where she occupies the position of subject, and because fictional representations provoke the same process of identification in the subject regardless of genre, the experiences she creates in this manner will have a positive effect on women within reality. Fantasy might thus very well be the perfect place for woman to begin creating her own discourse, which justifies its choice as the object of this analysis.

The female representations presented by two different literary works will now be examined in the terms described in the previous two sections in an attempt to disclose whether they employ fantasy in such a subversive manner, and whether they create a female subjectivity outside of the dynamics of the mirror.

## 2 CASE STUDIES

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This section comprises two different case studies of female representation within the fantasy genre. The chosen medium was literature, which becomes especially interesting when considering that these representations operate within the parameters of the non-visual. As mentioned in the previous sections, representation and identification theories have based themselves strongly on the visual and the idea of specularity, which is in itself extremely ocular-centric, and as such have focused on the study of the visual medium par excellence, the cinema. If literature does not at all rely on the visual, it follows that the process of representation (and subsequent identification) might also function differently.

Literature relies much more heavily on the imagination of its readers, their ability to create mental images when prompted only by words, which crucially connects it to the functioning of fantasy as outlined in the previous section. In cinema, the camera does – arguably – not leave as much room for the imagination, since its descriptions are limited to the visual, which leads to the use of voice-over and dialogue to explain what cannot be perceived by sight; literature, on the other hand, need not limit itself to descriptions pertaining to the visual. Other senses, such as touch, smell, or taste, can disclose their full potential in literary form, so that there would, theoretically, no longer be any reason to prioritize the visual to trigger identification. However, because we construct the world through images, vision will inevitably enjoy a position of prominence, and hence the importance of point of *view* in literature. This refers to the stance from where the reader *looks* within the literary work, whose consciousness readers inhabit, or through whom they perceive the events. In the case of cinema, this is determined by the camera, whose “look is disavowed” and erased in order to “create a convincing world in which the spectator’s surrogate can perform with verisimilitude”, and to prevent the spectator “from achieving any distance from the image in front of him” (Mulvey 26). This is the result of

the combination of the gazes coming from the camera, the spectators, and the characters within the film; since the intervention of the camera must not be perceived, “the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude” (Mulvey 19), which ties in with Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze. How does, then, this interaction of looks translate into literature, when it is precisely characterized by the non-visual?

I would argue that the combination of “three different looks” which Mulvey speaks of (25) is not as “specific to film” as she believes (26). The literary work represents a complex interaction of gazes as well: that of the reader, that of the character, and that of the *narrator*. However, the narrator’s position is not quite the same as that of the camera, precisely because there can be different types of narrators which may assume different points of view. A first-person narrator combines the narrator’s look with a character’s, which in turn seamlessly lines them both up with the reader’s gaze. Through this unification of gazes, the reader is made to identify closely with the given character and to forget the unreliability provided by this single perspective, unwittingly assuming it to be their own. A third-person narrator could, however, complicate things: the narrator might not at all attempt to conceal its presence, giving commentary throughout the story and almost making itself into another character with whom the reader may identify or not; or they might employ focalization in order to switch points of view, and thus force the reader to change their perspective as well, moving from a character’s gaze to another. This interplay of gazes has clear consequences for the way in which characters are represented: the images in the narrative are built through the different perspectives offered by the narrator(s); the reader receives this image and projects their own views upon it, therefore constructing their own image from the received one. If there is only one given point of view in the narrative, this is the only position through which the reader can

perceive other characters and events, and thus the only thing upon which the reader can build their own representation. From this it follows that, if the given perspective is pervaded by harmful conceptions (such as the male gaze), these conceptions will be transmitted onto the reader's own image, which is why it is important to examine *from where* the women characters present in the tale are perceived.

## **2.1 THE KINGKILLER CHRONICLE, PATRICK ROTHFUSS (2007)**

This fantasy trilogy by Patrick Rothfuss, which is as of yet missing its third and last volume, constitutes the first case study chosen for analysis. *The Kingkiller Chronicle* focuses on Kvothe, the main character and near-prototypical fantasy hero, whose family is killed by magical entities known as the Chandrian. This sets him off on a quest for revenge that accompanies him through the many subplots of the narrative as his ultimate end. At the beginning of the narrative, Kvothe promises to tell his story in three days, a day for each book: the first comprises his childhood and journey to study at the University, a school for the arcane arts; the second, his further research on the Chandrian and his journey to a race of legendary mercenaries and to the Fae realm. Kvothe is characterized by his adeptness at everything he sets his mind to, which separates him from a canonical fantasy hero like Tolkien's Frodo. Nevertheless, Rothfuss' work has been heralded as *The Lord of the Rings* of our time, as both stories share the same epic-like tone and many of the high fantasy elements popularized by the latter, which seems to justify such a flattering comparison.

Such a comparison is not so flattering on other grounds, however, since Tolkien's work presents a male-governed fantasy world. *The Lord of the Rings* is a trilogy over a thousand pages long, yet only three women in it have a name, a personality and a role of some significance. None of these female characters belong to the Fellowship of the Ring, all three are equally, breathtakingly beautiful, and all three remain in passive roles in the

side-lines. Only Éowyn deviates from the traditional female roles of domesticity, healing, and nurturing, and she does so as a very clear exception, only to go back to a passive role by the end of the narrative. Unfortunately, Rothfuss does not improve on this issue as much as might be expected of such a recent work, especially one coming from such a socially aware author. Through his blog and Twitter account, Rothfuss displays a witty capacity for critically thought-out social commentary, as well as an awareness of socio-political movements like feminism, which does not appear to translate all the way into his fiction. This analysis will consider women characters present in both of the available volumes of the trilogy: *The Name of the Wind*, the first instalment (2007, henceforth abbreviated as *TNotW*), and *The Wise Man's Fear*, the second (2011, henceforth *TWMF*).

In both volumes, the story is narrated by Kvothe in the first person, an enterprise in which he proves to be doubly unreliable: on the one hand, because he gives a partial and biased perspective by presenting his narrative as truthful, while garnering the sympathy of readers so that their own perspective will be slanted in his favor. On the other, because Kvothe is narrating his story in retrospect, and therefore events will be inevitably colored with the inaccuracies natural to memory. This unreliability combines with the inevitable pervasiveness of the male gaze: both author and character are heterosexual males, which makes it nearly inescapable, and the point of view draws the reader into taking the same perspective, so that “the gaze of the [reader] and that of the male [character ...] are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude” (Mulvey 19). As a consequence of its intervention, the physical “appearance” of women in the narrative “is coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (Mulvey 19). What this means is that, when projected through this male gaze, female characters lose roundedness, personality and subjectivity – even agency – in order to appear as objects for male contemplation and appreciation.

As explained in the earlier sections, the male gaze forms its objects after what it seeks to find in them, in such a way that it becomes both an expectation and a model. Since in this case the male perspective is the only one we get, and since Kvothe is such a likeable and charismatic character who lures us into accepting his narrative, it is very difficult for the reader (even a female one) to realize the intervention of the male gaze.

The setting is also important to take into consideration when it comes to fantasy, as it allows to discern which – if any – of the primary world’s prerogatives are being followed and which are changed, subverted, or outright eliminated. In this case, the story takes place within the world of Temerant, which shares a very clear similarity with Tolkien’s Middle-Earth and most of high fantasy in general: it takes inspiration from the Middle Ages in order to structure its fictional society. From the insights given in both books, it is possible to deduce that the position of women is no exception to this norm. They are generally confined to domesticity and child-rearing, only lower-class women needing to work for a living; though some may know how to defend themselves, they are not warriors, nor meant to be (women of the fictional Adem race being the sole exception); they are also married into power, not generally possessing or wielding any themselves. Though there are women studying at the University, and though they are allowed to take the same subjects as their male colleagues, there are no female masters at all, and the students are hindered by much the same values found in our real, primary world, as proven by the fact that “[t]he ratio of men to women in the University is about ten to one” (*TNotW* 299). Women are thus placed in a disadvantageous position that is much too similar to that which we encounter in the known world, and which sets an expectation for very little subversion of the specular dynamics described in the previous sections.

For the sake of brevity and coherence, this analysis will focus only on two female characters, Denna and Felurian, since they are among the most significant women characters in the narrative. Furthermore, Denna and Felurian share quite a few similarities in spite of their different positions: they are both mysterious characters possessing an almost unearthly beauty, they are both romantic and/or sexual interests for Kvothe and play an important role in his development, and most importantly for this work, they both appear to function within the dynamics of the mirror.

### **2.1.1 DENNA**

Denna appears rather prominently in both books and clearly serves the function of Kvothe's love interest. Even so, she spends more time outside of his radar than in the spotlight, not because – like Tolkien's Arwen, for instance – she is being kept safely away from danger, but rather because she seems to have her own agenda, which keeps her away from Kvothe for much of the time. Denna remains a mysterious character throughout both books, and little information is given concerning her background: she belonged to a caravan of traveling merchants when she first met Kvothe; but half a year later, when they meet again, Denna seems to be doing much better for herself. She dresses elegantly and frequents rather expensive prestigious establishments, giving every appearance of a well-to-do young lady. As the first book advances, though, it becomes obvious that she remains in a difficult situation: she makes a living by creating fake identities and allowing herself to be courted by rich men, who give her expensive gifts that she then sells to survive; when these men get too familiar and try to overstep, or if they get emotionally involved in the relationship, she disappears quickly and quietly from their lives. This is what makes it so hard for Kvothe to contact her and so difficult for herself to survive. But, since she lacks friends and family, not many other options are left for her:

“There’s begging and whoring. Or being some lord’s mistress, which is a different slice of the same loaf. And we know our Denna doesn’t have it in her to be a kept woman [...].”

“There’s other work to be had,” I said holding up fingers of my own. “Seamstress, weaver, serving girl...”

Deoch snorted and gave me a disgusted look. “Come now lad, you’re smarter than that. [...] And you know that a pretty girl with no family ends up being taken advantage of just as often as a whore, and paid less for her trouble.” (*TNotW* 566)

It is clearly the patriarchal society around her that is preventing Denna from surviving independently without taking any risks; nevertheless, she shows an extremely easy-going, charming personality to everybody that effectively conceals her situation and helps her obtain what she wants. In this, she resembles a stereotypical gold-digger: she does not hesitate to employ her beauty and sexual attractiveness to seduce her suitors into being generous with their money, only to leave as soon as she feels the need to without any regard for the suitor’s possible feelings. The fact that she does so out of necessity rather than greed is the only thing prompting Kvothe’s tolerance for her less-than-worthy suitors, and something which garners his – and the reader’s – sympathies.

However, it must not be forgotten that Denna’s characterization is the outcome of Kvothe’s narrative, which partakes of conventional representations of women to construct her image, such as the emphasis placed on her breathtaking beauty:

Her eyes were dark. Dark as chocolate, dark as coffee, dark as the polished wood of my father’s lute. They were set in a fair face, oval. [...] Her easy smile could stop a man’s heart. [...] Her lips were always red, morning and night. [...] No matter where she stood, she was in the center of the room. [...] Finally, say that she was beautiful. That is all that can be well said. That she was beautiful, through

to her bones, despite any flaw or fault. She was beautiful, to Kvothe at least. At least? To Kvothe she was most beautiful. (*TNotW* 458, 459, 460)

Denna's beauty makes her desirable to men, which allows her to survive, but also makes her the objective of unwanted attentions and thus forces her to run away, burning whatever bridges she had managed to build in the meantime. Not only that, it also seems to earn her the jealous dislike of other women, which supposedly explains her lack of female friends: "Women hate Denna. [...] She's pretty and charming. Men crowd round her like stags in rut. [...] Women are bound to resent it" (*TNotW* 565). This stereotypical perception of women as preoccupied only with male attention, which leads them to refuse and alienate a fellow woman in need of help, contributes to the victimization of Denna in Kvothe's eyes and glorifies her at the expense of other women characters.

Through his construction of Denna's image, Kvothe effectively turns her into the ideal female heroine he needs to complete his own legend. In so doing, the narrator of idealization found in traditional myths by placing Denna on a pedestal as the standard for female perfection: he compares her to other women characters, demeaning them in order to elevate her ("Her lips were red. Not the garish painted red so many women believe makes them desirable", *TNotW* 458), and he endows her with a natural beauty and inborn talent, which help her foster other traits to further prove she is his perfect match. Like Kvothe himself, she is charming, charismatic, intelligent and a quick-learner; she is a good musician ("Speed comes with time and practice, but timing you are born with. You have it or you don't. Denna had it", *TWTF* 132), and possesses bits of knowledge which are ordinarily inaccessible to common people. All of these unparalleled qualities make her worthy of the position of Kvothe's heroine in his narrative:

"Think now. What does our story need? What vital element is it lacking?"

"Women, Reshi," Bast said immediately. [...]

Kvothe smiled. “Not *women*, Bast. A woman. *The* woman. [...] I will tell you the truth of her. Though I fear I may not be equal to the challenge.” (*TNotW* 385)

Through this disproportionate idealization, Denna becomes the object in the dynamic of specularization that Rothfuss inadvertently builds through Kvothe’s narration: all of Denna’s best qualities are a nearly exact reflection of Kvothe’s, yet untrained, so that he can look at her and be reassured that he possesses the best abilities. Denna’s beauty and charm are a result of the projection of Kvothe’s own desires upon her, which is why they satisfy him until he realizes that she is using them as a mask to protect her real self, even when she is with him. In fact, Denna remains a spectacle for Kvothe throughout the first book and continues to be so for much of the second one. Denna is forced to play a part, a mask she is forced into both by societal expectation and by necessity to survive, but Kvothe does not believe her: since he already has his own image of who she is, he thinks he knows her entirely – that what he is projecting unto her is all there is to her.

A crucial scene in *The Wise Man’s Fear* shows that Denna, though aware of the undesirability of her situation of dependence on men, knows exactly what she is doing and how to keep the situation under her control. She rescues a young girl from rape in a city slum, who reminds Denna of herself (“Meeting you is worse than looking in a mirror”, *TWMF* 619). She tries to help the girl by giving her several different options, among which she considers prostitution; in doing so, Denna outlines the life she is herself leading: “So if you’re going to be a whore, you do it smart. [...] You want men to court you. Send you gifts. [...] If you’re interesting, and pretty, and you know how to listen, men will desire your company. They’ll want to take you dancing as much as take you to bed. Then *you* have the control” (*TWMF* 621). However, even such carefully controlled manipulation has a price: “Even the fanciest horse is still a horse. That means sooner or later, you’re going to get ridden”, which can only be avoided if “[y]ou leave, quick and

quiet in the night” (622). This practicality, bordering on cynicism, is a much more fitting expression of the precarious situation Denna experiences; her words shock Kvothe deeply, since they represent a sharp contrast to the easy charm she shows when she is with him. This shock betrays Kvothe’s inability to see beyond what he wishes to see, as he refuses to believe that there can be a side of Denna he does not know. Later on, when an argument between them explodes, Denna begins to realize what the problem is:

“You hate that I won’t take your help. You can’t stand that I won’t let you fix every little thing in my life, is that it?”

“Well maybe someone needs to fix your life,” I [Kvothe] snapped. “You’ve made a fair mess of it so far, haven’t you?” [...]

“What makes you think you know *anything* about my life?” (*TWMF* 634)

Here, Kvothe starts rattling out his list of assumptions about her lifestyle, based on what little she has allowed him to glean until this point, which enrages Denna and escalates the argument further. At this point, she shows a perfect understanding of what truly goes on beneath Kvothe’s words:

“You don’t like my patron because you could get me a better one. You don’t like my song because it’s different from the one you know.” She reached for her harp case, her movements stiff and angry. “You’re just like all the rest.”

“I’m trying to help you!”

“You’re trying to fix me [...]. You’re trying to buy me. To arrange my life. You want to keep me like I’m your pet.” (*TWMF* 635-636)

This is the core of the problematic of their relationship: Kvothe’s refusal to see Denna as a complex individual. His misconception that he knows Denna perfectly leads him to assume that he knows what would be best for her, and hence to his efforts to dictate Denna’s actions and behavior. Here, ironically, Kvothe makes the same mistake as the

rest of Denna's suitors: he attempts to stake a claim upon her and to draw her into the dependent situation which she has been trying to avoid all this time by subsisting on her own.

Unfortunately, given the biased perspective, the reader does not get to see Denna as anything but Kvothe's mirror image: a perfect woman who plays the part of the narrator's love interest, reflecting Kvothe's greatest qualities at a lesser degree so that his ego can be reinforced and enlarged. However, Denna gives glimpses of the character she failed just short of being, especially in her clear wish to remain an active agent of her own fate. The fact that she has an active existence outside of Kvothe's knowledge already separates her from a passive love interest like Tolkien's Arwen, who is kept safely away from the main action and is not allowed to do much of significance in the meantime. Denna also clearly knows how to defend herself and take control of dangerous situations, as shown by her wisdom regarding weapons of self-defense: "A woman who wears a knife is obviously looking for trouble.' She reached deep into her pocket and brought out a long, slender piece of metal [...]. 'However a woman who *carries* a knife is *ready* for trouble. Generally speaking, it's easier to appear harmless'" (*TNotW* 637). The most positive trait in Denna, though, and what ensures a separation – however small or fruitless at the end of the day – from the role of mirror, is her refusal to give up her independence. She rejects Kvothe's insistent offers of using his influence to induce a prestigious noble to patron her, even though it could certainly grant her a stable, comfortable and safer lifestyle, and she is firm in her refusal: "I have a patron. [...] One I've earned on my own" (*TWMF* 625), which demonstrates the importance she gives to being able to earn her living without help. Her greatest wish is not to "be beholden to anyone" (*TNotW* 681), something which Kvothe willfully ignores. In rejecting his offers and calling him out on his patronizing, paternalistic behavior, Denna reaffirms her personal agency and avoids

being reduced to a passive love interest who awaits the hero's help, something readers have grown used to seeing, especially within the fantasy genre due to its inspiration in traditional legend.

### 2.1.2 FELURIAN

Though Felurian is mentioned in *The Name of the Wind*, she does not actually make her appearance until *The Wise Man's Fear*. She is depicted as a faerie equivalent of a siren: a magical, immortal being who bewitches men using her song to lead them to their doom; in this case, *doom* involves being sexually used and abused by Felurian until they are consumed by insanity or die from exhaustion. Of course, that means this character is depicted with a focus on her physical beauty, much like Denna, yet Felurian's descriptions are focused on her body and her sexuality in such a way that she is constructed as an erotic temptress:

Her lips were pale and perfect. Her eyes half-lidded and hungry. [...] One breast stood round and full, while the other angled slightly to one side, following the downward slope of her body. They rose and fell with her breath, moving gently [...]. The heat of her body was like standing near a fire. The skin of her waist was soft beneath my hand. (*TWMF* 810)

The simple motion of her moving leg was like a dance, the unexaggerated shifting of her hip entrancing as a fire. The arch of her bare foot said more of sex than anything I'd seen in my young life. (813)

The temptress archetype uses these physical attributes and sexual potency to seduce men, often rendered as helpless victims before her power, and this is exactly what Felurian appears to be. Kvothe constructs his image of Felurian through an excessive insistence on her physical perfection that is reminiscent of the way he describes Denna, although in Felurian's case this idealization may be justified by the fact that she is not human, and

therefore can go above and beyond the expectation of a mortal. However, this does not justify the way in which her whole character is reduced to her sexuality.

In a disappointing turn of events, the thing that Felurian is most proud of is not her Fae heritage and power, her wisdom, or even her beauty – it is her sexual skill: “I put on my innocent face. ‘Isn’t it [sex] always like this?’ [...] She simply sat. ‘I am Felurian.’ It wasn’t a simple stating of a name. It was a declaration. It was a proud flag flying” (*TWMF* 821). Felurian clearly possesses a close connection to magic which enables her to wield great power, but she appears not to know how to transmit that knowledge to Kvothe as he had hoped, since it comes to her naturally instead of as a learned skill. The fairy is also unwilling to share the knowledge Kvothe needs to execute his revenge against the Chandrian, and any other related knowledge she does have is too ancient to be useful to him. While she does tell him at length about the fascinating Fae and their realm, Kvothe’s narration does not go into any details about it; in fact, most of the conversations and stories unrelated to sex which they supposedly share are either cut out from the narrative entirely, or mentioned only in passing. The only knowledge Felurian gets to display is her sexual savvy, which Kvothe *does* discuss, as it is the only thing she is readily willing to teach him; this means that the ten chapters devoted to Felurian’s section of the book (eleven, if the epilogue where Kvothe returns to the human world is counted) are almost entirely dedicated to the development of their sexual relationship. In turn, this makes the whole section appear gratuitous, very close to a wish-fulfilment fantasy pandering most particularly to male readers – or to Kvothe’s own desire to satisfy his ego. In this process, Felurian comes to function, like Denna, as Kvothe’s magnifying mirror.

At this point, Kvothe is fifteen or sixteen years old at most, and has made his lack of romantic experience painfully obvious, recognizing it himself and reiterating it multiple times: “If there was one thing I knew less about than naming, it was courting

women” (*TWMMF* 303), “What I personally knew about courting women could comfortably fit into a thimble without taking it off your finger first” (584), “Inexperienced as I was with women [...]” (603). This inexperience explains his sometimes excessive care when interacting with Denna, because he is afraid of doing something wrong and driving her away. Of course, this also translates in complete ignorance regarding sex and sexuality, being as he is a teenage virgin; and yet, in spite of this, Felurian is impressed by Kvothe’s sexual ability, even refusing to believe him when he tells her he has never been with another woman before:

“you tell me a faerie story, my kvothe.” [...]

[M]y expression seemed to convince her. “but you were like a gentle summer storm.” She made a fluttering gesture with a hand. “you were a dancer fresh upon the field.” Her eyes glittered wickedly.

I tucked that comment away for later ego-polishing purposes. (*TWMMF* 820-821)

The fact that a centuries-old magical being, whose entire life revolves around bewitching and seducing men to suck their life away through intercourse, would find the abilities of a fifteen-year old virgin anything more than satisfactory does not seem at all believable. It does not only come across as the “ego-polishing” Kvothe himself admits to, but is clearly meant to reflect his heroic prowess at everything – even something he has never tried or learned about before – by sacrificing verisimilitude for the sake of egotism.

There is also the fact that Kvothe quickly becomes able to withstand Felurian’s spell, which creates an irresistible sexual desire that subjugates every man’s will to hers; this can, indeed, be justified by his earlier, grueling training in the arcane arts, which granted him a greater discipline of mind than most, but resisting her spell is not all he does – he *out-powers* her. Something in him snaps in such a way that he is able to call

upon powers he has only wielded once before, powers he does not know how to use or even control, yet he suddenly overpowers and submits Felurian with a mysterious ease: “I held her there above the ground. She watched me with an air of fear and disbelief [...]. I knew then that I could kill her” (813-814). While it is not at all uncommon in fantasy for a hero to muster unknown powers in his hour of need, to defeat a centuries-old creature who lives and breathes magic so quickly and effortlessly reflects poorly on Felurian, as it takes away all of her supposed power in favor of a teen-aged Kvothe. She is thus reduced to yet another mirror image, to the extent that she is devoid of roundedness and depth to facilitate her amplification of Kvothe’s qualities, furthering his ego and fueling his legend. In addition to this, Felurian’s over-sexualization makes her existence revolve nearly entirely around sex, thus giving her little less to add to the narrative other than wish-fulfilment for the ultimate male fantasy – that of a continued sexual relationship with the most beautiful woman in the world.

This portrayal stands in a curious contrast to that of other legendary figures present in the story. Kvothe’s narration consists entirely of the deconstruction of his own myth, of the unraveling of the facts and the demystification of the legend he has carefully built around himself. Through this tale, Kvothe also contributes to the demystification of other mythical or folktale figures whom he comes into contact with, such as the Chandrian, by proving their mythology somehow untrue or wrong. Felurian is, herself, one of these legendary figures who appear in human tales and songs, and thus has a myth of her own; however, upon meeting her, this myth is reinforced and proven true, rather than the opposite. This would initially appear harmless, were it not for the fact that Felurian’s portrayal calls to mind the persistent stigma placed on female sexuality: it is reminiscent of traditional depictions of sexually active women as somehow dangerous and evil, an archetypal example to teach women to control their sexuality or indeed give it up entirely.

Nevertheless, Felurian seems to narrowly escape the temptress archetype because her actions are not presented as a conscious, cruel attempt to inflict harm, but rather as part of her nature: her seduction is a power in quite the literal sense – it is a supernatural ability, but she does not use it with an evil intention. Rather, “Felurian made men mad with desire the same way I gave off body heat. It was natural for her”, even though “she could control it” (*TWMF* 806). Kvothe actually compares her to a child, ruled by the desire felt in each moment, or with a sudden storm, simply following its nature; in any case, Felurian “does not concern [herself] with consequence” (*TWMF* 812), and therefore cannot be inherently evil or harmful as the temptress archetype is.

Indeed, it need not be harmful to construct a female character who is unapologetic about her sexuality, and even relishes in it at every given chance. Felurian is certainly an active part – perhaps *the* active part – in her sexual relationships, and by extension, is also in control of her sexuality and how she experiences it. She is not simply knowledgeable with sex, she is comfortable with it – and not afraid to show it, given that she takes to mentoring Kvothe in a myriad of techniques and moves, endowing him with a sexual prowess that will serve him well later on. All of these are undeniably positive traits, but such positivity is undermined by the fact that her sexual prowess is not used to empower her, but rather to further the male’s ego and cater to his fantasy. Interestingly, this overly sexual depiction contrasts with Denna’s portrayal, which is similarly idealized, but very nearly devoid of any sexuality: she is placed on a pedestal as the ideal image of woman, and hence separated from bodily matters, from sex and sexuality. Both characters fall just short of becoming fully rounded depictions, but in both cases the male gaze turns them into mirrors who reflect what is needed of them to complete Kvothe’s story and to reaffirm his position as a hero.

### 2.1.3 OTHER FEMALE CHARACTERS

The rest of the female characters of the narrative fall under Kvothe's gaze in similar terms to those of Felurian and Denna. Their depictions are clearly influenced by the ever-present male gaze, which constructs them as beautiful and idealized, particularly when they could take the place of a romantic or sexual interest for Kvothe. One could argue that this is due to Kvothe's perspective as an unreliable narrator, because he finds them all beautiful and his subjectivity seeps through the narrative to make them seem so, even if they are not. This is not a realistic argument, however, considering that female characters are described as having conventionally attractive physical features. Fela, Kvothe's classmate, is one of the first to display this consistency: "She was strikingly beautiful, with long, dark hair and clear, bright eyes" (*TNotW* 300), "Her long black gown was gathered close at her narrow waist and well-rounded hips. She was also displaying the most spectacular pair of breasts I'd ever seen [...]" (*TWWMF* 329-330). Other examples are Losi, the tavern girl Kvothe meets before Felurian's appearance, with her "well-advertised bosom framed by a tumble of bright red curls", her skin "white as cream with just the barest hint of freckle" and her lips of "pale, dangerous pink" (*TWWMF* 659); and Penthe, a young warrior woman: "Her frame was more delicate, [...] her small face and shoulders making her look almost childlike. But the pronounced curve of her high breasts and round hips [...] made it obvious she was no child" (*TWWMF* 967). All of these features correspond to traditional ideals of feminine beauty, and they are often highlighted as the characters' most remarkable characteristics. Moreover, many of these secondary female characters are conveniently placed in the narrative, so that Kvothe can seduce, save or help them in some way. Losi's only reason to exist in the narrative is to allow Kvothe to display his newly acquired sexual ability after his stay with Felurian; similarly, two of Fela's few

appearances in the first book involve her being harassed or with her life in danger, at which point Kvothe coincidentally appears to save her.

At this point, it is also necessary to consider how language is employed to refer to women. Leaving aside the constant use of adjectives which remark on physical beauty (“beautiful” being a particularly reoccurring word), Kvothe or other male characters within the narrative will often attempt to *explain* women and their behavior through questionable metaphors, or even through certain problematic jokes which are objectifying and demeaning:

Sometimes a man enjoys a symphony. Elsetimes he finds a jig more suited to his taste. The same holds true for lovemaking. [...] Each woman is like an instrument, waiting to be learned, loved, and finally played, to have at last her own music made. (*TWMMF* 887)

You see, women are like fires, like flames. Some women are like candles, bright and friendly. Some are like single sparks, or embers, like fireflies for chasing on summer nights. Some are like campfires, all light and heat for a night and willing to be left after. (*TNotW* 532)

“And surely you know there’s nothing inherently wrong with having sex with three people in a row on the broad hearth of a busy inn.” She looked me in the eye pointedly. [...] “What would you call that person?”

[...] *A whore*, I thought silently to myself. And a cheap and shameless whore to boot. (*TWMMF* 942)

“That’s a clever wife you’ve got there, Arl.” Ben spoke up. [...] “How much will you sell her for?”

“I need her for my work, unfortunately. But if you’re interested in a short-term rental [...]” (*TNotW* 108)

It is true that male characters, and even Kvothe himself, are also joked about or spoken about metaphorically in a similar manner, so that this tendency to explain through metaphors can be attributed to the author's poetic style. However, it cannot be denied that these textual features only reinforce the presence of the male gaze, turning women characters into objects complementary to men and meant for their consumption and enjoyment. It is rather telling how this same thing does not occur with male characters – not even conventionally attractive men in the story will have the shape of their chest described or the features of their faces praised with the same zeal. Descriptions of female characters and related perceptions of them are filtered through a male lens, which provokes a lack of true agency outside of Kvothe's scope of influence. Since there are already fewer female characters than male ones in general, and even fewer who have real plot significance, it becomes frustrating to see objectifying practices and over-sexualization be perpetuated through their images.

A positive aspect of female representation in Rothfuss' books is the variety of personality and background in the female characters which he creates, as well as their number, particularly in *The Wise Man's Fear*. Unfortunately, many of these female characters occupy secondary roles that do not impact the narrative meaningfully, except as part of Kvothe's specularizing practice. Generally, women characters in Rothfuss' work appear underdeveloped and do not live up to their full potential, especially when portrayed against Kvothe himself. The two characters which the analysis focused on, Denna and Felurian, are particularly and dangerously close to being reduced to the function they accomplish in relation to Kvothe's development. Their beauty and sexual appeal are idealized and objectified to an extreme, as well as employed to further enhance the male character's importance and to amplify his greatness, which brings these women into a specular dynamic with respect to Kvothe. Not to withhold credit where it is due,

however, these female characters do have very positive aspects to them: they are all active agents, not traditionally submissive, and display their strengths in a variety of ways, as well as showing very different and unique personalities. They do therefore represent a clear improvement when compared to their predecessors within the genre, such as Tolkien's women characters. Nevertheless, the fact that a socially aware author like Rothfuss can reproduce some of the misrepresentations of his male predecessors is not only evidence of how deep patriarchal values are ingrained in our society – it also demonstrates that to create well-rounded female characters who escape, or at least attempt to escape, the dynamics of the mirror, the male gaze and the stereotypes that inevitably pervade it, is not only important to women: it is also greatly necessary for other authors, perhaps especially male authors, so that they can look to these role models and avoid tripping over the same stones in their own work.

## **2.2 *UPROOTED*, NAOMI NOVIK (2015)**

The author of this novel, Naomi Novik, was deeply inspired by her Polish ascendancy to create her secondary world. This use of Polish language and Slavic folklore allows for a unique setting that differentiates itself from traditional fantasy, which is, as mentioned earlier, often inspired in central and northern Medieval Europe. This novel has a female protagonist, something uncommon in the traditional fantasy canon – though very common within the young adult genre –, who also acts as the first-person narrator. Her name is Agnieszka, inspired by the title of a Polish folk tale; unlike Kvothe's, her story is not an epic adventure in the traditional quest-like fashion, but rather more similar to the Grimm Brothers fairy-tale style – a dark tale hidden beneath apparent simplicity. Agnieszka lives in the nation of Polnya, in the small village of Dvernik; though the valley is peaceful, Dvernik is the village closest to the Wood, an enchanted forest whose fruits and seeds

poison the mind. Even its pollen is enough to corrupt people and animals into madness and violence:

But I had lived through the Green Summer, when a hot wind carried pollen from the Wood west a long way into the valley, into our fields and gardens. The crops grew furiously lush, but also strange and misshapen. Anyone who ate of them grew sick with anger, struck at their families, and in the end ran into the Wood and vanished, if they weren't tied down. (Novik 8)

To protect themselves, the people of Dvernik and the neighboring villages rely on the Dragon – whose real name is Sarkan –, an ancient and powerful wizard. In exchange for his protection, every harvest feast he chooses “a girl of seventeen, born between one October and the next” (Novik 5) and takes her away to his tower for ten years. Every girl that was taken by the Dragon comes back changed and ends up leaving her home village to never come back, but the Wood is fearsome enough to the point that the families give up their daughters willingly. Although the Dragon keeps up his end of the bargain, he remains distant from the people of the valley and only interacts with them as much as is strictly necessary, which makes him a good enough lord, but not a beloved one.

When the narrative begins, it is Agnieszka's year to stand in line at the harvest festival for the Dragon's perusal; however, by now, everyone is certain the wizard will choose her best friend Kasia, who has been preparing herself to serve a lord her whole life. As the two main female characters, Agnieszka and Kasia will be the focus of this analysis.

### **2.2.1 AGNIESZKA**

Agnieszka, Nieszka for short, accomplishes a double function: she is the narrator of the story, and at the same time its protagonist and therefore an active participant in it. An analysis of her character must therefore cover both functions, but starting with the former

seems to make the most sense, since – as it happened in Kvothe’s case – she narrates in first person and therefore has the point of view that will be shaping the story.

The most interesting point to consider about Agnieszka’s point of view is whether the male gaze is also present in this case. A female narrator does not preclude the presence of the male gaze, since, as discussed earlier, women tend to interiorize it in such a way that they see through the male gaze when looking at themselves and other women: they see their physical defects in relation to the male standards, their inferiority with respect to men, the undesirability of their difference, and thus attempt to change and shape themselves according to men’s wishes. As mentioned earlier, an existence within the patriarchal dynamics of specularly prevents them from ever escaping the male gaze entirely, but it is possible to make a conscious attempt to avoid the objectification and sexualization which accompany it. As it happens, Agnieszka does carry out the idealization of a woman – embodied by her friend Kasia in the narrative – but does not do so in the same way as Kvothe had with Denna, in an attempt to build a perfect image which will reflect positively upon the narrator and amplify his qualities. Rather, Kasia’s placement on a pedestal of perfection comes at the expense of Nieshka herself. Everyone knows the Dragon will take Kasia because she is clever, brave, and can cook, clean, and sew, and the wizard “always took the most special [girl], somehow” (Novik 5). Agnieszka, on the other hand, herself admits that her parents would have felt quite reassured that she would not be taken “even if there hadn’t been Kasia” (Novik 6): “At seventeen I was still a too-skinny colt of a girl with big feet and tangled dirt-brown hair, and my only gift, if you could call it that, was I would tear or stain or lose anything put on me between the hours of one day” (6). Kasia is thus clearly a standard against which Agnieszka measures herself, and because the comparison harms her, rather than the

opposite, it is possible to rule out the idea of Kasia as a magnifying mirror, as Denna was for Kvothe.

As a result of this comparison, Agnieszka's voice is characterized by self-deprecation, which turns out to be accompanied by a jealousy which Agnieszka has worked hard to conceal, even to herself:

[...] I *had* wanted all her gifts, if not the price she would have to pay for them.  
[...] All the times I'd felt like nothing, the girl who didn't matter, that no lord would ever want; all the times I'd felt myself a gangly tangled mess beside her. All the ways she'd been treated specially: a place set aside for her, gifts and attention lavished, everyone taking the chance to love her while they could. There had been times I had wanted to be the special one [...]. (Novik 141)

This passage highlights the fact that Agnieszka's jealousy is not simply a consequence of the low self-esteem which years of regarding herself as inferior to Kasia have garnered her: it is also a result of the workings of the male gaze. She mentions feeling like "no lord would ever want" her, which indicates that her feeling of worthlessness stems from the fact that she does not fit in the ideal picture of a lady which men expect and desire: "I wasn't a lady-like quiet girl; all my life I'd spent running in the woods, climbing trees and tearing through brambles" (Novik 18). She is not traditionally beautiful, nor does she take pains to improve her appearance, and she is not skilled at stereotypically feminine endeavors, such as sewing or cooking, either. Kasia, on the other hand, possesses all of these things, which means that she is growing up under the premise that she will become an object of desire for men, and therefore someone whose gifts should be envied, even if they doom her to ten years of servitude. Therefore, even though the male gaze is not present *as such* in Nieshka's way of looking, it is certainly present in the way she perceives herself, which proves the harmful consequences of the interiorization of the

specular model. It is thus interesting to see how, if at all, the female point of view changes things for the way in which images of women are built in the narrative, which is why Agnieszka herself is also analyzed as the main character of the story.

Agnieszka is clearly far from being the type of idealized figure which *The Kingkiller Chronicle* offered: she is not only self-conscious about her appearance, but also clumsy, untidy and disorganized, a slow learner who is aware of her limitations – unlike Kvothe, whose skill seemed limitless. The only thing Nieshka is truly skilled at is harvesting and gathering, which serves her family’s farming lifestyle well: “I’d always been able to glean more nuts and mushrooms and berries than anyone [...]; I could find late herbs in autumn and early plums in spring. [...] But that was as far as my gifts went, I’d always thought” (Novik 55). It is Kasia who first realizes that this “gift” must, in fact, be a consequence of her magical ability. When Nieshka reveals she can do magic, Kasia replies:

“I should have known [...]. Strange things always happened to you. You’d go into the forest and come back with fruit out of season, or flowers no one else had ever seen. When we were little, you always used to tell me stories the pines told you [...]. Even the way your clothes were always such a mess – you couldn’t get so dirty if you tried, and I knew you weren’t trying. I saw a branch reach out and snag your skirt once [...]”. (Novik 65)

This gives Agnieszka’s main flaw – clumsiness and untidiness – a reason to exist, and brings up the likelihood of her magic being an inborn talent. Interestingly, it also establishes a connection between Nieshka and the natural environment that explains her love for the outdoors and her deep understanding of nature and the workings of living things. This sets the grounds for her realization that the Wood need not be burned for its corruption to be defeated, but rather purified through the lending of a kind hand. Her

magic is thus focused on restoration, on cleansing rather than destroying, which is likely the closest element to the fantasy canon about Agnieszka's character: it is reminiscent of archetypal female healers, such as Viviane from the Arthurian legend and Galadriel from *The Lord of the Rings*, who in spite of possessing unfathomable power, only employ it to protect and to heal, without ever taking a more active part in the fight against evil. Agnieszka is separated from these archetypal features, however: the focus of her magic on restoration and cleansing – and her own dislike for violence – do not by any means render her unable to actively participate in the battles where she is needed.

Aside from this, it is important to consider how Agnieszka's physical and personal imperfections (quick to judge, stubborn, strongly guided by emotion and instinct rather than careful thought and planning) guide her actions and provoke consequences which hinder her success, and also affect the development of her relationships. As consistent flaws are brought to the fore, characters become more believable and human-like, as well as easier to empathize with, because as Žižek had stated, “the feature, the trait on the basis of which we identify with someone [...] is by no means necessarily a glamorous feature” (117). However, such roundedness and verisimilitude are especially significant features for a *female* character to have, because the presence of flaws, fears, and general imperfections contributes to the demystification of the female figure. As was mentioned earlier, in order to avoid misrepresentation as much as possible, female characters should unmask “the spectacle enacted for [woman's] gaze” (Žižek 119); that is, they should question the standards established by traditional images of woman catered to the male gaze by somehow subverting them or deviating from them, thus proceeding to an effective demystification of the traditional idealization – or vilification – to which woman's image is limited in patriarchal discourse. This is what Agnieszka's character accomplishes.

From the beginning of the narrative, as was discussed before, she evidences that she is far from the ideal picture of a lady:

My skirt had one enormous ugly stain, from the vomit – I'd wiped it off best as I could in the kitchen, but it hadn't really come out – and another where I'd blown my nose. There were three or four dripping stains from the stew, and some more spatters from the dish-pain where I'd wiped the pots. The hem was still muddy from this morning, and I'd torn a few other holes in it without even noticing. My mother had braided and coiled my hair that morning and pinned it up, but the coils had slid mostly down off my head and were now a big snarled knot of hair hanging half off my neck.

I hadn't noticed; it wasn't anything out of the usual for me [...]. (Novik 22)

Of course, this description is practically opposite to Denna's – and other fantasy women characters, like Galadriel or Arwen's – perfectly beautiful and elegant outward appearance. These flaws are, however, not used to vilify or demean Agnieszka – though the Dragon does insult her incompetence quite harshly –, but are rather presented as a natural part of who she is. Their demystifying effect lies in the fact that they distance Agnieszka from an ideal, and therefore prevent her from becoming an object of the male gaze's desire, while also giving her character dimension, as they keep her from becoming a flat image adapted to suit male idealization. Furthermore, Nieshka's flawed portrayal of herself and of others ensures that she does not become a magnifying mirror for the male characters: by not conforming to the ideal expected of her, she avoids entering the specular dynamic that required her to be perfect, and disavows female inferiority by depicting male characters as equally flawed and imperfect. What is more, as the narrative progresses, she becomes more self-aware and grows to accept herself as she is, without

having needed to change herself according to the male gaze's standards to achieve personal fulfilment or self-love – *or* romantic love, as her relationship with Sarkan shows.

Such a relationship is worth discussing here for two main reasons: firstly, because it avoids the specular dynamic which pervades most fictional romantic or sexual relationships, such as Kvothe's and Denna's; secondly, because it is built on grounds of equality (or near-equality, given the natural differences in knowledge and skill). Both of these features are particularly remarkable because they are achieved in spite of the fact that Agnieszka occupies a submissive position to the Dragon, as his student and servant. Part of what contributes to the deconstruction of the specular economy is that Agnieszka never does idealize Sarkan or regard him as her natural superior: she recognizes that he is not a bad lord, nor evil, "but he was distant and terrible", and "he was going to take Kasia away, so I hated him, and had hated him for years and years" (Novik 10), so of course their relationship was not bound for the best start. On Sarkan's part, it is very likely that he would, indeed, have taken Kasia if the decision had depended entirely on him: he stops to look at her in the row of girls "the way he hadn't paused for any" of the others, with "a thin pleased smile curving his thin hard mouth" (Novik 12), and recalls her in front of Agnieszka as "neither horse-faced nor a slovenly mess" (Novik 23). The choice is made for him, however, as Agnieszka is the only one who possesses magic: "I would have been delighted to leave you moldering in your coin-sized village, but [... t]hose with the gift must be taught: the king's law requires it" (Novik 47). Thus, with Agnieszka unhappy with being away from the simple farming life and the family she loved, and the Dragon dissatisfied with her performance in magic and chores, both are stuck in a situation they had neither expected nor desired, which leads them to constant arguments.

Their personalities clash because they are very nearly opposites of each other. The Dragon loves order and beauty, and becomes increasingly frustrated at Nieshka's

untidiness: “I could tell from only a few days in the tower that he loved beautiful things. [...] I was a glaring blot on the perfection” (Novik 31-32). Being an ancient wizard accustomed to loneliness, Sarkan does not know how to mind others’ feelings, and therefore is rather harsh to Nieshka, berating and insulting her quite strongly:

“I was – I cooked, and I cleaned –” I tried to explain.

“The dirtiest thing in this tower is *you*,” he said – true, but unkind anyway.  
(Novik 22)

“I’m not a splendid cook, but –” I started, meaning to explain that [...] I’d only not known my way [around the tower], but he snorted, interrupting me.

“Is there anything you *can* do?” he asked, mockingly. (22-23)

“You village girls are all tedious at the beginning, more or less, but you’re proving a truly remarkable paragon of incompetence.” (23)

At one point, Agnieszka decides that attempting to please him is useless, as well as against her better judgement – “I didn’t feel I owed him beauty” (Novik 32) –, and thus becomes determined to become as messy as she possibly can in a small, yet effective rebellion: “I wanted him to be bitterly annoyed every time he looked at me, and he rewarded me with every incredulous scowl” (Novik 36).

Another point in which they clash is their idea and use of magic. Agnieszka is initially terrified of it, since every spell she casts appears to drain her of energy completely, regardless of its simplicity: “I staggered [...], my lungs emptied as if someone had sat on my chest; I felt like I’d been squeezed for juice like a lemon. Stars prickled at the edge of my sight, and I leaned over half-fainting” (Novik 24). In fact, Nieshka believes that Sarkan is using her as a channel for his spells, employing *her* energy for *his* magic, and only later does she realize it is her own magic she is using. In truth, Sarkan is earnestly attempting to teach her, as he loves the craft and attempts to instill the same love in

Nieshka: “I was almost sorry not to be better, for now I could tell his frustration was that of the lover of beauty and perfection. [...]. He loved his magic, and would have shared that love with me” (Novik 55). Once she gets over her fear, though, Nieshka remains uninterested in learning magic and contents herself with being shouted at after failing her spell-work. In truth, she does not want this gift at all, as it has caused her to be forcibly ripped away from her home and normal life: “If [...] I wasn’t a witch, would you let me – could I go home? Couldn’t you take it out of me?” (Novik 47). Later on, where the Dragon’s magic consists of long, complex, yet clearly enunciated incantations, Agnieszka’s craft is – like herself – entirely based on intuition and simplicity, “like gleaning in the woods. [...] You have to pick your way through the thickets and the trees, and it’s different every time” (Novik 88). This infuriates Sarkan, as Agnieszka becomes a conundrum he cannot wrap his head around.

It is this clashing and butting heads which ends up bringing them closer, slowly growing into a mutual respect which only later evolves into attraction. Their romantic and sexual relationship develops gradually and naturally throughout the tale, without interfering or influencing its main events, and thus it never becomes the focus of the narrative. It does not become the focus of Agnieszka as a character, either: she never revolves around his acceptance, refusing to change herself to please him, and she does not hesitate to defy him when she believes he is wrong. When it comes to sexuality, however, Agnieszka is of course deeply inexperienced, as Kvothe was: what little she knows comes from having overheard her mother telling Kasia “how it happened when a girl was married”, so she would know what to do if the Dragon tried to take her: “take deep breaths, and keep from clenching up tight, [...] so it wouldn’t hurt” (Novik 16). Of course, since Nieshka was the one taken in the end, she believes she is at risk of being raped by the Dragon, which enhances her fear. The experience when Prince Marek

attempts to seduce her does nothing to help the matter: “I didn’t scream, I didn’t plead, and I think he scarcely imagined that I would resist. [...] But he did overcome me. Then I began to be really afraid, wanting only to get away [...]. And though he might not have wanted resistance, when he met it, he cared nothing: he only grew impatient” (Novik 43-44).

Though she has clearly not been taught to find sex appealing or that desiring it would come naturally, Agnieszka’s experience of her sexuality is completely different with the Dragon. Nieshka describes the experience of their first kiss as follows:

[...] I didn’t have anything to compare that intimacy to. [...] I hadn’t connected it to sex – sex was poetic references in songs, my mother’s practical instructions, and those few awful hideous moments in the tower with Prince Marek, where I might as well have been a doll as far as he’d cared.

But now I toppled the Dragon over, clutching at his shoulders. As we fell his thigh pressed between mine, through my skirts, and in one shuddering jolt I began to form a startled new understanding. (Novik 158)

This marks Agnieszka’s discovery of her own sexual desire, something she did not know she had, but that she fully embraces when it comes to her as a wanted thing, something natural she need not be and indeed is not ashamed of. At this point, however, the Dragon pushes her away before anything more happens; when their sexual attraction finally consummates, it is because Agnieszka herself takes the initiative, reaffirming her desire and forcing Sarkan to confront his own: “[...] I pushed him back down and kissed him. [...] I scrambled up the tall side of the bed and climbed in on top of him [...]. I glared down. ‘Do you *want* me to go?’” (Novik 353).

Of course, he does not. Further, Sarkan preoccupies himself with her pleasure, tending to her until she achieves, to play on Lacanian terminology, *jouissance*: “He was

asking me a question I didn't know the answer to, until I did; I clenched up suddenly, wrung out and wet against his hands. I fell back shaking against the pillows [...], panting. 'Oh,' I said, 'Oh'" (Novik 354). Thus, not only is Agnieszka embracing her sexuality, taking control of it, and fully enjoying its experience, but its depiction emphasizes female pleasure in a way that is uncommon to see, especially within the fantasy genre. Usually, sexual relationships in fantasy are not depicted at all or merely glossed over: although young adult fantasy tends to be much more focused on romance, it hardly ever emphasizes female pleasure in this same manner, and often depicts sexual relationships only in a fade-to-black sort of style, without pausing in the particulars. Novik, on the other hand, does not shy away from bodily and near-explicit descriptions to depict a fully consensual relationship, based on mutual trust and respect and concerned with the partner's pleasure, as something desirable and, indeed, natural. Instead of making one character into an object of sexual desire for the other, and instead of making Agnieszka into a mirror where Sarkan can project his qualities and desires, Sarkan's and Nieshka's relationship is one where both of them are active subjects.

### **2.2.2 KASIA**

As mentioned in Agnieszka's section, Kasia is Nieshka's best friend and a paragon of perfection, the only character who is presented as ideal within this narrative. As Agnieszka herself recognizes, Kasia sounds "like something out of a story" (Novik 5):

She had thick wheat-golden hair that she kept in a braid to her waist, and her eyes were warm brown, and her laugh was like a song that made you want to sing it. She thought of all the best games, and could make up stories and new dances out of her head; she could cook fit for a feast, and when she spun the wool from her father's sheep, the thread came off the wheel smooth and without a single knot or snarl. (5)

However, as mentioned before, she does not act as a magnifying mirror for Nieshka in spite of her idealization. Because she possesses everything – the personality, beauty, and skills – that Agnieszka lacks, the comparison actually hurts Nieshka instead of elevating her. Therefore, if anything, Kasia is rather a *reductive* mirror – a reflected image in which Nieshka can see everything she does *not* have, so that even though idealization is partly a consequence of the love and admiration she feels for her dearest friend, it is also a way to contribute to Nieshka’s self-deprecation in Kasia’s favor.

And yet, when Agnieszka casts a spell to save Kasia from the Wood’s corruption, she is able to see Kasia’s own secret envy: she’d “hated” Agnieszka “for being safe, for being loved” (Novik 141), and for having a close and loving relationship with her mother, whereas Kasia’s mother would force her to do things she was uncomfortable with or did not want, to face her pain and fear alone, with the sole aim that she would be fit to serve a lord. Furthermore,

[...] she’d even hated me for being taken. She hadn’t been chosen after all. I saw her sitting at the feast afterwards, out of place, everyone whispering [...]. She’d made up her mind to pay the price, and be brave; but now there was nothing left to be brave for, no glittering future ahead. [...] And I’d come back in silk and velvet, [...] my hands full of magic, the power to do as I liked, and she’d thought, *That should be me, it should have been me*, as though I was a thief who’d taken something that belonged to her. (Novik 142)

This comes across as a kind of irony, as it shows a secret misery and bitterness which prove how Nieshka’s image of Kasia as the girl with all the gifts had been mistaken all along. However, this also plays on the way in which women are pitted against each other in fiction, a reflection of the female competition which is instilled in patriarchal societies. Denna’s lack of friends is an example of how female relationships are usually portrayed

in fiction: as non-existent, since their jealousy drives them to hatred in a competition for male attention and validation. In Novik's secondary world, Kasia's traditionally feminine traits are celebrated and Agnieszka's inability to conform to them is scorned, so that, in a more prototypical story, their petty jealousy would have grown into rivalry instead of friendship. Kasia would have remained a rival until Agnieszka grew beautiful and skilled enough to surpass her, thus becoming yet another object to male desire. And yet, instead of competing against each other and allowing envy to consume them, Kasia and Agnieszka love and admire each other deeply and unreservedly. Their friendship, or even sisterhood, becomes even stronger as, instead of choosing to dwell in resentment for their petty hatred, they choose to help and protect each other through the ordeals they push through. Moreover, other relationships between women are emphasized throughout the narrative: for instance, Agnieszka loves her mother and considers her an important presence and role-model, and Jaga becomes a predecessor and a guide to follow and look up to. This creates an emphasis on sorority, on solidarity between women, which effectively goes against the portrayal of female relationships as seen through the male gaze, undermining their representation as a competition for male attention and validation.

Something interesting about Kasia's description, and that of other women from Dvernik, is that it shows how stereotypically feminine traits – based on traditional gender roles – are enforced in Nieshka's and Kasia's environment. Women cook, spin thread and rear children, while putting care into their appearance and their dress. However, they do also take up heavy farming work: Agnieszka, for instance, did all the gathering for her family and “helped at butchering-time, held the bucket for the pig's blood [...]” (Novik 39). Women in the tale are also mostly learned, even those from Dvernik, since book-peddlers pay frequent visits to the village to satisfy the Dragon's taste for books. Female characters can even hold positions of power within this secondary world, as shown by the

fact that the village head of Dvernik is a woman. Traditional roles are further dislodged upon meeting Alosha, a woman of “ebony-dark skin” (Novik 243) who serves as the king’s Sword – commander and strategist of his armies and guards – in spite of having been born the child of a slave; she is also wearing men’s clothing and sporting traditionally masculine features, being “taller even than me, with [...] shoulders as broad as my father’s, her black hair braided tightly against her skull” (Novik 243-244). This is interesting because, eventually, Kasia herself comes to leave behind the role that was assigned to and expected of her – that of a traditional lady, who was destined to serve a man. After having the Wood’s corruption cleansed from her, she becomes wood herself, acquiring supernatural strength and endurance, being thus endowed with a raw physical power superior to that of any man. This enables her to not be limited to the role of Agnieszka’s best friend and to become a warrior and protector, inspired by the horrors she witnessed:

“The princess died next to me. She put the children in the wardrobe, and then she stood in front of it. They stabbed her over and over, and she just kept trying to stand up in front of the doors.” Her voice shook. “Nieshka, can you make a sword for me?”

[...] I didn’t fear for her: Kasia would be safe enough fighting, when blades just went dull on her skin and arrows fell away without scratching her. But she would be dangerous and terrible, with a sword. [...] I didn’t want her to need to do things like that. I didn’t want her to need a sword. (Novik 330)

As shown in this passage, though neither of these girls enjoys violence, they are willing to use their power to the last of their strength in order to defend what they believe to be right. It is thus that Kasia becomes the protector of the young prince and princess; after the Wood is defeated, the newly crowned prince “asked Kasia to be his champion”, and

after her triumph has her named “captain of his guard” (Novik 429), causing yet another breach of enforced gender roles.

However, and in spite of this assumption of a traditionally masculine role, it is worth mentioning that Kasia never loses her femininity or even her beauty – in fact, she becomes “unearthly [beautiful], preserved and shining” (Novik 151) after her transformation. She acquires an “unfeminine” strength and fighting spirit, but still, for instance, attempts to sew: “In my room, Kasia was sitting up in bed, grimly struggling with my mending-basket: there were three broken needles on the table, and she was only with enormous difficulty making long sloppy stitches in a spare scrap” (Novik 160). And she becomes a sort of motherly figure to the young princess, Marisha: “She’d asked for her mother a few times already. Now she clung to Kasia’s skirts almost all the time, like a smaller child, and didn’t go out of sight of her” (Novik 332). This is an especially necessary portrayal within the young adult genre, which, in its pressure to avoid female archetypes, many times incurs in a different *type* far more commonly seen nowadays than that of the “damsel in distress”: the trope of a *strong female character*. In an attempt to further themselves as much as possible from the traditional traits which specular economy imposes on women, young adult writers tend to portray their heroines as *different* or “anomalous”: “Of course, *normal* women are weak and boring and can’t do anything worthwhile. But *this* one is different. She is strong! See, she roundhouses people in the face” (McDougall, “I Hate Strong Female Characters”). This character, in Sophia McDougall’s words, “has something to prove. She’s on the defensive before she even starts” (“I hate Strong Female Characters”), because she needs to show that she is as good as a man; and, in doing so, she complies exactly with the wishes of the male gaze. She rejects her femininity as a weakness, and looks down upon those female characters who embrace it (thus creating the aforementioned rivalry and competition for male validation)

in order to display traits which would traditionally be considered masculine. However, in the end, they end up being driven solely by their romantic relationships, and must eventually recognize that their male love interest has either saved them or surpassed them in ability, regardless of the strength they displayed in the beginning. Thus, they either “with ladylike discretion they back out of the narrative’s way” (McDougall, “I Hate Strong Female Characters”) to make room for the male protagonist, or they fall – often without realizing it – into a specular dynamic, by which they become the male character’s mirror: smart, strong, and beautiful, but only so far as will not overshadow the superior male image, a one-dimensional reflection to match and enhance the male character’s greatness.

Kasia’s character, on the other hand, demonstrates that femininity, and its associated traits – beauty, delicacy, caring – need not preclude power and courage; that it is possible to portray a strong woman without her needing to mirror male traits, but instead making her strength and bravery her own. This endeavor is likely helped by the fact that she does not have any love interest, male or otherwise, which could become the center of her plot. Both Kasia and Agnieszka find fulfilment outside of romance, which is part of what makes them three-dimensional characters and positive representations of traditionally feminine traits. The reader obtains a complete picture of who they are, which in Agnieszka’s case is probably partially due to her being the first-person narrator, as well as the protagonist, so that her life, thoughts and feelings must be fully depicted. They both are shown to have ideas and principles of their own which they refuse to give up in order to please or comply with the men in the story, which grant them an individual agency – further, an individual *existence* away from male projection, which is what had been missing in Rothfuss’ *Kingkiller Chronicle*.

## CONCLUSION

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This dissertation began with the intention to describe some of the available theories regarding the process of identification, focused around the idea of the mirror, in order to describe how it functions in relation to fictional representations. This has served to build towards a more specific and more clearly-formulated theory of representation, though - given the scope of the current study - the offered approach remains as little more than groundwork. The main point was to establish a relationship between the Otherness of women, suggested by the theoretical framework, and the subversive potential of fantasy, as they both function as the oppressed part of dualistic conceptions. Thus, the possibility to create new worlds offered by fantasy provides an opportunity for women to begin subverting the hegemonic patriarchal order. In order to support - or disprove - this theory, two case studies were chosen to exemplify how female representation is carried out in contemporary fantasies; therefore, aside from their individual interest, these books were chosen because of the particular contrast they offer. Rothfuss' *Kingkiller Chronicle* has many features which bring it closer to the high fantasy canon (male hero whose quest makes him into a legendary figure, extensive world-building, inclusion of folklore and mythical figures, etc.), even though it does subvert the canon in places (for instance, the hero's quest is for revenge; the University does not teach him magic, but rather a type of fantastic science, and so on).

On the other hand, Novik's *Uprooted* deviates from both the high fantasy and the traditional fairy tale canons thanks to the subversive elements described above. Rothfuss' male first-person narrator tends to incur into the misrepresentations typical of specular economy, whereas Novik's first-person female narrator is more successful in portraying herself and other women in a naturalized, demystifying manner. As was mentioned in the introduction, however, these case studies are not presented as prescriptive examples of

how women should (not) be portrayed; rather, they are analyzed as individual results of the specular economy described in chapter 1.1, as different consequences stemming from the same system.

This essay has therefore aimed to set the groundwork for a theory of representation that can be applied in a practical context, a groundwork that can hopefully be developed further in future works. The analysis of the case studies has intended to shed some light on how female characters are represented – whether they fall into or avoid the hegemonic specular economy – in contemporary fantasy literature. It must, however, be remembered that each of the representations analyzed here is understood individually at a small scale, as a manifestation of a larger system or, by contrast, of the *resistance* against that larger system. The size of the current study makes the inclusion of more pieces of literature, and of other media, impossible, and therefore does not allow to make a general informed statement about whether the specular system is effectively being undermined, or whether whatever resistance there is against it is being successful in its efforts.

In this sense, there is much that this dissertation has been obliged to leave out due to space constraints. Encompassing a wider range of case studies, for instance, would have provided a better array of examples, including queer female characters, or women characters of color, in order to offer a more inclusive picture. This dissertation can thus be taken as a stepping-stone towards a larger, more complete work, in which a theory of representation could be more clearly delineated and more case studies could be analyzed in detail, so as to provide a more accurate picture of the current status of female representation in fantasy. Further studies could also include media other than literature, such as the examples mentioned in the introduction: visual novels or story-oriented videogames, for instance, bring in the element of reader (or player) agency, which determines the development of the story and would therefore be an interesting addition

to the earlier-described interplay of gazes taking place in literature and cinema. For the present, though, this study stands as a small foray into a nearly uncharted territory that can, hopefully, serve as the starting point for future exploration.

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