Visionary Fantasy Worlds:

Nature, Hierarchy and Gender in the Fantasy Worlds of Tolkien, Le Guin, Martin and Jemisin

Emma Velia Vik

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Abstract:

Fantasy authors are freer in their creation than most writers who are bound by a commitment to realism and mimesis, freer even than those within other Speculative Fiction genres. Focusing on a cross-section of High Fantasy texts; The works of J. R. R. Tolkien, Ursula K. Le Guin, George R.R. Martin, and N. K. Jemisin, I explore the fantasy worlds created in terms of how they relate to nature and the environment, to hierarchy and race, and to gender. Tolkien's fantasy world, which has become the archetype, was built on medievalism and the idea of "going back" to an imagined past. These aspects shape the High Fantasy genre into one well suited to lush ecological narratives, yet they also create a tendency for worlds to be bound to a certain conceptualization of that imagined world of the past - recreating the institutions and hierarchies of that imagined past in terms of monarchy or autocracy, racial hierarchy, and patriarchy. Later writers like Le Guin, Martin and Jemisin thus choose to adapt, subvert, or wholly reject certain such archetypical elements to avoid the resulting socially conservative bent which we find in Tolkien.

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Introduction:
Speculative and Escapist - On the Potential of Fantasy

When it comes to literature which envisions and depicts worlds in which people and societies can exist in alternative ways from "real" world of our present, Science Fiction is often what comes first to mind. Tied to the idea of the future, one description of Science Fiction writing is that it tries to imagine what might be, for better or worse. This is a somewhat limited description, but it highlights an aspect of that genre which is key to its appeal for many readers, and key to the most lauded examples - like Orwell's *1984* or Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*. These stories take the reader out of the current historical moment, and into the great beyond.

However, as a person who loves both Science Fiction and Fantasy, but always preferred the latter, I recognize that this element of imagining otherwise, exploring the heights and lows of existence, is also central to the appeal that Fantasy holds. Fantasy, which is even less bound to the current moment or to any ideas of realism and mimesis than Science Fiction, holds at least as much potential for imagining new ways for how people, relationships and societies could work. Or at least it should. Yet, Fantasy is often imagined as a "going back", tied to visions of the past the same way Science Fiction is tied to those of the future. Archetypically this past is a pre-industrial one, which means it creates an ideal space for ecological storytelling and reflection on the Anthropocene and humans' relationship to nature. However, it also can seem to hinder or limit the representations of social relations and different kinds of people, with the archetypical fantasy world being that of the Tolkienian medievalist fantasy which is inscribed with strict hierarchies, whiteness, and hetero-patriarchy - elements which have increasingly caused friction and the need for adaptation, subversion, and innovation as we see in later works like that of Le Guin, Martin and Jemisin.

Increasingly, from the 2000s on, Fantasy and Science Fiction has come to stand together under the umbrella of Speculative Fiction, and today there is a widespread acceptance of these genres as worthy of critical appraisal with Speculative Fiction having a number of dedicated journals. Yet, even before the emergence of "Speculative Fiction" these two genres stood together, along with many other types of genre fiction, under the ramshackle label of "escape literature". These two contrasting conceptions of the genres and the move from one to the other is fascinating because they seem closely tied to one another, both trying to comment on the purpose and effect of non-mimetic fiction. A commonality in the writing

of both Sami Schalk and of P. L. Thomas, who have written studies on the topic, is their memories of Speculative Fiction being denigrated as a lesser form of literature. Thomas read deeply in the genre of Science Fiction as a child until his English teacher and mentor "banned" them, insisting he switch his Science Fiction books for more "literary" fiction, thus introducing him to a "corrosive snobbery" which denigrated all literature which is not sufficiently "literary"[1]. Sami Schalk on the other hand came to the speculative fiction genre later in life, having thought of Speculative Fiction as purely "escapist fluff" until she was pushed toward Octavia Butler's writing[2]. These experiences strike a chord, mirroring my personal experience: Because of the non-mimetic nature of the writing, the reading of Fantasy, Science Fiction and other Speculative Fiction is often seen as less interesting, less educational, and intellectual than other reading - not an "edifying" pursuit the way reading is often otherwise seen as, but a meaningless time-sink. "Escapist fluff" is a perfect encapsulation.

But where do these ideas come from? The idea of Escapist literature is an old one. In a 1932 sociological paper, Allen Bacon writes about the emerging literary phenomena of "The Literature of Escape", following the surge highly commercial "pulp fiction", printed in cheap paperback format[3]. All such "pulp fiction", from detective novel to erotica to Science Fiction was deemed "escape fiction", with the underlying argument being that people use this type of literature as an escape from reality. There was usually an implicit judgment of the escapee made, and Bacon himself is pitying and condescending. The reading of escape fiction then is coded as corruptive rather than constructive.

In his 1975 history of literary "escapism", Robert B. Heilman writes that this idea of literature as corruptive can be seen as an evolution of Puritan suspicion of poetry and drama in the 1500's – where such texts were deemed immoral because they were untruthful because they were not realistic[4]. Later, in the 1700s he finds authors like Daniel Defoe insisting on the edifying truthful nature of "private histories" over novels and romances, and we see a large quantity of fictional narratives presenting as true histories. One prominent example being Aphra Behn's 1688 novel *Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave: A True History* which is often cited as the first English novel. Fiction in general seems to have held a precarious position in those

[1] Thomas, *Science Fiction and Speculative Fiction: Challenging Genres,* 2.
[2] Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*, 1.
[3] Bacon, «The Literature of Escape».
[4] Heilman, «Escape and Escapism Varieties of Literary Experience».

first centuries, seen as non-realist and therefore escapist. Heilman claims that fiction writers came to internalize this criticism, prompting writers to come up with the self-justification that fiction was actually realist and not escapist; instead of bringing people out of the world it was bringing people further into the world as it was. This understanding of the value of fiction was only strengthened in the 19th and 20th centuries and Naturalism especially "simply intensified the commitment to a truth that was good for you but not gratifying"[5].

The suspicion of literature that is not deemed edifying has long roots, and in the 1930s "escape literature" became the focus for this anxiety, and charges of "escapism" became a staple of literary criticism during the 40s and 50s[6]. The idea of "escape literature" then, inherently sets up a binary between normal, literary literature and escape literature, where the first is good, worthwhile literature, and the latter bad, shallow, insipid literature. As Heilman notes, "escape literature" was always a polemic, derogatory term, meant as a value judgment instead of being a neutral descriptor. Of course, all literature is somewhat escapist in nature - "in a sense, all literature has in it something of the sanctuary, the entering of which resembles an escape from something else"[7]. As any lonely, bookish child could attest, whether it is hyper-realistic or entirely non-realistic, most fiction has the power of bringing the reader away from their own personal reality and is often used as a temporary escape from the real world.

However, because Speculative Fiction includes shamelessly non-mimetic elements and settings, it attracts this kind of condemnation of "escapism" more than other genres, with the assumption that the value of reading such fiction is only that of mental escape. Good literature, in this framework, is supposed to intensify human experience, but as the writer Mary Cappello notes in her essay on escape, it is a common conception that "Great literature" means a literature that is universal, smoothing out difference and escaping historical specificity[8]. Cappello sees this as also implying a sort of escapism inherent to literature at large. And as Schalk finds, Speculative Fiction can also bring you deeper into the world - in reading the alternative worlds of Speculative fiction and seeing the continuities and contrasts with our own world, she finds alternative ways of seeing disability which deeply engage with the way we view disability in our world. Speculative Fiction then also allows for reflection,

[5] Heilman, «Escape and Escapism Varieties of Literary Experience», 449.
[6] Heilman, «Escape and Escapism Varieties of Literary Experience», 445.
[7] Heilman, «Escape and Escapism Varieties of Literary Experience», 454
[8] Cappello, Mary. "How We Escape It: An Essay". https://daily.jstor.org/how-we-escape-it-an-essay/

imagination, and engagement with the world, and the enjoyment, pleasure and escape it offers if often far from passive. The opposition between "escapist literature" and good, ordinary, literary literature proves false, but we still see the impact of this charge of escapism, of Speculative Fiction writing as a lesser form of literature, come up implicitly time and time again with writers of genre fiction, implying that the idea of escapism is one of the reasons why there was such a strong need for the idea of "speculative fiction".

Speculative Fiction is an umbrella term which has recently come to encompass all of non-realist or non-mimetic fiction. That is; fiction which contains elements which do not appear in our real world. Among its inhabitants are, most notably, Fantasy, Science Fiction, and Horror, but the list could go on eternally as Speculative Fiction is an intentionally open category. Yet, the remapping of the literary genre landscape which this move represents was not an entirely uncontroversial one, as Marek Oziewicz explains[9]: "Speculative fiction" as a term originates with Science Fiction writer Robert Heinlein in 1941, who imagined it as a type of writing that was much like Science Fiction but focused on human problems rather than technological problems. In inventing the term he was trying to set such writing apart from the more pulpy or more technologically focused types of Science Fiction. Oziewicz writes that "it was effectively an attempt to replace the term "science fiction" on the taxonomical map". This attempt did not take off, although writer Judith Merril embraced it and it was often used among authors of feminist speculative fiction during the 70s.

Similarly, Margaret Atwood infamously posited Speculative Fiction as an opposite to Science Fiction[10]. Atwood insisted that her novels, *Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* were Speculative Fiction instead of Science Fiction, hinging her claim on Speculative Fiction dealing with the probable, with *prediction* of the possible future, while Science Fiction included the impossible[11]. The author later admitted she had a simplified understanding of what "Science Fiction" entailed in comparison to other people: "In short, what Le Guin means by "science fiction" is what I mean by "speculative fiction," and what she means by "fantasy" would include some of what I mean by "science fiction.""[12] Science Fiction was to her a genre of the impossible - in which category she included elements like teleportation, inter-galactic travel and aliens. The characteristics defining Atwood's Speculative Fiction were not

[9] Oziewicz, «Speculative Fiction».
[10] Oziewicz, «Speculative Fiction».
[11] Oziewicz, «Speculative Fiction».
[12] Thomas, *Science Fiction and Speculative Fiction: Challenging Genres*. 7

just the existence of a predictive element then, but the exclusion of elements she deemed more fantastical and Fantasy-esque. Ursula K. Le Guin commented on Atwood's conceptualization thusly: "This arbitrarily restrictive definition seems designed to protect her novels from being relegated to a genre still shunned by hidebound readers, reviewers and prize-awarders. She doesn't want the *literary bigots* to shove her into the *literary ghetto*" [13] (Emphasis mine). The problem with both Heinlein and Atwood's definitions then seems to be that they were motivated by a desire to distance themselves and their writing from the Science Fiction label, rather than naming some distinctly new genre, or finding a potently apt and useful descriptor for an existing phenomenon.

As Le Guin suggests, these uses of Speculative Fiction seem to be motivated by a discomfort with the Science Fiction label and the negative associations the genre can have as being frivolous and escapist. This discomfort with writing genre fiction also comes up in Thomas' quotation of Kurt Vonnegut: "I have been a sore-headed occupant of a file-drawer labeled "'science-fiction" ever since, and I would like out, particularly since so many *serious critics* regularly mistake the drawer for a tall white fixture in a *comfort station*."[14] His complaints about critics not taking writing labeled Science Fiction seriously mirror's Le Guin's quip about "literary bigots", and the idea of Science Fiction's primary function being to give comfort to the reader recall the accusations against "escape literature" – that its function is not to edify but to pacify the escapist. In discourse surrounding Fantasy as well, this idea of a divide between "proper literature" and Fantasy is often evoked, as when in 2022, Neil Gaiman was asked by a fan if he "ever considered becoming a literary writer", to which he responded he just wanted to be a writer and left the marketing and shelving to others[15]. Fantasy writer Terry Pratchett was also allegedly asked point blank why he, as a talented writer, chose to write within the "ghettoized" field of Fantasy. After reminding the interviewer of his huge success as a writer within the genre, Pratchett also invokes the historical normalcy of non-mimetic writing. "The first fiction ever recounted was fantasy […] Fantasy is without a shadow of a doubt the ur-literature, the spring from which all other literature has flown. Up to a few hundred years ago no one would have disagreed with this,

[13] Thomas, *Science Fiction and Speculative Fiction: Challenging Genres*. 7
[14] Thomas, *Science Fiction and Speculative Fiction: Challenging Genres*. 1-2
[15] Gaiman, Neil. "Ask Blog August 14th, 2022". https://neil-gaiman.tumblr.com/post/692617904614719488/did-you-ever-consider-becoming-a-literary-writer.

because most stories were, in some sense, fantasy."[16] Here he seems to be echoing the work of Fantasy scholars Diana Waggoner, Robert Scholes and Kathryn Hume.

Waggoner was first to use the term Speculative Fiction for all non-mimetic fiction in her 1978 work *The Hills of Faraway: A Guide to Fantasy*, where she structures Western literature into 4 classes structured by how the literature treated the supernatural - from pre-realistic literature, where supernatural elements existed as norm, to Realism, to post-realistic fabulation, which is realistic fiction such as the Gothic, where supernatural fiction appears as representation of madness. Last was Speculative Fiction which is all modern literature "that treats supernatural and/or nonexistent phenomena (such as the future) as a special class of objectively real things or events."[17] In Waggoner's frame, Realistic fiction, which is seen as the norm of literary fiction now, was not the norm of fiction historically but is a relatively modern phenomenon. A precursor to Waggoner was Robert Scholes, who in his 1975 *Structural Fabulation* also put into one category all non-mimetic fiction - all works with some marked discontinuity between the story world and the real world. But he called that category Science Fiction, expanding the idea of that genre to include other non-mimetic fiction, like fantasy fiction. This idea never spread – likely due to the potential loss of specificity of the Sci-Fi term, and the consternation of other non-mimetic genres at the idea of being subsumed into Science Fiction. Scholes also saw non-mimetic literature as a subversion of the dominant tradition which was Realism, an idea we see Waggoner expanding on.

Kathryn Hume's 1984 study *Fantasy and Mimesis* explored the idea of fantasy and mimesis as two impulses involved in the creation of all art. Fantasy, as she conceptualizes it, is tangled up with other genres, making sharp distinction between mimetic and non-mimetic fiction difficult, although there exists a tradition of literature where the mimetic impulse is dominant, Realism, and another tradition where fantasy impulse is dominant, which is in opposition to Realism. These ideas recall Pratchett's other claims, that "Fantasy is kind of a plasma in which other things can be carried. […] This is, fantasy is, almost a sea in which other genres swim"[18]. In all fiction, whether mimetic and non-mimetic, there will usually be some attempt to imagine anew and some attempt to recreate known phenomena – thus fiction often contains both some element of fantasy or speculation and an attempt at mimesis and Realism.

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[16] Rothfuss, «Thoughts on Pratchett», https://blog.patrickrothfuss.com/2015/08/thoughts-on-pratchett/
[17] Oziewicz, «Speculative Fiction».
[18] Rothfuss, «Thoughts on Pratchett», https://blog.patrickrothfuss.com/2015/08/thoughts-on-pratchett/

While there was increasingly an acceptance of the idea that there was some family resemblance between the fantasy and science fiction genres, it would take until the turn of the century until Speculative Fiction came into the fore as an umbrella term. An early example of cross-genre solidarity is the Nebula award, created in 1966 by Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, awarding works of either genre. In the 70s, "Fantastic" was used for a while as another umbrella term, especially by fantasy scholars. China Mieville in 2002 declared that science fiction is a subset of a "broader fantastic mode", but the term was opposed by many science fiction scholars, who insisted on the particular value of Science Fiction. Oziewicz poses two events as catalysts for the start of the era of Speculative fiction: the publication of *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (2000), which in 2001 won the World Fantasy Award for Best Anthology, despite containing texts outside the bounds of the Fantasy genre. Also in 2001, The World Science Fiction Society awarded both a Harry Potter book and Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* as winners of the Hugo Awards. These events show both fantasy and science fiction valuing more genre-fluid works, and that the view of non-mimetic genres being more widely related to one another was taking hold.

The term Speculative Fiction remaps the literary landscape and has a lot of useful functions within the field of literary analysis. In highlighting the commonalities of all the non-mimetic genres it brings a sort of power to non-mimetic fiction. As individual genres they can seem marginal and often make up a small proportion of literature, but seen together as strains of non-mimetic literature, of Speculative Fiction, they make up a more substantial, less easily disregarded piece of the literature pie. Further the term worked to settle the impulse to fight over what umbrella genres in the borderlands between Science Fiction and Fantasy should sit under. And importantly, Speculative Fiction is seen as less inherently Western in nature, or at least more open to non-Western expression.

Since the modern genres of Science Fiction and Fantasy are of a specifically Western historical origin, there can be some friction in the attempt to classify non-Western writing within those terms, which is especially concerning since the historical devaluing of non-mimetic literature is also quite specific to Western literature. Oziewicz writes that Speculative Fiction can be seen as "a tool to dismantle the traditional Western cultural bias in favor of literature imitating reality", because it not only strengthens non-mimetic fiction's place in the topology of literature as a whole, but because the term also offers a way for us to resist the temptation to place international authors' non-mimetic fiction into Western genres limited

purview, where they might fit poorly, being seen as liminal works of Science Fiction or Fantasy instead of literature existing within their own traditions. Speculative fiction thereby accommodates international works without forcing them into a Western-specific genre frame, and insists on the diversity and the strong familial ties between all of non-mimetic fiction, but does this without erasing, subsuming or privileging existing or emergent genres.

On the function of Speculative Fiction, Sami Schalk writes: "Speculative fiction allows us to *imagine otherwise*, to envision an *alternative world* or future in which what exist now has changed or disappeared and what does not exist now […] is suddenly real"[19] (Emphasis mine). In this idea, though there is more openness in terms of genre – it is not simply a future *or* an alternative world, yet there is some echo of Heinlein and Atwood's focus on specifically human problems; on the social and political, on predicting, inspiring, warning. Atwood especially, excluded writing with supernatural, more fantastic elements from her definition of Speculative fiction, implying that she did not think writings with such elements had the same potential to serve a social-criticism function as works like her *Handmaid's Tale,* but Schalk makes no such distinction.

What made Schalk personally reconsider her negative evaluation of Speculative Fiction, was encountering Octavia Butler's writing, both her more Science Fiction like *Parable* series and her more Fantasy-like *Kindred* and seeing in Butler an example that non-realistic fiction could also speak to her own experiences in ways that felt potent and relevant in a socio-political sense. Schalk writes that Speculative Fiction poses a chance for people, especially marginalized people, to imagine a better world absent of oppression and exploitation or, alternatively, to imagine a world where everything has gone wrong, which illuminates exactly what we cannot allow to happen. These aspects of speculative fiction writing make up the utopian and dystopian impulses - and these are generally tied to the Science Fiction genre. It is there we generally find the subgenre of Utopian and Dystopian literature, but I would argue these elements often exist in a smaller or greater degree in much Speculative fiction. In the work of world building, the author explores better and worse possibilities, and through the fabric of the text they communicate their ideals, desires, and fears in the elements they chose to include and how they frame these elements.

Diana Waggoner, who first used the term Speculative Fiction in its modern definition, was a fantasy scholar and meant that the fantasy genre, where the gap between the

[19] Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined*. 2

story world and the real world was widest, could be the ultimate expression of Speculative Fiction. I am not making such a strong claim, but I am very interested in the potential that the Fantasy genre has for telling truly visionary stories – for telling stories that take us beyond the current moment and show us alternatives for how we could be, reflects on futures that might come, and the choices which took us where we are today. Tolkien, the "father of Fantasy" himself, wrote on the topics of escapism in his 1947 essay On Fairy-Stories[20]. He was aware that "fairy-stories", his word for works of fairy tale and fantasy, were often seen as the height of escapist writing, but he did not share the negative moral judgment of "escapism" that critics so often exhibited. He instead saw it as one of the main functions of fairy-stories.

He pointed out that the metaphor painting the reader and writer of escape fiction as an "escapist" implied a prison of some kind that the escapist was escaping from. "Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go *home*? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls? *The world outside* has not become less *real* because the prisoner cannot see it." (Emphasis mine) Tolkien also takes issue with the idea of the "real world" being defined as a world that is more industrial, more technological. He saw technology as ephemeral and insignificant in comparison with the natural world, which he describes as much more fundamental and permanent. The fairy-stories of the escapist, which are not driven by "evanescent fashion", but by the deeper truths, hold an implicit critique of the prison. These statements expand on the escape metaphor and casts the "real world", which Realism so steadfastly insists on, as the prison, while the actual real world exists beyond the prison. Somewhere out there is a home that the prisoner is trying to come back to. It is pretty clear that Tolkien here is speaking of a quality of Fantasy fiction more similar to the imagining of better worlds that Sami Schalk mentions, a sort of imagining beyond the now to the truly "real" – yet there is an additional element of going back to the roots, of a travel back in time to a pre-industrial, more "natural" way of human existence.

Like Sami Schalk I am interested in examining what potential for alternative ways of being the authors imagine, what lies behind their choice of building blocks, and which opportunities they might have left unturned. Especially, I am interested in the texture of the imagined world: In how societies and people function in meeting with each other and with nature, and how this does or does not differ from "reality". While the texts Schalk analyses

[20] Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories". 59-70

fall both in the Science Fiction and the Fantasy corners, many set in worlds that are quite similar to our world, my focus is instead on texts within the subgenre of Fantasy called High or Epic Fantasy, by which I mean fantasy stories that are set in complete secondary worlds with no textual tie to ours, as this is a genre which necessitates a huge amount of world building and thus has a great potential for the kind of reimagining of the world that I am interested in. My chapter "A Green World: Fantasy, Nature and the Anthropocene" will focus on the texts' representation of humanity's relationship with nature and their ecological messaging, building on ecocritical readings, while the chapter "The King and the Enemy: Racial and Class Hierarchies in Fantasy Worlds" will focus on the representation of hierarchies, from that of monarchy to the creation of racial hierarchies and will be build on readings within post-colonial and critical race theory. Lastly the chapter "Recreating Gender and Sexuality in Fantasy Worlds: Patriarchy and Beyond" will focus on the representation of gender and sexuality in the texts, building on feminist criticism and queer theory, and exploring t the effects of the norm of patriarchy within high fantasy in addition to how is subverted.

The subgenre of High Fantasy had its beginning with Tolkien and was codified by him, thus I am also interested in asking how Tolkien's specifically Medieval-inspired vision of Middle-Earth has shaped the fantastical worlds of other authors, and how they build on, reimagine, or subvert the genre expectations which began with Tolkien. For my selection of primary texts, I have chosen Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (*Rings*), Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea*, George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (*Song*) and N. K. Jemisin's two series *Inheritance* and *Broken Earth.* My choice is grounded in my personal appreciation for these texts, as well as the special space these authors and texts hold within their genre, as innovators, largely critically acclaimed, and as cultural juggernauts. I also think these texts give a nice cross-section of high fantasy writing as they stretch through time chronologically with Tolkien's *Rings* published in the mid-50s, Le Guin's *Earthsea* spanning from 1968 to 2001, Martin's *Song* beginning in 1996, publishing its latest volume in 2011, and not yet having reached its end, while Jemisin's two series span the 2010s with *Inheritance* published within the frame of 2010-2012 and *Broken Earth* that of 2015-2017.

Most of these texts fit neatly into the genre of High Fantasy and into the archetype of the genre as established by Tolkien, though each author brings their own twists, from the move away from romanticization toward a more dystopian world in Martin and Jemisin to the increasing attempts to wrestle with the more conservative ideas of the archetype established in

Tolkien within Le Guin and Martin in terms of portrayals of race and gender, with Jemisin being the most subversive in that regard, wholesale rejecting the norm of patriarchy, for instance. The most genre bending of the texts is *The Broken Earth* by Jemisin, which in being a postapocalyptic fantasy somewhat straddles the gap between fantasy and sci-fi, with its remarkably high technological level and modern slang-like and slightly anachronistic language, with its "comms" and "asphalt" and hot showers, but while it is a trilogy inspired by Science Fiction, it has a greater foothold within Fantasy than in Science Fiction, as shown in an interview with Jemisin where, while the interviewer repeatedly uses the term "Science Fiction" about the series, Jemisin calls it an "Epic Fantasy"[21].

Thus, through this thesis I will explore a number of High Fantasy works, focusing on how Tolkien's archetype of the fantasy world came to be as a reaction to the ramping up of the Anthropocene and his love for medievalist visions of the European past, thus spawning through his influence, myriad fantasy worlds equally "escaping" into the past, resulting in bountiful ecological narratives, yet also tying the archetype of the fantasy world to rather regressive norms in terms of gender roles and of social and racial hierarchy. Later writers within the genre like Ursula K. Le Guin, George R. R. Martin and N. K. Jemisin are always, in a sense, writing back to Tolkien, either in their continuity with his vision or in their subversion of it. While the potential that Fantasy holds for envisioning different ways of being is great, this tendency to "look back" has expressed itself in rather interesting ways, both fueling and kind of hampering narratives and the room for visionary exploration, resulting in different writers choosing to keep or subvert different parts of this archetypal framework, some twisting the framing from romanticization to a dystopian depiction, or going entirely their own way.

[21] Hurley, Jessica, and N. K. Jemisin. "An Apocalypse Is a Relative Thing".

1. A Green World: Fantasy, Nature and the Anthropocene

As N. K. Jemisin has noted, fantasy is seen as a genre "looking back" much as science fiction looks forward[22]. This is a common outlook, echoed in Jameson's critique of fantasy as well, and it is often seen as one of the justifications for thinking of science fiction as the more cerebral, less escapist genre of the two. Yet, I think this "looking back" has potential in and of itself, especially when it comes to depictions of how humans interact with nature. High Fantasy especially, can be seen as a genre which got its start as a reaction to the Anthropocene, to the increase in exploitation of nature and other people which came with colonialism, industrialization, and modern capitalism.

This preoccupation with nature and people's interaction with the natural world is a constant through all these texts, from Tolkien to Le Guin to Martin, and finally Jemisin. In Tolkien there is a palpable sense of loss of connectivity with nature, which is somewhat echoed in Martin. Le Guin, Tolkien and Jemisin in *Inheritance* all draw messages focusing on balance, temperance, and a return to valuing nature, while Jemisin's *Broken Earth* shows us a picture of a climate collapse where environmental restoration is tied to a demand to view both the Earth itself and other people as beings with inherent value. This exhibits the great potential that fantasy and its "going back" has for telling ecological narratives and how the genre comments on the Anthropocene and humans' relationship to nature.

1.1 The Fantasy Aesthetic: Trees and Horses

Critic and political theorist Frederic Jameson astutely noted that **"**fantasy remains generically wedded to nature and to the organism» whereas science fiction is interested in humans' relation to machines[23]. This is of course, a bit overly simplistic; there are also High Fantasies taking place in a more futuristic setting; Space Fantasies, like Star Wars and She-Ra: Princesses of Power for instance, as well as Postapocalyptic Fantasy, a genre which includes Miyazaki's beloved Ghibli films *Laputa* and *Naüsicäa,* or Jemisin's *Broken Earth*. Yet, these are seen as more genre bending than such installations as those of Martin or Le Guin, whose fantasy worlds are, like Tolkien's, evoking the past.

Tolkien, who jump started the new commercial genre of fantasy writing, was building on European folk tales, myth. and medieval legends. When other authors followed

[22] Miller, Laura. "If Tolkien were Black". https://www.salon.com/2011/11/09/if_tolkien_were_black/ .
[23] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 64

suit, the archetype of the high fantasy world became dominated by a medievalist aesthetic and by the specific aesthetic of Tolkien's Middle Earth in particular. Typical fantasy aesthetics have become largely focused on natural spaces such as agrarian villages, fields, forests, and mountains, as well as ornate castles of different types. Thus, it rings very true that, as Jameson notes, fantasy writing in particular is bonded to conceptualizations of nature, emphasizing ideas and images of nature and the natural far more than most other writing outside the paradigm of nature writing does. Fantasy scholar Brian Attebery lovingly notes that it has become customary for the problem threatening the world of the fantasy to be somewhat ecological in nature[24], and it is in part this concern with nature and ecological destruction is one reason why, as critic Kathy Lavezzo points out, Tolkien was adopted by hippies[25].

Nature, whether it be untouched nature or nature shaped by pre-industrial era agriculture is a staple of the genre, and the lush, green landscapes that usually populate high fantasy worlds are perhaps one of the most appealing aspects of it, right besides magic, dragons, and swords. As Jameson notes, one thing Fantasy and Science Fiction shares is a "visceral sense of the chemical deficiencies of our own present"[26], and one of the things so deficient in our modern world is just that connection to nature which we so often find in fantasy. Most of us do not live in such green, lush spaces anymore, and even when we live near nature we seldom interact with it in a meaningful sense. Our focus is pulled inside, away from nature, into our workspaces, our malls, our schools. To spaces which are becoming more and more alike and less and less lifelike as the prioritizing of profit and efficiency strips our landscapes of greenery and artistry and simultaneously fills them flimsily created elements and advertisements.

In his essay "On Fairy Stories", Tolkien singled out electrical streetlamps specifically as one of those things he wanted to create an escape from - a symbol of modernity and modern technology. This choice might seem silly and a bit random to a contemporary reader. Tolkien did not explain his choice of synecdoche, except to call streetlamps "ugly". Perhaps one reason for this choice might be that his friend and contemporary, C. S. Lewis, used them thus in his Narnia books – the streetlamp is the one thing of the modern world which exists within Narnia and the thing which marks the boundary into fairy land. Yet, importantly, streetlamps work as an emblem of modernity in much the same way as the

[24] Buse, Katherine. "Genre, Utopia, and Ecological Crisis". 271
[25] Lavezzo, Kathy. "Whiteness, medievalism, immigration". 47
[26] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*. 59

timepiece. Before the industrial age our lives were shaped by nature – the sun and moon marked time for us. Day became Night, and days grew shorter as Summer turned into Fall and Winter, and then longer again. Darkness made work outside difficult, and so the darkness of night, the darkness of winter marked times for more restive activity, for socialization and sleep. With the advent of streetlamps, darkness was defeated, diminished. Night and Winter did not disappear, but it is not night and winter which drives our lives' revolutions anymore – it is the clock, it is work hours vs free time, the systems that rule us.

We have inherited a narrative of progress which insists that technological innovation is synonymous with the forward march of humanity, that societal or moral progress is tied to the progress of technology, and that "progress" is inevitable. We see it in idioms like "being on the right side of history", where the present and future is coded as good and just and inevitable, the past a defunct space of obvious injustice and foolish mistakes. We see it in the tendency to point toward improbable silver bullet technologies as solutions to climate change and in our desire to lift up celebrity capitalists like Steve Jobs, Elon Musk, Jeffrey Bezos, Bill Gates, as world-changers, heroes and saviors who can innovate us into paradise, without us ever having to make drastic changes to our habits, values and systems. Some even argue we have come to "the end of history" – our modern Western system of capitalist democracy is the final step in the evolution of human society, and everything change must only be a tweak.

Yet, with the advent of climate change and the growing ecological consciousness which has followed the rise of that issue, it becomes harder to see our modern world as a world of "progress". In recent years the term Anthropocene has gained momentum, and it bears consideration in this context. As an historical epoch, it is vaguely defined, different people locating its beginning at wildly different points, yet the compelling idea behind the term is that we are existing in an unprecedented time where humans are the greatest controlling factor deciding the future of life on Earth[27]. It is an idea intended to confront us with the power humanity wields, the destruction we have wrought and will likely continue to wreak if we continue on our current path. An alternative term to Anthropocene is that of Capitalocene, and as Ursula K. Le Guin famously said, "We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings". The power of the term Anthropocene, of recognizing humans' oversized power over nature, is that we have the power to choose to act differently.

[27] Johnson et al. "Anthropocene"

Tolkien's desire for escape from the unreality of the present has only become more relatable in time. Now, knowing how light pollution has cut us off from our ancestors' night sky, how it disturbs insects and animals in flight, it becomes even harder to see the streetlamp as an unquestioned good, as simply "progress". And knowing what we now do of what the use of cars and airplanes does to our atmosphere, their convenience seems somewhat less valuable. The question of whether the technological progress and the changes caused by such innovation has really created a better world for humans, let alone for all earthen life, is a hard question to answer simply, and it is a question which seems to loom over the High Fantasy genre, which tends to imagine a world less dominated by technology.

The absence of modern spaces and technologies can feel like a relief - an escape, and in that absence and in what replaces it, I think we can locate a streak of the visionary even though it is in fact usually looking backwards, upon things which once were the norm. In a time of where speed and efficiency is paramount, cars and planes spewing pollution as they whizz people about, the way that characters in Fantasy traverse great distances full of near untouched nature slowly on foot, by simple technology like Ged's boat Lookfar, or by the aid of natural beings like the horses in *Rings*, can prompt longing for a more slowly moving, greener world, and bring about a questioning of the inherent good of technological progress and of our way of living.[28] As critic Lindsay Burton points out, Le Guin saw fantasy as rooted in a "green country" – "a space in which animals, nature, and the unknown Other enjoy a power equal to or greater than that of humans", countering the anthropocentric idea that humans are the rightful masters of the natural world, and that everything beyond us exists for our consumption. Speaking on Tolkien's Middle Earth, Le Guin pointed out that it is "pre-human and non-human" in addition to being pre-industrial – it is a time before the beginning of the "domain of man" after all, before the true beginning of the Anthropocene. In her own fantasy series *Earthsea* she imagined humanity living in exile from nature, "shut out from a community, an intimacy, it once knew". These features, Burton writes, "suggest fantasy worlds as vehicles for making sense of the Anthropocene"[29].

While Tolkien was writing in a time before the concept of the Anthropocene was coined, he was definitely reacting to the idea of the ramping up of human intervention in

[28] In using terms like "our way of living", I am speaking as a Norwegian, living in a post-industrial country which is part of what I would call the imperial core. As Johnson et al. notes, ours is not the common experience of all humanity, and not all people have the same responsibility or power to do something about these issues.
[29] Burton, Lindsay. "PLAYING WITH THE TROUBLE". 28

nature which that term reflects, as expressed through his vilification of industrialized development in *Rings*. Scholars like Theresa Freda Nicolay argue that Tolkien's writing, much like that of literary modernists like T. S. Eliot, was a reaction to the horrors of industrialization on the one hand and the modernized warfare of World War 1 on the other[30]. In the wake of the war, it was a common belief that "western civilization" was in decline – or at least that somewhere in the past people had taken a very wrong turn, and now were stuck in this "waste land", as Eliot puts it. Tolkien was a veteran of World War I, and it is commonplace to point out how the narrative of Frodo in *Rings* in many ways mirrors that of a boy going to war – brought somewhat unwilling from his village beginnings into what first seems a fun adventure, but which turns into a frightening, dour journey through a wide world filled with giants. Frodo ends up returning with unhealing mental and physical scars, often likened to PTSD, and is never quite able to return to the happiness of innocence. There is a deep similarity between the journey of Frodo and Sam through Mordor with the trench warfare of that war and Mordor reflects the image of a wasteland, filled with milling, unhappy soldiers in the form of orcs. Critic Anna Vaninskaya also identifies Tolkien as a modernist, and highlights how, typical of many modernists, he showed a deep frustration with the changing of landscapes as they developed from rural to suburban spaces, from green fields to bare streets of red-brick housing, with petrol stations and trams, destroying trees and ponds and landmarks in the process[31].

He seemed to somewhat lay the blame for this on increasing globalization, or Americanization, the cultural assimilation to hegemonic capitalist norms. Tolkien aligned himself with "Little England", meaning he distanced himself from the British Empire and Commonwealth, and was critical of empire in general. Sauron and his forces then invites parallels to a modern colonialist empire like the British one (or German, American, Russian) – their military actions are not simply war but one overwhelming force trying to take control of the entire world, and all its lands and peoples. The different peoples of Middle-Earth are not strong enough to beat Sauron alone but have to band together to defeat him. Vaninskaya points out that the orcs' are also tied to ideas of government and business – as they are the people who exhibit the most use of modern slang, concerned with the "Big bosses" and "Higher-ups", expressing Tolkien's hatred of the idea of "the state"[32]. Wherever Sauron's

[30] Riggs, Don. 'Review: Tolkien and the Modernists'
[31] Vaninskaya, Anna. "Modernity: Tolkien and his Contemporaries". 359-360
[32] Vaninskaya, Anna. "Modernity: Tolkien and his Contemporaries". 362-363

forces go, they bring natural devastation, orcs leaving the earth trampled and burned behind them, while Saruman devastates the forests surrounding Isengard to create his new, more efficient race of orc – stronger, faster and more brutal. In the "Scourging of the Shire" the colonial narrative is perhaps most obvious, with Saruman using the hobbit Lotho as a puppet ruler, using his unhobbitlike greed to snare him. Through Lotho, Saruman attempts to acquire the entirety of the Shire and turn it into a site for extraction. When our hobbit heroes return home, they find it overtaken with strange men, and the Shire's police force, the Shirriffs, working for Lotho and they must "raise the Shire" to revolt and expel the colonizing force, which they manage quite easily with their newfound skill at war. As one hobbit, Mr. Cotton, spells out "This isn't your country, and you're not wanted." The ruffians have devastated the Shire, tearing down trees, building ugly shacks, polluting and burning. Their mismanagement of nature signals their evil, as does Saruman's mismanagement of the forests of Isengard, the orcs' trampling of nature, and the fact that Sauron's realm is a barren wasteland.

Tolkien had a special fondness for trees and viewed deforestation and the mindless destruction of trees as deeply immoral; He wrote of a tree he much loved which was threatened with being felled by a neighbor:

> "It had been savagely mutilated some years before, but had gallantly grown new limbs – though of course not with the unblemished grace of its former natural self; and now a foolish neighbour was agitating to have it felled. Every tree has its enemy, few have an advocate. (Too often the hate is irrational, a fear of anything large and alive, and not easily tamed or destroyed …)"[33]
>
> "The savage sound of the electric saw is never silent wherever trees are still found growing" [34].

This anti-deforestation attitude and tendency to view trees as individuals rather than a simple uniform backdrop is reflected in *Rings*. As critic John Charles Ryan points out, one of the first antagonists the hobbits meet in *Rings* is the Old Man Willow, a sentient, vengeful tree who lulls them asleep and tries to eat them, because he remembers hobbits coming into his forest to chop his siblings down[35]. He exists as a voice for the whispering trees of the Old Woods around the Shire who have become slightly malevolent, turning the hobbits around, because they are angry and fearful of humans as a result of the ill treatment of other trees.

[33] Tolkien, J R R. et al. «241 From a Letter to Jane Neave", in *The Letters of J. R. R.Tolkien*. 464
[34] Tolkien, J R R. et al. «339 To the Editor of the Daily Telegraph", in *The Letters of J. R. R.Tolkien*. 620
[35] Ryan, John Charles. 'Tolkien's Sonic Trees and Perfumed Herbs". 128

Willow is an embodiment of active nature and his existence raises questions about the consciousness of plants and their right to protection[36]. Similarly, the forest of Fangorn, full of huorns, whispering trees with the ability to move, is known to be malevolent, but Merry and Pippin are saved by the treelike Ent, Treebeard - Paralleling their rescue by Tom Bombadil from Old Man Willow. Yet, where Tom chastises Willow for seeking revenge for hobbitkind's tree-killing on the innocent hobbits, the Ents, shepherds of trees, avenge the fallen trees and destruction of natural beauty of Isengard, breaking Saruman's dam and flooding his infernal engines. "Nature acts to strike down those who would abuse it." writes Michael J. Brisbois[37]. Other trees are more passive, yet still important symbols: The White tree of Gondor is perhaps most important, whose living or dying symbolizes the strength of the life force of Numenorean line of kings, and by extension the strength of Gondor and of mankind. There are the Mallorn trees of Lothlorien, whose golden beauty matches the mysterious, shining beauty of their ruler, Galadriel. The party tree, under which Bilbo gives his birthday speech at the beginning of the tale and which has been torn up by the ruffians of Saruman at the end.

Trees are thus perhaps the most potent symbol of the *Rings* besides the ring itself and the eye of Sauron, and they are also a powerful symbol in the stories of *Earthsea*, in Martin's Westeros and in the world of Jemisin's *Inheritance*. In Le Guin's *Earthsea* the most magical place on earth is the Immanent Grove, a strange forest on Roke Knoll, where the roots go deeper than anywhere else, and the trees are of every kind you can think of. You can walk for days between them, never turning round, or walk out within a minute, its dimension unmeasurable and fluid. This is where the master mages meet and where the apprentices are made from sorcerers into wizards, and where the Patterner walks searching for understanding. The trees of the Immanent Grove then are a symbol of life, magic and prosperity, and it is insinuated that with the destruction of that grove, the entire world will falter too. Additionally, they are a symbol of freedom, with both Ged and Tenar having their first experiences of true freedom among trees, in the hills of Gont or those of Atuan.

In Martin's Westeros, the weirwoods – pale trees with red leaves, some with faces carved into their bark, symbolize the northern cultural identity that they have inherited from their ancestors, the First Men, and the northerners' connection to the Old Gods – the nature

[36] Ibid.
[37]Brisbois, Michael J. "Tolkien's Imaginary Nature".

gods of rock and stream. Additionally, they are tied the Singers[38], who first taught the First Men the faith, and who are reincarnated into the trees when they die, and the trees can connect a person into the past, as it does for the Three Eyed Raven and Bran. The trees thus represent the connection both to nature and to the past – the oneness of all life in existence and in death, and that the South of Westeros has cut most down symbolizes their rejection of nature and their more anthropocentric view of the world. Meanwhile, in *Inheritance*, trees are a symbol of the goddess Enefa, of life itself, and Yeine's first act upon gaining her power is to grow a giant tree which roots the floating citadel of Sky, making it part of the world again. The tree's body becomes the site of a city – thousands living under the shadow of its canopy, building around its roots, as insects and animals make their homes in normal trees. In the city of Shadow, the lives of humans, godlings and that of nature intermingles harmoniously.

Trees, often seen as the kings of the plant kingdom[39], are in these texts used as a synecdoche for all of nature. The use of tree symbolism is thus used to connect characters and peoples to the natural world, and in turn that natural connection symbolizes the embeddedness of humans within nature, as well as being connected to beauty and the proper, natural order of the world. The loss of trees and greenery, on the other hand, is a loss for all humanity.

1.2 The Loss of Enchantment

A sense of loss and sadness is a constant background presence in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings.* As Brian Attebary points out, the Fourth Age which starts with Aragorn's coronation marks a shift from an era dominated by magic to a time dominated by humans and human issues[40]. This is expressed most strongly through the leaving of the elves from Middle-Earth, with their great leaders Galadriel and Elrond, joined by the wizard Gandalf, and the majority of elves eventually passing over the sea into the west. Even Legolas, who initially stays, eventually leaves for Valinor, bringing Gimli with him. And in the Scouring of the Shire, Attebary sees a taste of what's to come, the magic being stripped from both heroism and villainy, such that it will be up to ordinary people to push against bad actors and their deception and attempts at destruction. To the image of the ruined Shire, trees uprooted, grass trampled, landscape wounded and cluttered by industrial huts, Attebery poignantly writes:

[38] Also popularly called Children of the Forest, but "those who sing the the songs of the forest" is their name for themselves, and "singers" is what Bran comes to call them.
[39] Ryan, John Charles. 'Tolkien's Sonic Trees and Perfumed Herbs". 125
[40] Attebery, Brian. "From the Third Age to the Fifth Season". 18

"We know this world. We live in it. We made it."[41] The story of the world of Middle-Earth, and the many stories which follows Tolkien's formula have a bitter-sweet ending where a world loses its magic and moves into a version of the Anthropocene, mirroring the themes of disenchantment common to modernist writing.

In Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire,* Westeros has experienced three waves of colonialism by the time the events of *Thrones,* which have had palpable effects on the natural world and on the indigenous populations of the singers and the giants. Forests used to cover the continent, but with colonization by humans the continent has become largely deforested, and the native populations have been decimated, the survivors retreating beyond the Wall[42]. The native peoples have been so thoroughly erased that the arbiters of knowledge in Westeros, the maesters, are unsure whether they ever existed at all. In this depiction, Martin highlights that the agrarian landscape often favored as more natural than the suburban or city landscape, is not really a fully natural one either but one which has already been quite heavily deforested. A thing Tolkien himself hints at in his inclusion of Old Man Willow's rage. Where Tolkien depicts the leaving of the elves as a saddening affair, he also gives them agency in doing so – with Martin's depiction of the singers and giants' "leaving" diverging heavily.

Critic John Miller interprets the differing fantasy races of Middle-Earth as embodying different versions of pre-industrial masculinity; the artisan elves, craftsmen dwarves, agrarian hobbits, which are doomed to become defunct as the "dominion of man" begins. Thus, in part mirroring and reflecting on the way that western masculinity changed in meeting with the brutal reality of colonialism and modern warfare - devaluing things like purity, piety and aesthetic sensibility as now being feminine, coming to value a more hard-nosed masculinity[43]. In *Rings*, the masculinity that wins out – that encapsulated in Aragorn, is rather softer and nobler, influenced by the aesthetic appreciation of elves and deeply contrasted with the warlike orcish masculinity or the industrial, selfish one of Saruman. Yet where the elves *"*reject values of political power and historical progress in favor of the aesthetic and the transcendent"[44], men embrace power and ideas of history and their takeover is depicted as a matter of destiny. Sad, yes, but both just and inevitable.

[41] Attebery, Brian. "From the Third Age to the Fifth Season". 18
[42] Carroll, Shiloh. "Postcolonialism, Slavery, and the Great White Hope". 110-112 + 118
[43] Miller, John. "Mapping Gender in Middle-Earth". 149
[44] Miller, John. "Mapping Gender in Middle-Earth". 140

Tolkien's elves can, like the Martin's singers, be seen as an analogue for indigenous peoples, or at least building upon an idea of indigenous people. either Celtic or Native American, in the way that they live within nature in a way which contrasts with those of the humans in their worlds – They don't plow agrarian fields or construct towns on hills but build their dwellings into the natural landscape, as we see with the portrayal of Lorien and Rivendell, and the singers' caves. But where Tolkien's elves decide to leave Middle-Earth on their own, after the unescapable disenchantment of that world, Martin's singers and his giants were victims of a genocide. They did not choose to leave for the far north beyond the Wall but were chased there. This emphasizes the way that the change toward European feudal agrarianism, or into Western capitalism for that matter, has often been a case of colonial violence, not of social evolution.

While in one sense, the disenchantment of Westeros has already been thought completed, with the exile of the singers and the giants beyond the wall, and the death of the Targaryens' dragons, we come to see the reappearance of magical creatures just as *Song* begins in the return of the malevolent ice-creatures, the Others, the Stark warg-children and their direwolves, and Dany's dragons. Thus, Martin's story is one of re-enchantment as well, rather than just one which has experienced disenchantment. What that means for the singers and the giants, who represent the old pre-agrarian way of life, is yet to be seen, as Martin's as yet unfinished *Song* turns all other magical and non-magical species against the Others, life against the personifications of death.

The disenchantment tale of *Rings* and *Song* then mirror that of the disenchantment of the Western world as the Anthropocene encroached further, casting it as an inevitable, yet saddening loss, expressing a deep melancholy which sharply contrasts with the joy in "progress" which is the dominant narrative. Meanwhile, tales of re-enchantment imply that history is not a tale of linear "progress, but that there can be a return. This trend of re-enchantment is also an element of Le Guin's *Earthsea* and especially in Jemisin's *Inheritance*, where the re-enchantment is interconnected with a rebalancing of the world which sets the world aright.

1.3 Balance and Nature's Worth

The first book of the *Earthsea* cycle, *The Wizard of Earthsea* (*Wizard*) documents the rise of the great wizard Ged from a goat herd boy to a mage, emulating the framing of a historical

tale, like the telling of *Rings*. Ged's relationship to nature is a key part of the narrative. The first spell the boy Ged learns is to call goats to him by using their true name. In *Earthsea* magic is performed through the use of the True Speech, the language of the mythic original people of the Archipelago, who raised the land from the sea. Everything has a true name, from dragons, to people to the pebble – and the knowledge of the true names of things grants a mage power over them. Thus, while magical ability does not exist in all people, for those who have an affinity, their knowledge of the world becomes their basis for manipulating it. As Kathrine Buse writes, the True Speech is explicitly ecological, not only describing the natural world or giving the speaker power over the world, but in evoking its "interconnectedness and embeddedness" in a universal ecology [45]. All parts of the natural world are connected, and impacting it through the performance of magic is thus no simple matter.

Ged is naturally talented in magic, soon learning to call other animals to himself, and he has a great hunger for learning. Ged first finds enjoyment in the power over animals that magic gave him, but as his gift was discovered by his aunt, the village witch, he is turned toward "more useful" knowledge, that might win him glory, riches, and power over men. He is simultaneously praised as special and feared by other children, and his focus is solely on becoming a great mage. An abused and neglected boy, youngest of many sons, he sees magic as his way out. After performing the feat of weaving fog about his village to save it from foreign raiders, he is taken in by the wizard Ogion, who gives him his true name, Ged. But Ged is unsatisfied at Ogion's in the winter, set to learning the true and common names of plants and animals. Ged thinks Ogion is a strange wizard; He will take shelter under a tree when it rains, even though common sorcerers, much less in power than he, will bat rain clouds back and forth across their isle of Gont[46]. He lives in a little house and keeps goats and chickens and a garden, like a common farmer. Ogion is defined by his gentleness and his silence, and by being seemingly unremarkable. Ged is miffed by his reluctance to use his powers, not understanding that it is wisdom. In one scene, which Buse points out, he is chastised by Ogion for thinking only of what use value a thing can have for him, with Ogion pointing out the absurdity of asking the "use" of Ged himself, or of Gont island, or the sea, putting the elements of the natural world on the same level as humans[47]. Thus, Le Guin rejects the typical Western notion of nature as existing as explicitly for humans to use as they please.

[45] Buse, Katherine. "Genre, Utopia, and Ecological Crisis". 266
[46] Rain, 13 *Wizard*
[47] Buse, Katherine. "Genre, Utopia, and Ecological Crisis". 268

Later in life Ged says: “I didn't stay long, I hadn't the sense to stay. I went off seeking evil, and sure enough I found it”[48]. After accidentally calling forth a shadow, Ged sets out for the wizard school on Roke Island. But he learns there that the master wizards of Roke are much the same as Ogion: they all teach temperance. “Rain on Roke may be drouth in Osskil, […] and a calm in the East Reach may be storm and ruin in the West” one Master says, and another cautions that to merely change a pebble into a jewel is to alter the world. The world exists in a precarious balance and since magic is able to threaten that balance it must be used sparingly, the wizards tell him. Ged does not believe them, however, but thinks that a truly great wizard must be able to do as he please without consequence. He desires power without responsibility and as a result of his ignorance he calls forth the evil that is the Shadow. Since, as Buse notes human ability to change the world in *Earthsea* is not limitless or simple, but depends on knowing and attending to every element carefully[49], the reading of spell books beyond Ged’s understanding conjures up an awful thing, created out of the unknown part of himself, and it is only in knowing himself, including the dark unlovely parts of himself which make up the shadow, and see that the entity chasing him is himself.

Le Guin’s espousal of balance and the interconnectedness of nature seem influenced both by her knowledge of Native American cultural beliefs and in Taoism. While Le Guin herself traces her idea of the True Speech to Californian Native American cultures, whose names for things were always imbued with greater meaning, and for whom all things had a place in a greater order of life[50], she was also an adherent to Taoism, and the critic Dennis Friedrichsen sees Le Guin’s *Earthsea* as being founded on Taoism, pointing to the series’ recurring motif of balance and of the need of upholding equilibrium in the world, which runs throughout the *Earthsea* novels[51]. For one thing, Taoism is expressed in the rather unconventional ending to *Wizard* where Ged does not defeat the dark enemy which has plagued him throughout but must face his fear of death and his desire to live eternally, unifying the light and dark, the conscious and unconscious sides of himself. And for another, there’s the heavy focus on the idea of a natural, magical balance, which evokes the idea of the ecosystem and the precarious balances which exist between different species of plant and animal which, maintaining a given natural space’s flourishing biodiversity. This emphasis on the fact that actions which change the natural world, even in minor ways, can have unforeseen

[48] Le Guin, Ursula K. “Voyage”, *Tombs.* 105
[49] Buse, Katherine. “Genre, Utopia, and Ecological Crisis”. 268
[50] Buse, Katherine. “Genre, Utopia, and Ecological Crisis”. 269
[51] Friedrichsen, Dennis. “Aspects of Worldbuilding”

consequences; communicating the need for careful consideration before action is taken and the import of choosing inaction sometimes, letting nature run its course, is a simple but powerful environmentalist message in a world where our world is constantly changed in big and small ways – trees cut down, mountains hollowed out, bogs filled in, all for the sake of profit and human enjoyment.

After another winter spent closed in learning true names, this time with the Master Patterner on Roke, Ged gains an animal companion in an otak, a small, furry ferretlike thing, which he calls forth using its true name. He finds it as it is sheltering from the rain under a tree, mirroring the previous image of Ogion sheltering under a tree. In a sense, the otak replaces Ogion as the symbol of being one with nature, of balance. The otak becomes part of the myth spun about him by the other boys, who see his talent and admire him. Ged's friend Vetch says that "a man favored by a wild beast is a man to whom the Old Powers of stone and spring will speak in human voice." [52]. The otak signals power, much like the raven of the Archmage, as well as signaling a respect for and oneness with nature. The otak serves Ged faithfully, seeming to have bonded to him and called him family. When Ged is attacked by the shadow, his otak leaps as if to attack while the other boys run away, and later in the tale, as Ged's spirit has lost connection with his body after a failing attempt to retrieve a dying child from death, the otak licks his fingers, thus saving him, calling him back to the waking world:

> "He knew that had none touched him when he lay thus spirit-lost, had none called him back in some way, he might have been lost for good. It was only the dumb instinctive wisdom of the beast who licks his hurt companion to comfort him, and yet in that wisdom Ged saw something akin to his own power, something that went as deep as wizardry. From that time forth he believed that the wise man is one who never sets himself apart from other living things, whether they have speech or not, and in later years he strove long to learn what can be learned, in silence, from the eyes of animals, the flight of birds, the great slow gestures of trees"[53]

This epiphany implies a shift in Ged's thinking, from a worldview where he thought of nature as being lower than him, something that could be of use or amusement, but not have

[52] Archmage's raven, otak 34
[53] Otak healer, 56

power, wisdom, real transcendent value. When a master of Roke told him even a pebble has value as itself, Ged had closed his ears, but from the otak, finally Ged has internalized what so many tried to teach him: that all aspects of the world are to be valued and considered and protected. He thus moves from a more modern Western and Christian view of nature, where nature exists separate from the human as a soulless space of objects, a garden which is ours to use and abuse as we please, with little thought to the beings and entities which make up that nature besides their use value to us, and into a more holistic view of human as one with nature, akin that of Taoism or Native American beliefs. He gains a greater respect for nature as something imbued with value and spirit on the same level as the human.

In *The Farthest Shore*, the third book of *Earthsea* and thought to be the ending, until Le Guin went back to the series and published Tehanu, a story of climate crisis, as Buse reads it. It is also one of disenchantment as the Archipelago suddenly sees the failure of crops and rise in crime and addiction, while magic users and skilled craftspeople abruptly lose their powers, forgetting the True Names[54]. While Arren, Ged's young companion and the future king, wonders it might be a natural phenomenon, Ged asserts that such a thing can only be caused by humans. And while Ged's assertion that pestilence is a matter of the balance righting itself is a bit dubious, especially with regards to recent global events (perhaps highlighting the danger of elevating balance and all things natural) it does make it seem a compelling analogy for the Anthropocene. In Cob, the villain, who scoffs at the ideas of balance and life's embeddedness in nature which the wizards espouse, Buse sees somebody seeking to create a sort of utopia beyond nature and death in the dry land away from the sight of the moon and the touch of grass[55]. But Cob is eventually revealed to be undead, neither living nor truly dead[56]. In him we see echoes of the desire for humans to build ourselves fortresses to act as sanctuaries, carving ourselves away from nature and its dangers, but Le Guin implies that we cannot separate ourselves from nature and death, and that doing so is tantamount to dooming ourselves to a non-life. The people under Cob's influence feel strikingly familiar as Arren describes them – They are unhappy, complaining of work becoming shoddier, but don't do anything to change circumstances. They know they are living through bad times but cannot say when those bad times started[57]. They mirror a common experience today, who in some way sense the wrongness, the "chemical

[54] Buse, Katherine. "Genre, Utopia, and Ecological Crisis". 271
[55] Buse, Katherine. "Genre, Utopia, and Ecological Crisis". 271 + 275-276
[56] Le Guin, Ursula K. "The Dry Land", in *The Farthest Shore*.
[57] Buse, Katherine. "Genre, Utopia, and Ecological Crisis". 275

deficiencies" of our time and place, but who, being born into this moment, do not truly have the ability to know what they are missing.

Buse ends her reflections on a scene of Ged chastising Arren for testily likening the isle they're on to the land of the dead, in a scene that mirrors the many scenes of young Ged being chastised by his masters in *Wizard*[58]. Ged tells Arren to look around him:

> "This is your kingdom, the kingdom of life. This is your immortality" […] "In all the world, in all the worlds, in all the immensity of time, there is no other like each of those streams, rising cold out of the earth where no eye sees it, running through the sunlight and the darkness to the sea. Deep are the springs of being, deeper than life, than death..."[59]

This makes Arren reconsider, filled with his love for Ged and seeing clearly the joy in living which he embodies. Buse writes that the power of enchantment lies in Ged's engagement with the world, in discovery, learning, naming[60]. It is up to the individual to see the "Living splendor" of the natural world – and in seeing it, not only will we become more capable of maintaining the balance and conserve or even reinvigorate the natural world, but we will enrich our own souls. This enchantment with nature is depicted as something almost innate, the child versions of both Ged and Tenar depicted as joyously running around the wilderness of Gont or the flourishing orchards of Atuan. Both move away from nature, as Ged moves to Roke and Tenar to the deserts of Atuan, both focused on their work and destiny, on building their power, and experiencing few moments of true social connection or time to dwell in nature. For Tenar, one of the most coveted moments of hers are being allowed to come on a fishing trip, or sitting on the walls eating apples with Penthe, while for Ged it's his moments with Vetch or finding the otak.

As a graduated wizard of Roke, Ged reflects on his life, his childhood, his time with Ogion, and most of all the sensual experiences of being on Gont – of the river, the mountain forests, of his village and his aunt's house. "He knew once more, at last, after this long, bitter, wasted time, who he was and where he was"[61]. In that moment he sees the four years he has spent on Roke as useless – those same years which made him into a wizard and not a mere sorcerer, which was the most Ogion could have made him. He thereby questions the idea and

[58] Buse, Katherine. "Genre, Utopia, and Ecological Crisis". 277
[59] Le Guin, Ursula K. "Selidor", in *The Farthest Shore.*
[60] Buse, Katherine. "Genre, Utopia, and Ecological Crisis". 277
[61] Le Guin, Ursula K. *Wizard of Earthsea* 48 ??

status of the wizard of Roke, which he has long held so high. When Tenar eventually choses to reject the empty power she has as Arha, and escape with Ged, she is offers her a lavish life in Havnor, the greatest city of the Archipelago, but Tenar first wishes to stay in the forests of her homeland, then accepts to go live with Ogion on Gont, and Ged tells her that her choice proves her wiser than he.

In *The Farthest Shore*, before the loss of his power, Ged articulates a dichotomy between Being and Doing. A life of Being is what animals have, what many people have who live small, simple life within nature and within a community. A life of Doing is what Ged has had – a life of striving to complete quests, to resolve conflicts, to win glory and power. Ged sees a life of Being as superior to one of Doing, but sees himself as wedded to a life of Doing by the choice he took once he chose to go to Roke:

> "When I was young, I had to choose between the life of being and the life of doing. And I leapt at the latter like a trout to a fly. But each deed you do, each act, binds you to itself and to its consequences, and makes you act again and yet again. Then very seldom do you come upon a space, a time like this, between act and act, when you may stop and simply be. Or wonder who, after all, you are"[62]

Ged's Doing/Being dichotomy is quite unstable, however. Ged sees himself as unfree because of his power, contrasting his existence as Archmage with a life as a normal person, imagined as free of responsibilities, but of course, people of less power hardly have more freedom and fewer responsibilities. People living lives of Being often tend to have many responsibilities and many great choices to make, as we see in the telling of Tenar's life after becoming a wife and mother. She might have relinquished her power as priestess, but this does not mean she is rid of the need to act, is rid of all power and all responsibility. Supreme power might bind, but it is not the only thing which does so. The dichotomy of Being/Doing comes back in *The Other Wind* when it is revealed that man and dragon was once one single species, but that there was a split where dragons came to choose an existence of Being, and Man chose one of striving for power and glory.

But the existence of magic in humans, of wizards, sorcerers and witches, disrupts this binary – Humans were supposed to let go of magic, but did not. Magic is in this way

[62] Le Guin, Ursula K. "Hort Town", in *The Farthest Shore* in *Earthsea: the first four books*. 333

characterized as something entwined with dragons, with animals, with creatures who Are rather than Do. Magic is of the natural world, and in going after power, glory and riches, humans disconnected themselves from this magic, except for a select few, who through trickery remained in connection with magic. Man's trickery also cut humans of from the cycle of rebirth, as they wished to create a heaven, an afterlife where humans could live immortal, but only succeeded in creating the undying lands, a dry, lifeless place, all sand and starless, moonless darkness. Thus, they again separated themselves from the rest of the earth's creatures. In the cycle of rebirth that was all life was literally connected, as one life dying could could be reborn as a completely different kind of life – from human to tree, otak to dragon. But through *The Other Wind*, the wall in the dry place is torn down, and the hardic peoples regain their ability to reincarnate, to become part of the Earth in dying, rather than spend eternity alone outside of life. This story then seems to be another story of re-enchantment, as in *Farthest Shore*, reconnecting humans to the fabric of the natural universe in yet another way.

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The first installation of Jemisin's *Inheritance* sees the rebalancing of the world and a re-enchantment. The world of *A Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, ruled by the Arameri is one in which monotheism has not only been forced onto the majority of the colonized population of the world, but the naturally polytheistic world has become crippled as the god of light and order, Bright Itempas, enslaved his brother and killed his sister. Nahadoth, the dark god of chaos is chained to Sky, and to the Arameris' control, while Enefa, the grey nature goddess' death left the world functioning, yet lacking in some strange quality. And all the many strange godling children of the triumvirate of gods are locked away. The story of the first novel follows Yeine, who learns that she was infused with the soul of Enefa and is supposed to become her vessel. Though she is afraid of losing her own identity in the process, she sacrifices herself for her people and for Nahadoth and his children, who she has come to love, and is reborn the nature goddess Yeine. She reverses the enslavement of Nahadoth by Itempas, tying Itempas to a human body the way he did for Nahadoth, yet she does not enslave him to another's will, like Itempas did. And while at the end of *Inheritance* the gods of light and darkness are still locked in a hatred, the three gods are still destined to return to one another – they are family, after all. Balance is often seen as a Taoist – an equilibrium between two opposing things, yet in here Jemisin is creating an idea of a three-sided balance, proposing that neither order nor chaos are enough, even in combination, nor is growth, but

that the three are in an intertwined relationship with one another. What this implies, to us Westerners who have grown up in the shadow of the monotheistic, Abrahamic and specifically Christian religion, is the need to recenter nature as something to be valued, loved and fought for, and that if order means authoritarian control, enslavement and death, chaos is a better ideal. Order and chaos must temper one another, all in the service of life.

In the second installation, the enchantment of the world is quite literal, as godlings come down to earth again and some other intangible element of the world that was missing returns; an element which the population didn't know to miss, having lived under the control of Itempas and the Arameri for hundreds of years. Yet, as Oree Shoth's narration tells, it was immediately discernable upon the reincarnation of Enefa into Yeine - a vividness of color, life, light, texture, smell, was missing that now came back. Life suddenly regained some lost flavor and meaning. And that is such a poignant, interesting idea – because the modern world is so often described in terms of being gray and lifeless, devoid of some certain je ne sais quoi. Enefa's color is, surprisingly, twilight gray – the middle point between her light brother and her dark one. Yet, it is in the reduction to a world of only black and white, with no gradation, that color is lost. Between birth and death, we find life. In the third installation, following the eldest godling Sieh, he is in a crisis. An eternal child, he has begun to grow rapidly older. With Enefa's return, change and growth becomes inevitable. Yet, Sieh does not die, but reaches a new stage of godhood, just as the changing of the Arameri Empire might be a disintegration, but their disintegration is into something better and more interesting.

Le Guin and Jemisin then use the theme of balance to express the need to value and be careful of nature, not only for the benefit of nature or our own survival, but because nature is good, and experiencing it and being part of it is a crucial part of being alive.

1.4 Magical Climate Apocalypses and The Way Back

The world of Martin's *Song* and Jemisin's world in *The Broken Earth* are both worlds dealing with repeated climactic upheaval, and both can be seen as a commentary on climate change. Martin's Westeros is one struggling with the experience of repeated ice ages, with seasons not following the yearly cycle of the planet about the sun as in our world, but one where winter comes at irregular times and stays for years. The natural cycles of the world in *Song* is characterized as more hostile to humans than in either Le Guin's or Tolkien's writing where the natural status quo is depicted as quite temperate. Winters in *Song* can be deadly, a time of

death, and they prove a test of character, for both individuals and societies. Being a "summer child" or a "green boy" is to be untested, soft, and somewhat naïve.

As critic Vincent Martins points out, both the Stark motto "Winter is coming", and the one of the Night's Watch, evoke the "Long Night", a mythic winter far in the past:

> "Thousands and thousands of years ago, a winter fell that was cold and hard and endless beyond all memory of man. There came a night that lasted a generation, and kings shivered and died in their castles even as the swineherds in their hovels. Women smothered their children rather than see them starve, and cried, and felt their tears freeze on their cheeks." (Old Nan)[63]

The Long Night is a concept which entangles the climactic, natural threat of a changing season and coming darkness, and the supernatural threat of the coming of the Others[64] Yet, as the world of *Song* is at its start practically disenchanted, even the head of house Stark disbelieves even the existence of the Others. And as such, there is a certain denialism at play.

As critic Markus Laukkanen points out the dualism of fire and ice of the titular song of course calls forth associations with Robert Frost's famous poem "Fire and Ice", and thus the implication that either fire or ice might end the world[65]. The Others are creatures of the winter, pale as the ice, an incarnation of the death that the cold and ice brings, while the dragons represent the opposite, an incarnation of the death by heat and fire. The narrative seems to build up to a battle between fire and ice, but as Laukkunen writes, the two forces, both destructive ones, are less likely to battle one another than to compound the destruction. The motif of the encroaching winter and the Others has been seen as a climate change allegory by many fans and critics. Martin himself commented, when asked about this interpretation, that while he did not intend *Song* to be a climate change allegory upon beginning it, he does see it as a valid reading:

> "[T]he people in Westeros are fighting their individual battles over power and status and wealth. And those are so distracting them that they're ignoring the threat of "winter is coming," which has the potential to destroy all of them and to destroy their world. And there is a great parallel there to, I think, what I see this planet doing here […] We're fighting over issues, important issues, mind

[63] Martin, George R. R. "24: Bran IV" in *A Game of Thrones*
[64] Martins, Vincent. ""Winter Is Coming""
[65] Laukkanen, Markus. "Literalizing Hyperobjects" 238

> you […] But none of them are important if, like, we're dead and our cities are under the ocean."[66]

Crucially, the Others are things which *can* be fought, but not easily. Thus, cooperation and intelligence is needed, and the use of every weapon from dragons and magic to obsidian blades and fire, but first those in power must recognize the problem and agree that combating it is of greater priority than their own squabbles. Much like the different warring houses and factions of Westeros must set aside their grievances to fight the greater foe, or perish all together, so should we, this reading implies. Laukkanen sees fire and ice as hyperobjects, akin to climate change – objects that are cognitively estranging, too vast and strange for humans to comprehend fully, but which when recognized become an inescapable looming presence. Fire and ice both exist as such looming threats, represented through the entirety of song in myriad little ways – the recollection of spooky winter's tales, the red comet, bad harvests and concerns about food, the Glass candles and more[67]. As Laukkanen points out, the hyperobjects of ice and fire threaten to overwhelm the other elements of the story, because the "game of thrones" starts to lose all meaning when confronted with the potential end of the world, just as Martin states that our other problems will not much matter if we let ourselves be killed off by climate change.

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N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy begins with "the end of the world". Echoing the work of Octavia Butler's *Parable* series, *Broken Earth* is on the one hand a narrative of migration and survival in the face of personal and global apocalypse, caused both by climactic collapse, and by systems of oppression. On the other hand, it is a tale about taking the world into your hands, starting to believe in change and then using the power you have to cause change – of ending worlds and of saving them. The series imagines apocalypse in an unconventional way as the first scenes juxtapose the personal ending of Essun's world as finds her son dead with the end of the city of Yumenes and the breaking of the continent as a man we will learn to know as Alabaster takes hold of the earth and opens it up to swallow the city whole. *Broken Earth* then, that while we usually talk about "*the* end of *the* world" as of a

[66] Sims, Jamie. 'George R. R. Martin Answers Times Staffers' Burning Questions'. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/16/t-magazine/george-rr-martin-qanda-game-of-thrones.html.
[67] Laukkanen, Markus. "Literalizing Hyperobjects". 242

moment sweeping all of humanity away in a blazing fire, like the biblical apocalypse, apocalypses can perhaps more helpfully be constructed differently.

In a blog post, professor Cutcha Risling Baldy, writing about teaching a zombie apocalypse show in her Native Studies class, points out that Native Americans already experienced an apocalypse when the Europeans decided to colonize their land and perpetuate their genocide[68]. It was not the end of Earth, nor all people, yet it did mark the end of a world, of many worlds even as the Native cultures were assailed, exterminated, crippled or forcibly assimilated. Likewise, as Jessica Hurley states, Jemisin's trilogy, "resists the idea that apocalypse is one event that will come at the end of time" or that apocalypse is clearly distinct from pre-apocalypse – "apocalypse is an ongoing condition" where some die and other survive[69]. Jemisin herself says:

> "I was trying to depict a society that had the emotional impact of the society that I live in now where there have been, not Fifth Seasons, but where there have been the equivalent of pogroms and holocausts and all of these disasters happening to a people again and again and again" [70]

The end of the world then is constructed not just as something ending of the earth, a civilization or even a community, but as something which can even mean the end of a single person's world. When Uche is murdered by her husband, who now *knows* about her powers, the world that Essun built for herself in Tirimo. Just as it ended for Syen and Alabaster when Meov was assailed and broken, their loved ones killed. Just as it ended for Damaya the day accidentally killed a boy and her mother called her monster. Essun, who is Syen, who is Damaya, has experienced the end of her world thrice over, each time having to pick up the pieces of herself and build herself into something new. When looking upon it like this the end of the world is a surprisingly mundane phenomenon.

> "This is what the world is for some people. It is the apocalypse again and again and again." [71]

This motif of apocalypse also plays with the discourse around climate change which portrays it as a coming apocalypse. Jemisin notes, as many others do in meeting this rhetoric,

[68] Baldy, Cutcha Risling. "Why I Teach "The Walking Dead" in My Native Studies Classes": https://thenerdsofcolor.org/2014/04/24/why-i-teach-the-walking-dead-in-my-native-studies-classes/.
[69] Hurley, Jessica, and N. K. Jemisin. "An Apocalypse Is a Relative Thing"
[70] Hurley, Jessica, and N. K. Jemisin. "An Apocalypse Is a Relative Thing". 472
[71] Hurley, Jessica, and N. K. Jemisin. "An Apocalypse Is a Relative Thing". 472

that the planet will be fine, “An apocalypse is a relative thing. Usually the world survives just fine”[72], and some people will likely survive, but people (and other life) will suffer, and they will not suffer equally. The term Anthropocene has been criticized for casting “humanity” as the driver of climate change, when not all humans have played an equal part, and the sad irony is that it is often those least contributing who face the brunt of the damage.

The world as viewed by the people of the Stillness, the name they have ironically given their ever-changing continent, is a hostile one, likely to eat you up bones and all. The landscape is full of remnants of deadcivs - civilizations who have died out, and people live lives colored by preparation for and dread of coming ecological collapse, as the world sees irregular but inevitable seismic shifts. Many are small microshakes, while others cause Seasons, periods of apocalyptic climactic change where people must bunker down for some years. Still again, some cause Fifth Seasons – civilization ending, long lasting catastrophes, such as that which Alabaster’s causes. The presence of deadcivs as such is not strange, except that it is made strange through the pejorative way the people of the Stillness think of them. In our world we usually look upon such artifacts with reverence as history, but Essun thinks of them as fools. Since their civilizations died out, all their ideas have been proven faulty.

As the critics Haji Mola Hosein and Pourgiv point out, the trilogy portrays two parallel types of societies which represent various ideologies which are problematized in respect to their relationship to the earth. First, there is the Sanzed empire, which rules the Stillness in Essun’s time. All share a language and a system of governance, and an ideology of survival epitomized in the ancient Stonelore. Stonelore consists of little phrases passed down through generations, through the work of Lorists and creche – a combination of kindergarten and school., which spells out the rules for creating a community, shortened to “comm”, survive through the seasons. Most comms live small and simple, crafting their society to the ideal of survivability. People have “runny packs” stored in their homes, in the knowledge that they might have to run from their homes with nothing but what they can carry on their backs. These elements of the runny-sacks and the Stonelore, given out in fragments at the end of each chapter, point to the influence of Butler’s *Parable*, and the first lorist, the tuner Kelenli, can be seen as a parallel to Butler’s Lauren, yet in time the interpretations of the Stonelore has become stagnant and somewhat counter-intuitive. This is epitomized in the way that lines that say; “Judge all by their usefulness: the leaders and the hearty, the fecund and

[72] Hurley, Jessica, and N. K. Jemisin. “An Apocalypse Is a Relative Thing”. 476

the crafty, the wise and the deadly, and a few strong backs to guard them all."[73] has become basis for a nonsensical, rigid hereditary hierarchy of "use castes" which decides how valuable a person is seen as and how likely they are to be cast out during a season.

The orogenes – those people who have the power of orogeny, can sense and shift the earth – stop or create quakes, throw rocks, freeze the earth. They also have the capability for magic, though the word is hardly ever used in the series, and the power of magic, which can work on organic matter as well as the material, is distinguished from orogeny. "Magic" is a lost word to the people of the Stillness, a word of the past, though it is implied that in the old world magic was commonplace, leading to some element of disenchantment and re-enchantment in this story as well, as magic is rediscovered by Alabaster and Nassun. Orogenes are seen as dangerous and in need of shackles, with Sanze coming to decree them "not human", despite them being born to humans and being like humans in every way but their power. Orogenes must either go to the Fulcrum to learn to live as servants of the Yumenes Empire, or live in hiding, always fearing their discovery and killing. After learning of her orogeny, Damaya's mother sends for the Guardians, even thinking they will kill the girl, and treats her like an animal, locking her in the barn with little clothes and no toilet. Damaya must have lied to them, pretending to be a normal person, she accuses. Jija, Essuns husband, mirrors her mother and reacts even worse in learning of Uche's orogeny, immediately beating the toddler to death. The treatment of the orogenes is an obvious example of racial hatred (an aspect which will be further explored in a later chapter), yet as Haji Mola Hosein and Pourgiv see it, it is also an example of eco-phobia, where the locus of the fear and hatred lies in the orogenes' closeness to earth, with orogene coming to be seen as akin to a potentially vicious animal upon discovery, perhaps best epitomized in the naming of orogenes born outside the Fulcrum as "ferals", contrasting with those like Alabaster, who are bred on site.

The earth seen as "Father Earth" and variations on "evil Earth" are common expletives. Earth is seen not as a mother figure, as a life-giver, the way the Earth is often imagined, but as a malicious entity desiring the destruction of all civilization and the death of all humans, less Gaia and more an Old Testament god, a zombified Mother Earth, as Brian Attebary puts it[74]. Through the first novels this seems most like metaphor and myth – The

[73] Jemisin, N. K. "13: you're on the trail" in *The Fifth Season*.
[74] Attebery, Brian. "From the Third Age to the Fifth Season". 19-20

Earth cannot really be a sentient entity set on the idea of humanity's destruction, it's just a planet that happens to be more volatile and hostile to humans, by no fault of its own. Yet in the last book, it becomes clear that The Earth is sentient, and it is angry, and is puppeteering and speaking through the Guardians. Attebary likens Father Earth to a Cthulic creature, yet unlike Lovecraft's Elder Gods, this one is a Younger God, created by humankind, while critics Haji Mola Hosein and Pourgiv read the move from Mother to Father as a product of the earth losing its child, the moon[75]. There is a parallel made between Father Earth and Alabaster – as the earth loses the moon, so does Alabaster lose Corundrum, his child with Essun and Innon. Essun suffocated the toddler Corundum in order to keep the child from ending up enslaved by the Fulcrum when they attacked their island comm of Meov, ending the life that Alabaster and Essun had built there, and killing Innon. Through making the earth into a character of its own, it becomes a being capable of being harmed and of rage and revenge. Just as Father Earth wreaks his revenge on humanity ever, so Alabaster wreaks his revenge on Yumenes, the Fulcrum and the Sanzed Empire. A theme of trauma leading to more trauma emerges, apocalypse causing further apocalypses.

In the last novel of the trilogy, we are introduced to Syl Anagist, a civilization which existed long ago and whose actions caused the earth to lose its moon and the first fifth season to begin. Like Sanze it eventually swallowed every other society in its world, and like Sanze it enslaved people with orogenic power in the tuners, like Hoa, who were even artificially created for the purpose of serving Syl Anagist. Yet unlike Sanze, which evokes ideas of ancient societies, with its pyramid, Emperor, horse drawn carts and easy violence, Syl Anagist was highly technological, almost utopian, and supposedly holds life sacred. Their way of growing rather than building things, using magic and organic matter, and their zero-emission society is straight out of a utopian vision, yet there is a problem, they hold a familiar ideology, focused on profit, hierarchy and exploitation. They want ever more energy, more power, to fuel their society, and just as they grew their society through conquest and enslavement, so do they intend to grow their energy power through the enslavement of the earth. Critic Alistair Iles points out the similarities to the real-world ideas that massive geoengineering projects are the best way to safeguard the planet and human life and sees Syl Anagist as a warning against

[75] Haji Mola Hosein, Shohreh, and Farideh Pourgiv. "Eco-Phobia in Nora K. Jemisin's Trilogy *The Broken Earth*". 1

such projects and against the anthropocentric hubris to think we can bend the earth to our will like a computer[76].

Certainly, the idea that a society could evolve to be capable of such great technological feats, yet still cling to the need for infinite growth is one both horrific and relatable. Iles writes about current sustainability discourse, focused on electric cars and other green tech; "They assume they are at the forefront of the sustainability movement but are still very much trapped inside a neoliberal discourse, where only certain things can be said, even imagined."[77] The neoliberal mindset, mirroring that of Syl Anagist, will not accept that there is no such thing as infinite growth, or that we live within an organic system of finite resources; will not accept the idea that maybe we need to learn to live with less. We also learn that the oft repeated phrase "Life is sacred in Syl Anagist" is a lie, much like the idea that the Arameri do not allow slavery in *Inheritance*, as the tuners are shown what is essentially a mass grave of their ancestors, the Niess, who exist in a strange undead state, their lives powering and flowing into the obelisks which are meant to help enslave the earth. While the society and technology of Syl Anagist seems impressive, it is built on a base of exploitation, and continues to rely on exploitation to fuel their unsustainable projects.

Jemisin thus ties the exploitation of the earth to the exploitation and oppression of different groups of people, insinuating that the two are intimately connected. After all, both rely on hierarchical thinking, where some people are put above others, some species above other species, with all other lives becoming subject to the wills of those most powerful of humans. Therefore, it takes a quite different approach to that of Martin, where it is implied that the existential threat of the winter, or climate change, should make every other political issue defunct. Some issues, like racial justice, economic justice and more, cannot be separated from climate change or subsumed under the idea of climate change, because the question of who holds power, how power is distributed, and the hierarchies and ideologies which keep power concentrated, is something intimately tied to our decisions to keep polluting, to dawdle on making the big decisions needed to halt or combat the threat.

> "[T]he fifth seasons could've been ended a lot longer ago […] They did not have to suffer so long. If they had just treated orogenes like people […] [H]ow much more amazing any of these countries could be if they weren't

[76] Iles, Alastair. "Repairing the Broken Earth". 11
[77] Iles, Alastair. "Repairing the Broken Earth". 10

> spending so much energy trying to oppress a massive chunk of their own population. How much further along could we be? Could we have flying cars? That's the science-fiction conceit: why don't we have flying cars? Well, it's because of fucking oppression."[78]

As we can see, the writers of fantasy text seem to have always been especially interested in nature, to the point of having a main conflict lie in some ecological crisis has become customary. Within the worlds of high fantasy, the norm is a green world, more sparsely populated and less developed than ours. Often reveling in natural imagery, fantasy writing can cultivate a desire for and love for nature. Tree symbolism is common, and so is the giving of significance to non-human entities, like horses or familiars. Magic and nature is often tied together in fantasy stories, with disenchantment being portrayed as a sad affair, and there is often a focus on care and prudence when it comes to interacting with nature; As we see with the demonization of industrial exploitation of nature in *Rings*, the focus on balance and embeddedness in nature in *Earthsea,* and the need to recenter nature as a source of joy and divinity in *Inheritance*.

Fantasy allows for the creation of fantastical climate apocalypses, which can mirror ours, while making such hyperobjects, so huge and abstract and complex, more easily legible. *Song* focuses on the way that people must come together to face such threats and the way other issues diminish in face of apocalypse, while *Broken Earth* instead emphasizes the way that exploitation of the earth is intimately tied to the exploitation of people, ruminating on the need for social justice as well as ecological justice, and a view of the earth, and other "inanimate" objects as a creatures with inherent value of its own – something to be considered and cooperated with rather than wrestled and subdued.

Not only is the green world of fantasy appealing in its decided contrast with modern ways of living, but fantasy can work as a space for writers to play with ecological messaging, using the fantastical, mythical narrative to clearer express issues with humans' relationship with nature and the need for humans to think of nature as something with value in and of itself, rather than just an inanimate collection of resources for us to use. The "going back" can create a feeling of nostalgia or longing and make the reader more critical of how "developed" and deforested the modern world has become, and while there is no turning back time that

[78] Hurley, Jessica, and N. K. Jemisin. "An Apocalypse Is a Relative Thing". 475

emotion can be useful in moving forward.

2. The King and the Enemy: Racial and Class Hierarchy in Fantasy Worlds

High Fantasy is a genre often associated with a "going back" in history as contrasted with the forward motion of science fiction, - a quality of the genre I have argued has great potential for telling stories about how humans interact with nature, yet there are ways in which this going back can serve to validate or excuse the uncritical inclusion of socially regressive ideas, especially when it comes to such things as class, race or gender. As Kelly Ann Fitzpatrick writes, Tolkien's writing has been widely criticized as "naturalizing nineteenth and early twentieth-century assumptions"[79] about these things, and in many ways his descendants have followed in those footsteps. Setting aside gender for the time being, in this chapter I will focus on how the ideas of the "one true king" and racial hierarchy are created or attempted subverted in the works of Tolkien, Le Guin, Martin and Jemisin. While the older, more mythopoeic writers Tolkien and Le Guin both portray a rightful king returning the world to order as he finds his throne, Martin and Jemisin subvert this typical fantasy trope in different ways. Where Tolkien establishes a "morally charged color binary" and a racial hierarchy, Martin wrestles with the heritage of those tropes, attempting to have his cake and eat it too and maintain the Whiteness of his world, while Le Guin and Jemisin both circumvent the trope of Whiteness as norm through making giving their protagonists darker skin and creating worlds filled with people of color, yet where Le Guin largely neutralizes racial tension, turning it into mere prejudice, Jemisin tackles the issue of racial hierarchies head on.

2.1 The Devine Right of Kings

The main reason that critic Frederic Jameson called Tolkien's style of fantasy "reactionary" and "ahistorical" lay in his depiction of feudalistic power hierarchies and their interaction[80]. In his depiction of medieval culture, Tolkien depicts the relation between lords and peasants as harmonious, where Jameson sees them as diametrically opposed; "Peasant culture […] constitutes a fundamental negation and repudiation of its aristocratic masters", and the story of *Rings* itself mixes the "incompatible cultural styles" of the aristocratic epic

[79] Fitzpatrick, Kelly Ann. 'Tolkien: From Medieval Studies to Medievalist Fantasy'
[80] Jameson, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future*. 60-61

tale of a fight of good vs. evil with the peasant fairy tale. It is a romanticized, mythical vision of the medieval period then, not one concerned with historical accuracy.

We see this in the idyllic portrayal of the relationship between Frodo and Sam. Most of the main characters in *Rings* exist on somewhat the same level in terms of power. Obviously, Gandalf being a wizard and older is sat above all others, and the hobbits are seen as more child-like than the rest and taken under their wings, yet there is little deference paid to the princely statuses of many of the party, and little differentiation is made between Frodo, Merry and Pippin. It is in the relationship between Sam and Frodo we see a difference in power being expressed and deferred to most clearly. Sam is initially given least choice in joining Frodo, nabbed by the ear by Gandalf and plainly told to go with Frodo[81], and while he reinforces the choice himself several times over, his treatment there is a reflection of his lowered status in comparison to Frodo, as part of the laboring peasantry, a gardener, rather than the leisured landed gentry which Frodo occupies. His status as a person of lesser birth is continually impressed upon the reader through his continual use of the term "master" for Frodo and his differing, more accented speech. Their relationship is a deeply unequal one, yet it is depicted as a harmonious one, devoid of the tension which might be brought on by inhabiting the roles of master and servant. Sam is happy to serve, recognizing Frodo as somebody worth serving – yes, because of his good character, but also likely because of his lineage and the wealth that comes with it.

Critic Kelly Ann Fitzpatrick, writing on Tolkien's medievalism, traces it to the popular medievalist revival of the 19th century, and sees his world as combining and smelting two opposing strains in that revivalism – the conservative, universalist view represented in Walter Scott, and the idealistic pluralist, primitivist and individualist one represented in William Morris[82]. In the first the medieval society was seen as harmonious, "held together by bonds of common faith and unquestioned social order" and writers like Scott, who (like Tolkien) created medievalism as much as he recreated it, lionized the period's chivalric heroes. In the latter strain, on the other hand, the period was seen as a time of great value in spite of the feudal lords and the monarch, with Scott's medieval fantasy utopia highlighting artisanship, craftmanship and a childlike peasant existence of work as play[83]. Fitzpatrick sees the figure of the idyllic, childlike joy of the Shire's hobbits as an obvious heritage from

[81] Tolkien, J. R. R. "Book I, Chapter II: The Shadows of the Past" in *The Fellowship of the Ring*.
[82] Fitzpatrick, Kelly Ann. 'Tolkien: From Medieval Studies to Medievalist Fantasy'. 39-40
[83] Fitzpatrick, Kelly Ann. 'Tolkien: From Medieval Studies to Medievalist Fantasy'. 40-46

Morris, but as Jameson pointed out, even in the Shire, the more conservative strain comes into play as uneven power dynamics along class lines are depicted in a rosy, harmonious light.

Yet, the trend of romanticizing feudal hierarchy as harmonious is perhaps most present in the character of Aragorn, who embodies the trope of the "one true king" whose role is justified as a moral good and even a necessity, as his return to power is framed as setting the world itself right. Monarchy is of course a trope inherited from the fairy tale as well as from feudalism – kings, queens, princes, and princesses have a notable aura of "faerie" to us children of the capitalist age, and they are in many ways a beloved part of fantasy with roles yet to play. However, the particular framing of Aragorn as a person born to power is supporting and being supported by a racial logic. At its core the idea of "birthright" to power, when mythologized and removed from the self-serving and immanently reproductive logics of real feudal society where people want to bestow their power onto their children and allies, suggests an understanding of the world where some people are better than others in an essential, unchangeable way. Indeed, as Tolkien scholar Dimitra Fimi notes, the racial hierarchies established in his writing; that of elves over men and dwarves and hobbits, all in turn put above orcs, and the more granular hierarchy of "men", where the Númenorean humans are placed over the humans of Gondor or Rohan, who are placed above "the Wild" dark skinned humans, all feeds into the idea of Aragorn as the "one, true king" which in turn feeds into the racial hierarchy by confirming it[84].

Aragorn, being a Númenorean, being a descentent of Elendil, *is* a good king not because he's a good person and good leader – instead the source of his goodness is given as his genetic makeup, his blood. He proves himself to the reader throughout the story, as a kind, strong and gentle man – a healer rather than just a warrior, yet likewise does other characters prove themselves to us, yet they are not lifted to the same height It is very easy as a reader to root for Aragorn to retake the throne his ancestors lost so long ago, because we come to love him and think and trust he will be a good king, and the narrative discourages the asking of questions like "Why is Aragorn, who never set foot in Gondor before the events of the book, the right man to lead Gondor's people? Why not Faramir?" or "Why does Gondor need a king at all?". As the logic of the books go, Gondor must have a king because the stewards, represented by Denethor, being a lesser type of men than the ones of Númenor, were easily

[84] Fimi, Dimitra. "Revisiting Race in Tolkien's Legendarium". http://dimitrafimi.com/2018/12/02/revisiting-race-in-tolkiens-legendarium-constructing-cultures-and-ideologies-in-an-imaginary-world/.

corrupted – and this decay is literalized, in the symbol of the White Tree of Minas Tirith which has slowly deadened but sees new blooms start appearing upon the return of a Númenorean king. With Aragorn, the future of humanity looks bright – without him they were doomed to decay and failure. Yet, this narrative of the racial, individualized heroism of Aragorn is undercut by the narrative of Frodo and the ring – For all that Aragorn saves Gondor and the kingdom of men from falling, it is Frodo and Sam who save the world.

This trope of the "one true king" is also utilized by Le Guin in *Eartsea*, as we are introduced to the prince Arren in the third book, conceived as the final one, who at the end of the novel is named king by Ged. Unlike Aragorn, while Arren does vaguely know he is a descendant of the mythic line of kings, he does not see kingship as his destiny throughout the novel. While his future kingship is hinted at throughout, it is only at the very end that Ged outright names him king. Ged prompts Arren to take pride in his lineage, and to "accept his destiny" and speaks of the power of lineage – "if the rowan's roots are shallow, it bears no crown" but Arren's roots are deep. While also conveying Arren's hidden strength, this metaphor reinforces the view that the role of wearing a crown is one reserved for people of the "right" bloodline, rather than those upstarts with shallower roots. This idea is again reinforced in the short story about Otter, where the king Losen of Havnor is called a false king, despite sitting the throne, because he is a cruel slaver and does not have the birthright to the throne[85]. This exposes the loyalty to the view of kings as not only "rightful" rulers in terms of birthright, but also as essentially morally good. A bad king is an oxymoron in Tolkien and Le Guin's world.

Like Aragorn, Arren proves himself to the reader to a likable, moral person who can be believed able to become as good a king as any other man. While Aragorn leads people and armies, Arren follows Ged, and fights no great battle. There are no armies for him to prove classical heroic qualities in fighting. Instead, the enemy is the wizard Cob who desires immortality and, through his machinations, ruptures the magical and moral fabric of Earthsea. Witches lose their powers and sailors get to slaving because of Cob. The rise of crime and cruelty is constructed as a magical problem, instead of one caused by changes in social and material reality, as in our world. On Roke students and masters are talking about the need for a king in Havnor[86], as an antidote to the war and brutality and as missing puzzle piece in the

[85] Le Guin, Ursula K. "The Finder", in *Tales of Earthsea*. 20 + 125
[86] Le Guin, Ursula K. «The Masters of Roke", in *The Farthest Shore* in *Earthsea: The first four books*. 322

world – Havnor is supposed to be "the center", evoking the idea of the imperial core, and there is an belief a king in Havnor there will lead to a return to a mythical, past glory. Thus, Le Guin also constructs the "return of the king" as something which will magically set the world right, creating order out of disorder, harmony out of strife and uncertainty.

This trope is somewhat or entirely subverted in the George R. R. Martin's *Song* and in Jemisin's *Inheritance* and *Broken Earth.* Martin's work has been called a work of "gritty fantasy", trying to veer away from the "Disneyland" version of medievalism, as Martin characterizes it[87]. His pillorying of the romanticized vision of feudalism and monarchy is part of this project; As Martin himself commented on the subject:

> "*Lord of the Rings* had a very medieval philosophy: that if the king was a good man, the land would prosper. […] My [characters] are trying to rule [but they] don't have an easy time of it. Just having good intentions doesn't make you a wise king."[88]

Of course, not all rulers do have only good intentions, and Martin again and again introduces us to lords and ladies, princes, kings and queens who very much do not rule benevolently, but actively harm the people they are supposed to serve. From the mad pyromania of Aerys Targaryen to the drunken womanizing of Robert Baratheon; Cercei Lannister's violent rage; Lysa Arryn's murderous paranoia; prince Joffrey and Ramsay Snow's awful misogynist brutality; the icy, calculated cruelty of great lords like Tywin Lannister, Walder Frey, and Roose Bolton; and the casual, sneering entitlement of the lordly Ser Waymar Royce and Ser Allister Thorne in the Night's Watch, the misuse and abuse of inherited power is rampant among the powerful of Westeros. Even avowedly honorable men like Ned Stark and Stannis Baratheon are shown as a potential menace to those in their power, as the first thing we see Ned do is to behead a man simply for fleeing a terrible horror which Ned will not let him bear witness of, and Stannis is shown to be easily swayed to horrid deeds of fratricide and burning people alive – Their honor easily becomes a weapon. Meanwhile, the thoroughly descent boy-king, Robb Stark, dies a gruesome death, and the beloved, well-connected Renly Baratheon, perhaps the most promising candidate for the throne at the beginning of *Storm* despite his weak claim, is killed off in similarly brusque fashion. This irreverence toward the powerful might go some way to explain why a conservative

[87] Young, Helen. «The Real Middle Ages" in *Race and Popular Fantasy.* 63
[88] Quoted in Young, Helen. «The Real Middle Ages" in *Race and Popular Fantasy.* 63

commentator called *Song* and its HBO adaption a "mockery and defilement" of the genre of mythopoetic fantasy[89].

Yet, Martin's most prominent heroes also, in some ways, drive a striking resemblance to the trope Aragorn and Arren inhabit. Daenerys and Jon, being descendants of the Targaryen house, both seem to be on a similar trajectory in their stories, proving their worth as people and as leaders, in a way which makes it easy to root for them and think they would make a relatively good king or queen. Jon is not yet aware of his heritage, yet he rises quickly through the ranks among the Night's Watch, propelled by his compassion, his leadership, and by his lordly Stark blood. With Dany, her role as the lost Targaryen scion, "heir to the Iron Throne", who is planning her return as queen, becomes a key part of her identity and story from the end of *Thrones*. As Kelly Ann Frederick puts it, Daenerys is "myth made real" – Her rebirth as Mother of Dragons in the funeral pyre of her love marks her as such, marks her as somebody special. As for her ancestors, whose rule of Westeros was made possible and justified by their control of dragons, Dany's dragons is proof that she is not only of Targaryen heritage, but is one of the mythic Targaryen dragon lords – of the same stuff as Aegon the Conqueror and his sisters. She also, like Jon, has a somewhat of a moral compass, choosing for her villain the institution of slavery. However, the irony is that while Dany speaks of wanting to break the wheel; stop the suffering of ordinary people who are abused and enslaved by the powerful, to do so she means to take control of the wheel, to become the Queen – that most powerful person of all. Dany thus buys wholeheartedly into the idea of the mythic monarch, who is just and good, and whose return to power will mark the return to decency and harmony.

Part of the peculiarity of Aragorn and Arren is that the characters do not really have personal motivations for fighting for the throne – it is not their dream or their deepest desire, but seemingly is only a reward and a responsibility they are led to take on after doing the heroic, good deeds they would be doing in any case. They are too good to really want the throne, too unselfish to demand it and fight for it, yet receive it anyhow. Dany is different – her desire for and entitlement to the throne is one she affirms every time she is introduced with her many titles, and her desire is a deeply personal one. Winning Westeros represents for her a return home – a place like the house with the red door where she can feel safe, as well as

[89] Young, Helen. *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*. 65

an affirmation of her own worth and the thing which will make it all worth it - all her suffering and the deaths of her brothers and of Drogo and her unborn son.

Although *Song* is as yet unfinished, I think we can make an educated guess that in all likelihood, even though they seem like obvious contenders for the throne neither Dany nor Jon will fulfill their potential as the mythic prince(ss) that was promised. While Martin has increasingly marked the differences between his writing and the HBO adaption's ending[90], his response at the end of GOT was that the end would be both much the same and also not[91]. Fans and pop critics thus speculate that major plot points will likely shake out the same, and that from that we can speculate that neither Dany nor Jon are likely to end up on the iron throne by the end of *Song.* Martin has already started to subvert the idea of Dany and Jon as morally unimpeachable rulers; Dany's freeing of the enslaved in Yunkai left the city in tatters after her leaving, and her queendom of Mereen is rife with poverty and strife after she takes over, while Jon hangs a bunch of his men as traitors and is then couped and (attempted) assassinated. Clearly, the politics of ruling is a lot more complicated and less mythologized, unlikely to lead to the success of a "one true king" here than in Tolkien or Le Guin – Martin is playing with the tropes, challenging and subverting them in their expression.

N. K. Jemisin begins her first installment of the *Inheritance* saga, focusing on the fight for the Arameri throne between Yeine and her cousins Scimina and Relad, and in so doing, like Martin, focuses the tale on a group of people who have largely been awarded power on the basis of their bloodline. Even Yeine, though her election as ennu of the Darre was not entirely certain, was helped by being daughter of the previous ennu, her father. The importance of blood is further impressed through the tattoos the Arameri wear, the "blood sigils" denoting to which degree they are considered Arameri, and also denoting which rank they should hold within the hierarchy of the Arameri order and giving them power over and protection from the Enefadeh. Yet, the hierarchy allows for some lenience, as Viraine, a distant relation of Yeine was accepted into the Central Family, while Kinneth was disinherited and had her sigil burned away. As Yeine notes, in her comparison of the Arameri stronghold to the altar rose, the Arameri, being freakish about maintaining their bloodline, are therefore largely inbred and unnatural[92]. Yeine does not desire the throne, however, for her it is a mere fight for survival and her story is far more focused on her search for her mother's killer and

[90] Martin, George R. R. "A Winter Garden". https://georgerrmartin.com/notablog/2022/07/08/a-winter-garden/.
[91] Martin, George R. R. "An Ending". https://georgerrmartin.com/notablog/2019/05/20/an-ending/.
[92] Jemisin, N. K. «I: Grandfather» in *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*. 8-9

on her growing relationship with Nahadoth. Yeine does not end up on the Arameri throne, but takes on the mantle as Enefa's reincarnation, and her first act is one that cripples the Arameri's power, growing the giant tree which spears, envelops and roots Sky, the Arameri's floating palace, thus taking away their god like power of omnipresence and omniscience. Further, this severs the Arameri's visual connection to the gods, who are their weapon and justification for their power. The Arameri are, if not pulled down, then bound to the ground, to the world of ordinary humans. The struggle for the throne which emperor Dekarta begins ends up more of a framing device for the greater story of murder mystery, family drama, and struggle for liberation. Yeine becomes both more and less powerful than an empress – goddess to all and master to none.

In the next installations, the focus shifts away from the Arameri – while they are still part of the world and the stories, they are sidelined rather than front and center. In *Broken Kingdom*, the protagonist is the generously poor, blind artist Oree Shoth, and in the *Kingdom of Gods* she choses Sieh, the oldest godling. In *Kingdom*, Jemisin again subverts the idea of the prince(ss) vying for and winning their deserved throne with the Arameri siblings, Dekarta and Shahar, a parallel to the siblings in the first novel, except that these ones love one another. Instead of either of them winning the contest and the throne – necessarily a solitary role putting one sibling above the other, they are turned into gods; the Yeine and Itempas to Sieh's Nahadoth. Thus, those of Jemisin's characters who are royals tend to lose their institutional power and gain a greater, more personal kind of power in form of the power of gods, rejecting their role as head of a monarchic authoritarian power structure and revealing the hollowness and artificial solitude of that power.

In *Broken Earth*, such blue-blooded characters do not even really enter the picture, and the main character Damaya/Syen/Essun is at turns a slave, a weapon, and a refugee searching for her stolen daughter. At the very beginning of *The Fifth Season*, as the narrator introduces us to Yumenes, a pyramid is described holding a geodesic sphere precariously balanced atop its peak; the building where the leaders and the Emperor lives. But we are immediately told that these people do not matter – and we turn to Alabaster, he who *does* matter, who raises the entirety of Yumenes, its emperor, leaders and all its symbols of power. In this way, Jemisin makes her intent clear to subvert the expectation that this story will be one concerned with the likes of emperors. In the brief moment we see the emperor, he is a pathetic picture, an ornamental thing full of "genteel despair", worrying if those leaders he obeys will not soon replace him with his own daughter. This image of a ruler is in some ways

drastically different from the portrayal of Dekarta in *Hundred Thousand*, with his authoritarian, brutal power, yet in some ways it is similar – Dekarta too is portrayed as a bit pathetic, having sacrificed his own wife in the process of gaining his power, and the Enefadeh imply that Yeine, lacking the blood sigil and set apart from the Arameri of Sky, is freer than the likes of Dekarta. While emperor of Yumenes' power is an illusion, the power of the emperor of the Arameri is a curse. Neither image is romantic. Paralleling the brief glimpse of the emperor at the beginning of the trilogy, at its end we get a short glimpse of the president of Syl Anagist, but she remains nameless. She and the emperor are ultimately unimportant – pawns of a system of belief and custom much greater and stronger than their mere individual selves.

Yet there is also an element of hereditary power throughout all of the Stillness, which was all ruled by Sanzed empire until the fall of Yumenes. People are divided into castes which impact their perceived disposability during a season, and these castes are hereditary shaping their "use name". Damaya reflects bitterly upon the unfairness of her being named Damaya Strongback while her brother is Chaga Resistant, one seen as absolutely disposable while the other is invaluable. As readers, the irony of this arbitrary system is obvious – if Chaga is "resistant" to something, then likely his sister is too, since they have both gained 50% of their genetic makeup from either parent. A person can be "adopted" into another caste, as Lerna is or fake their way in as Essun does both of them being assigned Strongback but ending up in Resistant in Tirimo. There is also a caste called "leadership" who are supposed to rule the comms, yet the leaders we do meet are generally not very effectual and they are portrayed as duplicitous and vicious in myth. Tonkee, being a "Yumenescene leader" is the closest we get to the blue bloods of Yumenes, and she was disinherited and exiled for not fitting into the leadership caste and for not conforming to her assigned gender. In this way, Jemisin also expresses the absurdity of the idea of inheriting a role as leader, or inheriting any social role. The comm leaders we meet who are portrayed in a positive light are neither of them "leaders" - Ykka would be a strongback, if she did not take "rogga" as her use name, and Innon is a Resistant and, like Ykka, an orogene. Their strength lies in their drive, charisma, savvy politicking and their orogenic strength.

2.2 Representations of Race

As discussed, the idea of the inherent superiority of a line of kings already implies a racial logic and feeds on and into racial hierarchies. Yet the presence of racial hierarchy in a story is not necessarily worthy of critique, even in fantasy fiction where such hierarchies could potentially not exist, as fiction can provide a great tool for understanding, challenging and picking apart racial logics. However, in stories like Tolkien's, racial logics and racial hierarchy are instead uncritically reproduced and naturalized. It is thus somewhat unsurprising that critic Kathy Lavezzo writes many on the far right has embraced Tolkien[93], such as neo-Nazi website Stormfront, and Italy's fascist party who hosted Campi Hobbit festivals for children, where among others, Giorgia Meloni, one of Italy's prominent current ultra-nationalist politicians was introduced to Tolkien and fantasy[94].

While Tolkien himself was critical of Nazism and positioned himself against antisemitism and the types of people running Campi Hobbit[95], Lavezzo observes that he was also not immune the power of white supremacy. In an anecdote told by Stuart Hall, Lavezzo recognizes a professor who could only be Tolkien discouraging Hall from pursuing medievalism, naming him mistaken in trying to apply contemporary methods of criticism to medieval literature[96]. Lavezzo means this shows a Tolkien who is deeply embedded in whiteness and white privilege, and she sees this reaction as a product of Tolkien's view of methodology as "inseparable from identity" since, within his scholarship, Tolkien posited a unique English identity, building on comparative philology and the idea that interpretation could yield up timeless cultural or racial characteristics; helping to define a national (or racial) identity[97]. Further, Lavazzo punctures Tolkien's "little Englander" nationalism using Hall, who pointed out that the colonial reality of England, and where its trademark tea, sugar and tobacco originated, exploded any idea of "singular and homogonous Englishness"[98]. And we can see how this idealized idea of England informed the Shire, with its hedgerows, green hills and fields, and endless tea and smoke breaks. This especially makes the invasion of the Shire in *The Scourging* by "squint-eyed" outsiders who are summarily expulsed, read to Lavezzo as

[93] Lavezzo, Kathy. "Whiteness, medievalism, immigration". 30
[94] Horowitz, Jason. "Hobbits and the Hard Right". https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/21/world/europe/giorgia-meloni-lord-of-the-rings.html.
[95] Fimi, Dimitra. "Revisiting Race in Tolkien's Legendarium". http://dimitrafimi.com/2018/12/02/revisiting-race-in-tolkiens-legendarium-constructing-cultures-and-ideologies-in-an-imaginary-world/.
[96] Lavezzo, Kathy. "Whiteness, medievalism, immigration". 31 + 44
[97] Lavezzo, Kathy. "Whiteness, medievalism, immigration". 36
[98] Lavezzo, Kathy. "Whiteness, medievalism, immigration". 44

an anti-immigration narrative to parallel news stories of the "wave" or "invasion" of immigration to Britain[99].

More evident is what Lavezzo names the "morally charged color binaries" of Tolkien's work[100]. If a somebody is dark skinned in Tolkien, they are not allowed to be a character in their own right, only part of a "savage horde", as Saladin Ahmed points out[101]. The people invading the shire are as mentioned "Squint-eyed" and "sallow" skinned, conjuring up typical Asiatic traits while the Easterlings are subjects of Sauron working in his favor, sometimes described more compassionately as misguided and unfortunate, sometimes in deeply racialized terms. Their deaths are sometimes portrayed as tragic yet necessary, as we see in the scene Dimitra Fimi points out, where Sam looks down upon the face of one of the felled Haradrim and wonders who he was and where he came from, if he was really evil at heart[102]. Yet, the choice to make the human subjects of Sauron non-white, and the racialized portrayals of the Easterlings, seem a product of an orientalist thinking which privileges west over east and sees eastern people as strange and incomprehensible.

Then, of course, there are the orcs. Orcs are not humans, nor part of a humanized fantasy race like the elves, instead they are deemed intrinsically evil, one of Morgoth's unnatural creations, a "corruption" of the elves. This idea orcs as "corruptions" evokes racial fears of degeneration the likes of those which fueled nazi Germany. Meanwhile, their appearance is built on racial caricature, Tolkien himself likening them to "the least lovely Mongol-type" and their descriptions of being black-skinned and red-tongued calling forth associations to both demonic imagery and anti-Black caricatures[103] [104]. According to Dimitra Fimi, the orcs seem to have troubled Tolkien somewhat, and he first thought of making them mere automatons, humanlike in appearance, but not individuals with minds and thoughts, yet the orcs we see in *Rings* are ones which are very much people, who fight and schism among themselves, who have their own internal order of clans, and who are unsatisfied with their lot[105]. Yet, they all must die, either swallowed up by the earth when Mordor falls, or to be

[99] Lavezzo, Kathy. "Whiteness, medievalism, immigration". 42-43
[100] Lavezzo, Kathy. "Whiteness, medievalism, immigration". 33
[101] Quoted in Lavezzo, Kathy. "Whiteness, medievalism, immigration". 33
[102] Fimi, Dimitra. "Revisiting Race in Tolkien's Legendarium". http://dimitrafimi.com/2018/12/02/revisiting-race-in-tolkiens-legendarium-constructing-cultures-and-ideologies-in-an-imaginary-world/
[103] Tolkien et al. "210 From a letter to Forrest J. Ackerman", in *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*. 398-399
[104] Young, Helen. "*Race and Popular Fantasy Literature"*. 23
[105] Fimi, Dimitra. "Was Tolkien Really Racist?". http://theconversation.com/was-tolkien-really-racist-108227.

hunted down by Aragorn and Eömer in the aftermath. Anything less than a genocide is insufficient when it comes to the orcs. As N. K. Jemisin puts it:

> "Orcs are human beings who can be slaughtered without conscience or apology. […] Creatures that look like people, but aren't really. Kinda-sorta-people, who aren't worthy of even the most basic moral considerations, like the right to exist. Only way to deal with them is to control them utterly a la slavery, or wipe them all out."[106]

While Tolkien was not the first person to create such a race – George MacDonald's goblins gets that award[107], he was definitely the one to popularize it such that it became a staple of fantasy writing to the point that somebody would think "just add orcs" to be sane writing advice aimed at boosting a fantasy book's appeal. We see them cropping up as Robert Jordan's "trollocks", as well as in D&D, Skyrim and many other fantasy worlds[108].

In his letters, Tolkien implies that he wanted the orcs to represent a certain soldierly mindset which embraced war and unquestioningly followed orders[109] [110], yet his characterization of the orcs, and of his human enemies, builds so heavily on the same light/dark, white/black, west/east and good/evil binaries which have long been used to uphold war against, as well as enslavement and exploitation of, non-white people across the globe that it actively works against the anti-war, anti-imperialist and anti-industrialization messaging. Thus, while for many readers the whiteness and racial logics of Middle-Earth is only an unfortunate product of Tolkien's personal and cultural limitations which undermines his work in being so tied to the exact colonialist and capitalist world that Tolkien sought to create an escape from, for others those same things remain a major part of his writing's appeal.

Instead of orcs, Martin has the Others, a pale creature of ice and death, who appears during long nights. He thus avoids racialized stereotypes and largely avoids humanizing them all together. All living creatures flee them, making them more of an anthropomorphized image of death than anything else, unlike the definitely humanized giants and Singers. The

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[106] Jemisin, N. K. " The Unbearable Baggage of Orcing". https://nkjemisin.com/2013/02/from-the-mailbag-the-unbearable-baggage-of-orcing/.
[107] Fimi, Dimitra. "Was Tolkien Really Racist?". http://theconversation.com/was-tolkien-really-racist-108227.
[108] Young, Helen. "Orcs and Otherness", in *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness*.
[109] Tolkien et al. "71 To Christopher Tolkien (airgraph), in *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*. 125
[110] Tolkien et al. "66 From a letter to Christopher Tolkien, in *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*. 118

Others are one of the main issues facing the people of Martin's world, yet interestingly, it seems the threat is mostly felt in Westeros so far, and given our Westerosi cast will most likely be fought and defeated by Westerosi people. This emphasizes the somewhat lopsided picture of Martin's world. Like Tolkien, Martin overwhelmingly choses to focus his story on white protagonists, living on a continent largely inhabited by white people, but unlike Tolkien's Easterlings his eastern continent of Essos is not subsumed under the will of a "dark lord", but is at least as diverse as his Westeros. Yet, as Shiloh Carrol points out the world Essos is seen entirely through the eyes of white, Westerosi characters – primarily Daenerys, and slides into orientalism[111]. Thus, Essos might exude an even stronger feeling of orientalism in *Song* than in *Rings*, as it plays on the typical orientalist narrative of the white westerner travelling through a strange eastern space full of strange eastern people. This is especially present in the portrayal of the Dothraki, the copper-skinned nomadic warrior people, who are overly sexual and violent in comparison to Westerosi or even Free Cities' custom[112]. Yet, importantly, Khal Drogo, who as the most powerful Khal there ever was epitomizes the culture, comes favorably out of a comparison with Dany's abusive brother Viserys, and there are of course many Westerosi men much who act as badly or worse than Drogo.

The strange thing in making Dany the locus for an orientalist tale is that Daenerys is in many ways more Essosi than Westerosi herself – she was born on Dragonstone, but grew up in Essos, moving from place to place with her brother. Her experience in some ways mirror a refugee experience, fleeing from her homeland on the pain of death. She has never set foot in Westeros, and only knows it through tales from her brother, from Jorah Mormont or Barristan Selmy. But she identifies not only as Westerosi but as a symbol of Westeros, thinking herself their rightful queen. Her fight against slavery then becomes an expression of her Westerosi identity because slavery is a thing outlawed in Westeros. This idea of Westeros as anti-slavery while Essos is pro-slavery seems problematic in and of itself, smacking of the idea of the moral superiority of the white west, yet interestingly the norm of slavery seems to have been most firmly established by old Valyria, the nation of largely pale skinned, pale haired folk who Daenerys is descendant to. Still, the choice to give the power of slavery to Essos, seems one tailored to make white readers more comfortable while still allowing the story to dwell on the grisly spectacle of slavery.

[111] Carrol, Shiloh. «Postcolonialism, Slavery, and the Great White Hope". 109 + 126
[112] Carrol, Shiloh. «Postcolonialism, Slavery, and the Great White Hope. 119-120

As Carrol and many others have noted, Dany fits into the role of a "white savior", taking up the "white man's burden", as she uses the presence of slavery as a noble pretext for her invasion of Slaver's Bay[113]. Carrol points out the scene where the freed people of Yunkai call Dany mother as one playing into this colonialist trope. In infantilizing them while lifting Dany up as maternal figure, the scene mirrors the paternalistic sentiment of Rudyard Kipling's infamous poem. Yet, Yunkai falls to ruin after she leaves, the previously enslaved facing fates of suffering and death worse than those they did under slavery. In response, Dany keeps Mereen after taking it, turning her back on her destiny in Westeros, because she wants to keep Mereen from falling into the same trap. Yet, she struggles to rule Mereen, with pressures both from without and within – the many city states who depend on slave economies are mobilizing against her, and the Sons of the Harpy, led by the great slave owning families of Mereen, are terrorizing the city and emphasizing Dany's foreignness even as the city sinks into poverty and disease.

Carroll believes the portrayal of enslaved people imply a view that "some people are not meant to be free or take care of themselves, that slavery is their "rightful" or "natural" place"[114], especially the fact that some of the freed people of Mereen want return to enslavement because their lives were better as highly esteemed slaves than as common people of Mereen. A more charitable reading is that Martin is highlighting the impossibility of embodying the role of the "white savior". Even with the best of intentions (and Dany's intentions are certainly more noble than that of those white men of Kipling's day, whose goal was always enslavement and extraction) you cannot come violently take over a foreign land to "fix" its internal issues without setting a whole chain of negative reactions into motion.

Dany does not understand Mereen, seeing it as a testing ground for herself as queen, and her myopic focus on slavery makes her miss the fact that without more equitable redistribution of resources, the freed people of Mereen come to be so poor that their freedom becomes *all* that they have, and thus almost worthless. Her folly in her endeavor to be a savior is also foreshadowed earlier, in the character of Mirri Maaz Duur who poisons Drogo and rejects Dany's understanding of herself as a savior, who nobly saved Mirri and the Lazarene women from rape – after all, the Lazarene still had their town and church burnt, their men killed, their wealth stolen and put toward the use of Dany's mission. Dany of course ends up

[113] Carrol, Shiloh. «Postcolonialism, Slavery, and the Great White Hope. 127-129
[114] Carrol, Shiloh. «Postcolonialism, Slavery, and the Great White Hope". 123-25

burning the woman alive and learning nothing. One could therefore say that Martin is trying to subvert the trope of the "white savior". However, as Carrol notes, the lack of agency of the enslaved and freed people within the narrative "exemplifies Naamen Gobert Tilahun's statement that in colonialist literature, the colonized people "are not allowed to participate in their own liberation.""[115] If Martin means to use the tropes of colonialist, orientalist literature with the intent of subverting them, he seems to be hampering his work by making the colonized largely subaltern.

As a counterpoint to all this whiteness and orientalism, there is Dorne, the southernmost house of Westeros, which is a breath of fresh air and just a downright joyful addition. The Martells' fight for vengeance for their murdered sister Elia Martell is tragic and compelling, the tragedy of the of lore-building and character drama in the series. First represented through Oberyn Martell and Ellaria Sand, there are elements of a somewhat orientalist gaze in how they are seen by the white characters of King's landing, brown and overly sexually liberal in comparison to the culture of Westeros at large. Yet, those same characteristics comes to make Dorne one of the most appealing spaces in Westeros, as it is one place where women can exhibit more sexual freedom and can inherit and become rulers on the same line as men, due to Dorne's origin in a marriage between the conqueror princess Nymeria of the Rhoyne in Essos and the prince of the Andal house Martell. However, Dorne while interesting and a pivotal part of many plot points, still remains a quite small part of *Song* overall.

Shiloh Carrol also points out that the continent of Westeros is in a state of postcolonialism, having experienced three waves of colonialism, and that the native people of the singers and the giants have all but retreated beyond the Wall in the north, their populations severely decimated. The singers echo romanticized ideas about the celts (and about native peoples in general) in their deep connectedness to nature, calling forth the idea of the noble savage, and the way that their existence and that of giants, wargs, and the others have been so thoroughly eradicated as to become mere myth, doubted by masters of learning and history like Maester Luwin, emphasizes the way that history is written by the winners, as even the First Men left "only runes"[116]. Carrol believes Martin both critiques the romanticization of the Singers, yet also perpetuates it through making them into a supernatural species.

[115] Carrol, Shiloh. «Postcolonialism, Slavery, and the Great White Hope". 110-118
[116] Carrol, Shiloh. «Postcolonialism, Slavery, and the Great White Hope". 110-118

Colonialization in general in Martin is depicted in a pretty neutral light, as something that just has and does happen, with the pain of this process being far in the past for most people. The greatest victims, those who couldn't assimilate, fled beyond the wall and their loss is erased or romanticized. Only in Daenerys' conquest of Slaver's Bay do we see colonialism in action, yet we see it through the eyes of the colonizer. Similarly, whiteness is the norm in the novels, as in Martin's own society, and people of color are generally seen through the eyes of white ones.

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Le Guin's *Earthsea*'s take on race is interesting because she is a white writer who early subverted the expectation of whiteness as norm through making her protagonist and the dominant culture of her novels non-white[117]. White people are few and far between in most of *Earthsea*, as the Archipelago where is filled with people with skin of different shades of brown, while the distant Kargad lands to the north are populated by the white Kargs. This decision was a pretty revolutionary step toward representation of people of color in fantasy, especially for a white woman, yet it felt natural to her. She was daughter to an anthropologist, grown up interested in Native American culture and knew that most people on planet Earth were in fact not white. It was a very intentional choice, yet she often experienced that people often wanted to erase the brownness of Ged and *Earthsea*, fans misreading him as white, publishing companies choosing covers picturing a pale-skinned Ged, or the creators of a tv-adaption whitewashing the characters[118] [119]. However, there are some ways in which this decision seems to retain some of the orientalist framing. The Kargad lands are to the north are a white warrior people. There is a suggestion of an inspiration in European culture, and with their expansionist, colonialist tendency to go raiding, burning, pillaging and slaving, they evoke ideas of both Vikings and the British empire, yet in *Tombs* they are tied to the desert, a more middle eastern, oriental topos, and are presented as being a culture afraid of writing, with a strong religious zeal in comparison to the largely atheistic Archipelago.

While "barbarian" is a term used for both the Archipelagans and the Kargs by the other, it is definitely the Kargs who fit more neatly into the popular image of barbarism, which can be uncomfortable, especially as in *The Other Wind*, the Kargish princess is used to

[117] Young, Helen. "*Race and Popular Fantasy Literature"*. 40
[118] Young, Helen. "*Race and Popular Fantasy Literature"*. 40 + 53
[119] Guin, Ursula K. Le. "A Whitewashed Earthsea". https://slate.com/culture/2004/12/ursula-k-le-guin-on-the-tv-earthsea.html.

the norm of being completely veiled, much as Muslim women so in some Islamic countries. Yet, there is no motion by any character toward the idea that Kargish culture must be vanquished or civilized by the Hardic people, and Kargish characters like Tenar, the princess, the new Master Patterner in *The Other Wind*, are fully humanized, interesting additions to *Earthsea*. Additionally, while in *Tombs*, it seemed Tenar must give up all her Kargish identity and culture as poisonous humbug in order to embrace freedom, in *The Other Wind*, her Kargish cultural knowledge comes into good use, as it is the Kargish idea of reincarnation, rather than the Hardic one of the eternal afterlife, which is revealed to be the original, natural truth of death. Thus, while *Earthsea* can be said to, instead of erasing the orientalist narrative, to be turning it on its head, making the white Kargs into an orientalized other, it is largely emptying this orientalism of its violence and of its potential of playing into real world orientalist thinking and neocolonialism.

As Helen Young notes in her analysis of N. K. Jemisin's *Inheritance* saga, the series is one which, instead of focuses on the fall of an empire[120]. Race in *Inheritance*: In *Inheritance* the white skinned Arameri empire which rules over all other nations evokes associations to modern day USA, with its unimaginable monopoly on power, epitomized in their panoptic, drone like power of their flying fortress of Sky and in the living nuclear missiles which are the Enefadeh. They reek of neoimperialism, working their influence through a pretense of soft power, with the threat of violence ever lurking beneath the surface. They will enact slavery, but not name it so, because the Arameri supposedly are above slavery. Their whiteness only enhances these associations, and we see how their white features are held up as ideal, Yeine's dark skin and hair being cast as ugly, and her people as "barbarians" and "darklings", a racially charged term evoking both the fantasy trope of orcs and real-world racial slurs.

Interestingly, Yeine seems to have bought into this idea herself, describing her people as having become less barbaric after the Arameri conquest, after the Bright – the great crackdown on polytheism. Their "barbarism" is tied to their resistance to monotheism, and in the case of Darr, their matriarchal society. This mirrors, as Young points out, the way that racial hierarchy was used to justify colonialism in our world[121], and also how the spreading of Christianity as the "one true faith" was used in the same way. Additionally, Young notes how

[120] Young, Helen. "*Race and Popular Fantasy Literature"*. 129-135
[121] Young, Helen. "*Race and Popular Fantasy Literature"*. 131+132

the language of service, epitomized in the line "All descendants of Shahar Arameri must serve" mirrors the "white man's burden" narrative, which was so tied to religion. [122]

Yeine, having grown up a monotheist, thus sees her own culture's past as somehow faulty, yet through the novel she comes to see that this conception is built on lies. Neither monotheism nor the Arameri are morally superior – the god of order and light, Itempas, who so mirrors Yaweh, jealously murdered and enslaved his loved ones, and the Arameri's brutality against those subjects who defy them and against one another, leaves the "barbarian" Yeine horrified. Additionally, all their power is based on a moment of "devotion" which was more like luck and opportunism – on being descendants of the woman Shahar who Itempas fell in love with and who stoked his hurt and jealously to violence. Yet, even after the Enefadeh are freed, Itempas' and the Arameris' source of power is diminished, the stories of their might, of their right to power still circulates, "echoing the ongoing power of racist ideologies in contemporary society, decades after the end of official colonial rule."[123]

The slow collapse of the Arameri's power continues through the next two books, and in *Kingdom of Gods*, the last Arameri ruler announces that she will leave her post, laying her power in the hands of a diverse group of organizations, representing different interests. This is in Young's words, "strikingly unconventional", since Fantasy conventions tend toward singular rulers – the monarch, the emperor[124]. Further Young writes that Jemisin's novels "work against singularity of narrative and being." allowing for a diversity of opportunities and rejecting the binary choice between order and chaos, represented by the Arameri's authoritarian control and the vague image of lawless violence.

Broken Earth also deals with themes of enslavement and empire. Even as we see the Sanzed empire fall in the first scene of *Fifth Season*, we see the racial oppression they perpetrate through the eyes of Damaya and Syen, Essun's younger selves, and we see that of Syl Anagist through Hoa's eyes. In the world of the Stillness there are three races as Jemisin reckons it: the humans, the orogenes and the stone eaters[125]. All were once one, equally considered humans, yet the Syl Anagistine empire swallowed up other nations one by one, until they were all there was. One of those they conquered, the Niess, though easily defeated, grew to become a feared enemy in the eyes of Syl Anagist, because they could create

[122] Young, Helen. "*Race and Popular Fantasy Literature"*. 133
[123] Young, Helen. "*Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*. 131
[124] Young, Helen. "*Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*. 134
[125] Jemisin, N. K. 'Creating Races'

technology which could compete with Syl Anagist. They were also phenotypically distinct, with white skin and broad foreheads and noses, and they were stereotyped as having a greater biological propensity for magic than other humans. After their defeat, they existed in diaspora within Syl Anagist, and grew increasingly hated, until they were entirely wiped out. As critic Kim Wickham notes, the story of Syl Anagist "emphazises the way differences are used to other entire peoples"[126]. The creation of the tuners, artificially created to resemble the idea of the Niess, also emphasizes the utility of racial caricature. The tuners are not truly like the Niess as they were, but rather like the caricature of the Niess that the Syl Anagistine used to justify their genocide. And it highlights the way in which the racialized enemy becomes a necessary part of the operation of Syl Anagist and their vision – a tool to help them extract ever more out of the earth, in a way which mirrors the way racial stereotypes of Black Americans justified their enslavement and is still justifying the exploitation of poor racialized people as cheap labor (or even slave labor).

As Wickham points out, Jemisin wrote *Broken Earth* in a time where the hope for change had been dashed with the election of Obama changing disappointingly little – a time of rampant police violence and seeing the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement[127]. Jemisin's work builds on both current oppression and the slavery of the past in its description of the enslavement and exploitation of the tuners and of orogenes in *Broken Earth*. Orogene are a product of a tuner reproducing with a normal human, their orogene qualities no longer tied to phenotype. Orogenes are as diverse in appearance as are the human peoples of the Stillness. Orogeny is genetic, with Alabaster being a product of the breeding of enslaved Orogene and Essun's three children all born orogenes, yet the trait can also go unexpressed through generations before popping up again, such that Essun's parents were entirely surprised to discover her orogeny, and her mother, filled with racial hatred, is eager to be rid of her.

Orogene children who are discovered are taken to Yumenes and the compound of the Fulcrum – a combination of trade school, prison, and barracks. They lose their caste and their birth name, their personal identity being subsumed by their new racialized identity as *other*. The stone-based names they are given as replacements, further dehumanizing them, communicating that they are themselves like inanimate rock[128]. Thus, Wickham writes,

[126] Wickham, Kim. "Identity, Memory, Slavery". 405
[127] Wickham, Kim. "Identity, Memory, Slavery". 394-395
[128] Wickham, Kim. "Identity, Memory, Slavery". 401

through the Fulcrum, Yumenes "seeks to monopolize both physical and symbolic force": the power of defining, of assigning identity and roles, as well as the power to enslave, punish, rape, murder. In becoming Syenite, she conforms, buying into the promise that by climbing the ladder within the system she will eventually gain some autonomy, (her goal being to eventually to take the place of her boss and overseer – the same one who pushes her toward Alabaster for the purpose of breeding a new orogene), rather than trying to dismantle the system itself. Thus, through the orogene, the tuners and the Niess, Jemisin writes of the impossibility of an existence within such a system – torn between the need to conform at pain of death, and the rage at the inequity and desire for change.

In the characters of Alabaster, as well as in Hoa and Nassun and the earth itself, all of whom want at some point to destroy the world, she also subverts the idea of the evil enemy, the "dark lord" type of character who is essentially evil. In an interview, Jemisin commented on the moral binarism of much western fantasy writing:

> "The Dark Lord is really bad, we know this. Because he's dark. Well, did you do something to him? Doesn't matter, he's dark. That's why he's bad and that's why you've got to go kill him. That kind of thinking I inherently do not trust."[129]

In many other stories Alabaster, the dark-skinned destroyer of the great city of Yumenes and the Sanzed empire who broke the continent in half, would be the villain, but not in this story. He's treated with sympathy, the story of his enslaved life unfolding like the answer to a mystery, his motive slowly uncovered. He is not all evil, nor is our hero Essun all good. Essun does her fair share of damage, at one point killing an entire city worth of people to save her own community. Yet they are both still allowed to be heroic, as well as worthy of understanding and love.

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From Tolkien's romanticization of monarchy and hereditary hierarchy as expressed through Aragorn's destined kingship in *Rings* and repeated in Le Guin's *Earthsea* in Arren, we see a movement toward a more realistic and even dystopian depiction of monarchy and

[129] Miller, Laura. «If Tolkien were Black"

other hereditary positions of power in Martin's *Song* and Jemisin's *Inheritance*, where illegitimacy and abuse of power by emperors, kings, queens, lords and ladies is emphasized. Likewise, in *The Broken Earth* Jemisin subverts even the idea of focusing on such people in her opening scene, instead choosing a marginalized, formerly enslaved woman for her protagonist, and those comm leaders we meet who are portrayed favorably, in Ykka and Innon, seem to be outliers, having gotten to their position through personal charisma and ability, rather than as a result of being of "leadership" caste. Martin and Jemisin move away from a romantic, mythic view of monarchy and autocracy, emphasizing the injustice of such systems and their brutality.

Furthermore, in Tolkien, the racial logic which elevated Aragorn to the throne through the idea that he and his people was innately more suited to rule, also explained the evil of the non-white people of middle earth and of the corrupted, degenerate, dehumanized orcs, justifying their indiscriminate killing. Yet, in later texts there's a movement away from these elements in: Martin creates a world inhabited by a multitude of non-white people who are not simply "on the side of evil" as in Tolkien, yet he maintains the whiteness as norm through his selection of characters and the orientalist lens through which he depicts Essos, wrestling with the "white savior" trope, yet still depicting the conqueror Dany in a positive light. Le Guin and Jemisin instead entirely subvert the trope of whiteness as norm by creating worlds inhabited by non-white people, focusing on people of color as protagonists.

Le Guin largely inverts the structure of Tolkien's world, by making the dominant society that of the brown Hardic people, while the white Kargs are the foreign barbarians, yet also avoiding making Kargad the enemy or in service of "the enemy", thus she avoids even the inversion of the racialized moral binary of Tolkien. Jemisin also choses for her protagonists people of color, but in addition engages more fully in a discourse about race, empire and colonialism in both her fantasy series. In the white Arameri empire of *Inheritance* she creates a story of enforced "order" and white supremacy and its necessary downfall, while in *The Broken Earth* she focuses two empires led by brown-skinned people, who despite their differing circumstances, both focus on strict hierarchy and perpetuate the exploitation, enslavement and attempted genocide of different races (and of the earth itself), which ends up dooming all people to continued suffering.

We see then, how the reliance on fantasy staples such as the king and the princess, can enhance a racial logic, and how the idea of an inherently evil enemy can lend itself to

racism. Yet there is also the question of what past it is that one is inspired by. As Jemisin noted:

> ""The genre can go many, many more places than it has gone," said Jemisin. "Fantasy's job is kind of to look back, just as science fiction's job is to look forward. But fantasy doesn't always just have to look back to one spot, or to one time. There's so much rich, fascinating, interesting, really cool history that we haven't touched in the genre: countries whose mythology is elaborate and fascinating, cultures whose stories we just haven't even tried to retell.""

The archetype of the high fantasy world is the Tolkienian medievalist one – based on an imagined European one, and even in Le Guin, who does not base her a typical European environment, but on an archipelagic one, with Ged's appearance supposedly akin to a Native American one, they are still interacting with the typical European feudal motifs of lords and kings and wizards, instead of, for instance chieftains and shamans. And of course, for many the Archetypical European past is often one where all people are imagined as white. This archetype is self-reinforcing as a genre perceived to be a white one largely attracts white writers and readers. We see, in for example the response to the recent series, *Rings of Power,* which is a loose Tolkien adaptation, a lot of people very angry about even the marginal inclusion of non-white people[130]; People who seem to want to see the whiteness of Middle Earth as essential to it, but conspicuously do not have a reaction to the dwarf women's lack of beards.

The imaginative writing of Jemisin, which takes inspiration from many places, and which does not tie itself to a specific vision of the past, nor even always the "past" at all, as we see in *Broken Earth*, is a breath of fresh air, and it is exciting to see High Fantasy drawing on more diverse historical inspirations, and to see more racially diverse writers getting published and getting popular and critical acknowledgement.

[130] Lavezzo, Kathy. "Multiculturalism in Middle-Earth" https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/multiculturalism-in-middle-earth-on-amazons-the-lord-of-the-rings-the-rings-of-power/.

3. Recreating Gender and Sexuality in Fantasy Worlds: Patriarchy and Beyond

As a feminist critic, one of the greatest frontiers I see for speculative fiction is the portrayal of gender, where speculative fiction has the potential to really explore and expand the ways we think about gender. It is interesting to imagine different gender systems, whether collapsed into one gender, expanded widely into three, five, ten genders, and these are not unknowns in science fiction, as in the aliens of Becky Chambers' *Wayfarers* series, or the futuristic uni-sexed humans of Le Guin's *Left hand of Darkness*. Yet in fantasy fiction, and especially that subgenre most focused on world building, High Fantasy, where the potential is the greatest to create what you will, we often see that the tendency bends toward recreating Western European binary gender system and the patriarchy and heteronormativity that comes with it. A tendency which began with the conservative J. R. R. Tolkien and was adopted by many of his predecessors within the genre of High Fantasy, including more progressive writers, such as Ursula K. Le Guin and George R. R. Martin.

While Le Guin is known for her feminist speculative fiction, especially *Left Hand*, yet in her most fantastical world of *Earthsea* she defaulted to reproducing a patriarchy, creating some dissonance in the original trilogy and seemingly within her own mind as well. When she returned to *Earthsea* 18 years after the presumed ending she sought to explore the topic of gender more fully. George R. R. Martin, on the other hand, was inspired by historical fiction, wanting to create a more "realistic", less "Disneyfied" medievalist fantasy, thus writing a more dystopian version of the world where a multitude of compelling female characters struggle to survive and thrive in a patriarchal world full of gendered oppression.

N. K. Jemisin chose an alternate, somewhat less traveled, route in her High Fantasy sagas - creating and focusing on gender egalitarian worlds more inclusive of gender-nonconformity and queerness, in her *Inheritance* series focusing on societies with a contemporary flavor of relative gender egalitarianism, contrasted by other societies, and in *Broken Earth* creating a world where gender is not much of a defining factor at all, nor seems to ever have been. Additionally, she nearly always chooses female main characters. I want to examine how this trend toward patriarchy came about, what effect the choice of either a patriarchal or a gender egalitarian setting has upon stories' potential to be envision different ways of being and living.

3.1 The Soft Patriarchy of Tolkien

The choice to create a patriarchal world can be a simple effect of the author's worldview bleeding into the text, as we see with Tolkien. J. R. R. Tolkien was a catholic and in many ways a conservative. Though he was not wholly uncritical of his times' ideas about women – understanding that since "Literature has been (until the modern novel) mainly a masculine business", men had been given ample opportunity to slander women, as with the claim that women were more prone to deceitfulness than men[131], he seems to have believed quite strongly and quite uncritically in traditional western gender roles. Writing at length to his son about the essential difference between men and women, and the evil of promiscuity and divorce, it is easy to see that Tolkien was no progressive on that topic[132]. For instance, he wrote that women needed to protect their honor and were "depraved" if they enjoy "conquests" and agreed that "women in trousers and often with hair both unkempt and uncovered" in church being an "affront" to good taste[133] [134].

Inevitably, Tolkien's catholic and rather patriarchal beliefs informed Middle Earth, but in many ways this becomes expressed as a *lack*, rather than a *presence* of women and sexual politics, at least on the surface. Women characters are few and far between in The Lord of the Rings, with all main characters being male, and as critics like Merritt have noted, the world is quite devoid of allusion to sexual desire[135]. Much more important to the story are the homosocial bonds between the male characters, between Frodo and Sam, Merry and Pippin, while the romances between the heterosexual pairings are quite surface-level. This can lead to a kind of strange situation, as a reader where the patriarchal nature of the world kind of escapes one's notice, especially when one adds the influence of Peter Jackson's adaption, which many readers (like me) encounter before they set out to read Tolkien's text. One thing Jackson did was strengthen Arwen's character, and generally give her and Eöwyn's arcs more weight, and thus it is at times interesting to compare how Tolkien and Jackson differ in portraying the women. Another reason why the patriarchal nature of Tolkien's Middle Earth can elude a reader, is that people, even women, queer and non-white people are so used to stories which center on white, straight, men. It does not necessarily feel strange that a band of nine characters includes no woman, before somebody points out to you how often it happens

[131] Tolkien et al. "Footnote 6" in *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*. 652
[132] Tolkien et al. «43 From a letter to Michael Tolkien» in *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*. 73-79
[133] Tolkien et al. «43 From a letter to Michael Tolkien» in *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*. 73
[134] Tolkien et al. «250 To Michael Tolkien» in *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*. 487-88
[135] Merritt, Stephanie. «No Sex Please, We're Hobbits"

in media in general. The patriarchal nature of Middle Earth is largely naturalized and invisible, subtextual rather than textual, until we meet Eöwyn whose outspokenness about how her female role limits her drags the patriarchal nature of her society into view.

In *Women among the Inklings,* Candice Frederick and Sam McBride write about the relation between Tolkien's lived life and his portrayal of women. Tolkien's experience with women were quite limited, and Frederick and McBride claim that Tolkien idealized his wife Edith and romanticized his own love for her as something entirely unusual. Famously, engraved on their tombstones are the names Beren and Luthien below their own. *Beren and Luthien* being one of Tolkien's earliest Middle-Earth stories, and a prototype or mirror to Arwen and Aragorn. Both are tales of mortal men falling in love with elven women and the men going off on great adventures before being reunited with their love.

Arwen's role in *The Lord of the Rings* mirrors Edith's in Tolkien's life – The relationship between Aragorn and Arwen is one based on long periods of distance. Distance makes the heart burn brighter in these stories, and the forced separation is necessitated to allow the *real plot* to happen – the men's adventures with and relationships to other men. For most of the story, Arwen is off-page somewhere, yearning diligently for Aragorn's return - not allowed to play a part in the greater story until she can be given as a prize at the end to the deserving hero. Arwen appears first in the second book in *Fellowship,* "The Ring Goes South", but we only see small glimpses of her before she disappears, and her only dialogue is in book six, in *Return of the King*, after she has married Aragorn. The relationship between Arwen and Aragorn is something relegated to the background, adding character to Aragorn and supplying him with motivation, but Arwen herself is hardly more than an image of a beautiful woman. While Peter Jackson's 2000's movie adaptions gave Arwen more scenes and a more active role, in the books, even the Aragorn-Arwen love story is mostly hinted at rather than shown until the end, and Arwen, as Tolkien portrays her, is largely just a "sexy lamp" character – she is a desired element, a motivator and a prize for Aragorn, but not really a character in her own right.

Goldberry, wife to Tom Bombadil is a similarly marginal character, yet in the small time she is present she gains a bit more characterization than Arwen. As critic Brenda Partridge shows, she is a combination of fertility/nature goddess and the womanly ideal of the

housewife[136]. On the one hand she is an incredibly powerful being, with power to control the weather and the river, but she uses these powers to do laundry, and spends her time doing various tasks of domestic service for Tom and the visiting hobbits, before retreating to her room as Tom starts to talk seriously to the hobbits. Like Tom is an image of the ideal man, living the ideal little life, so Goldberry is an image of ideal womanhood, beautiful as the river itself and joyous in her role as caretaker for men. Like Edith and Arwen, she had to give up her family in order to be with Tom. She is said to be the River-Woman's daughter, which implies she is a spirit born of the river winding through Tom's valley, but as we meet the two, it is Tom who is out on a trip to the river to get Goldberry water-lilies. The image of her, surrounded by water-lilies in bowls, is as sweet as it is tragic, with the implication being that she can no longer go see the water-lilies herself anymore. In marrying Tom, she became tied to the house and must give up on much of her nature-spirit life. Likewise, Arwen must give up her immortality and her chance to join her family as they sail away from Middle-Earth. This sacrifice of hers is played up in the Jackson adaptations, but in Tolkien's novels, like with Goldberry's longing for water-lilies, nothing much is made of it at all. We only learn of it after the fact, as she tells Frodo that she will give him her place on the ships to Valinor, short and matter-of fact[137]. In Arwen and Goldberry, we see a couple of marginal characters who are made into idealized images of women, existing to be complements to male characters and set dressing rather than as characters in their own right. Yet, there are also the characters of Galadriel and Eöwyn, who are portrayed as greatly powerful and pivotal to the success of the hobbits' quest. They are allowed a smidgeon more than just being a love interest.

Galadriel has often been called a Virgin Mary figure, with Tolkien responding positively when a friend and proof-reader of the manuscripts compared the character to Mary[138]. Galadriel is told to be incredibly beautiful, even in comparison to other elven women, as we see with Gimli's infatuation. Sceptical of elves in general, and of the powerful Lady of Lorien especially, he becomes immediately struck at her beauty. She introduced second to her husband, who is the one to speak to greet our party of adventurers, which frames her as a gender conforming, submitting to the rule of her husband. Yet it is her and not Celeborn who is undeniably more important. If Lothlorien is the heart of elvendom in Middle Earth, Galadriel is the heart of Lorien, the cause of its preservation, and the keeper of one of

[136] Partridge, Brenda. "No sex please - We're hobbits".
[137] Tolkien, J. R. R. "Book VI: VI Many Partings" in *The Return of the King*. 974-975
[138] Tolkien, J. R. R. et al. "142 To Robert Murray, SJ" in *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*. 257-58

the three elven rings. She can read minds, controls the Mirror of Galadriel, and is the one who called the White Council, where the wizards and the elder elves met. Celeborn on the other hand, is called "the wise", but she's wiser; When her husband must answer "I do not know", Galadriel has the answer and she once corrects him as "rash"[139] [140]. She calls him a great giver of gifts, but it is Galadriel who gives Frodo and Sam the cloaks and the phial of light which saves them in Mordor, and the seeds which Sam would plant to replenish the Shire after its scourging. Celeborn is such a strange character – he's got plenty of lines of dialogue, yet he seems to exist purely to act as Galadriel's husband, because of course she must have a husband. She might be one of the most powerful people in the world, but if she alone ruled, that would make her *too* powerful. Once Frodo offers Galadriel the Ring, we get a brief glimpse into a very different story, where Galadriel becomes a beautiful and terrible queen to vanquish Sauron, and it is notable that the story not only demands she refuse power, but that Frodo winning and destroying the ring means her power and the power of all her people must diminish. She, more than any other elf, is the image and heart of elvendom on earth, but for evil to be vanquished elvendom must be doomed to a slow death. And as the feminine elven power of Galadriel disappears from the world, the masculine power of Aragorn as king of men appears to replace it.

In Eöwyn's arc many readers see a proto-feminist figure since it is here that we see a woman being constricted by her gender and who rebels against those constrictions, in speaking her mind and in choosing to disguise herself and go to war beside her brother and uncle despite their orders for her to stay home. Eöwyn, even more than Galadriel is a woman who holds a crucial position within the plot in that she, with the aid of Merry, is the one to kill the Witch King, greatest of the Nazgul. Yet, she is also characterized as pale and sickly, right from the start until the moment she agrees to marry Faramir, and critics like Craig argue, supported by the evolution of Eöwyn from draft to text, that Eöwyn's marriage is a way of healing her from her relatively queer existence as a single, crossdressing woman warrior, with the only alternative end for her being death[141]. While in the Jackson film adaptions, she gets to say goodbye to her uncle before he dies and have him smile in approval, in the novels is Merry who hears Theoden's last words, and the man dies thinking she is still safe at home. The Theoden of the novels probably could not be conceived of reacting well to seeing his

[139] Tolkien, J. R. R. "Book VI: VI Many Partings" in *The Return of the King*. 981
[140] Tolkien, J. R. R. "Book II: VII The Mirror of Galadriel", in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. 356
[141] Craig, David. "Queer Lodgings". 23

niece there, even learning of her heroism, as evidenced by how Eöwyn's brother reacts more viciously to her presence on the battlefield than to the death of Theoden.

Another change made in the film adaptations is that Merry knows that Dernhelm is Eöwyn from the very start, whereas in the novels Merry only realizes this when Eöwyn removes her helm before fighting the Nazgûl. Jackson's change here impacts Merry's character, implying he Eöwyn's co-conspirator, while that same sequence in the novels, might have been unthinkable because Tolkien would likely feel more strongly Merry's duty to report Eöwyn's presence to his lord Theoden than his duty to support her. Merry, upon learning Dernhelm is her, looks upon Eöwyn's feelings of hopelessness with pity, much like Faramir or Aragorn, and one wonders why it is only Eöwyn who is characterized as pitiful for her lack of joy and hope. It is a time of war, and a war against a nearly unstoppable force, after all, a time where hopelessness is natural, yet Eöwyn feeling such things is used to show how her womanly nature makes her unsuited to the role of the warrior. While Faramir does not himself ask Eöwyn to give up her role as a shieldmaiden, on the contrary admitting to her achievements, she does relinquish that role in the same breath as she agrees to be with him. One could see this as a person who only wanted to defend her loved ones laying down her weapons now that there is no battle to fight, as embracing peace after war. But only she makes any such proclamation of giving up, because it is only for her that giving up her weapons is the "right", honorable, gender conforming choice. For the men it would be precisely the opposite.

Another aspect of Tolkien's writing is how focused on homosocial relationships it is. This is not particularly uncommon in adventure/action media, since these stories have historically been made by and for men who think the only woman you need is the hero's love interest. Yet, critics have noted that *Rings* especially gets singled out as feeling kind of queer – especially the relationship between Frodo and Sam. Critic Daniel Craig argues that the all-male nature of the fellowship facilitates somewhat ambiguously gendered personalities in the men of the fellowship in that it makes it necessary that male characters like Merry and Sam take on caring work which would more ordinarily be performed by women (just as men often had to in Tolkien's war time experiences), and Gandalf and Aragorn take on a caring, parental role over the hobbits.[142] While Tolkien tried to reduce Sam and Frodo's relationship to simply that of inferior to the superior, Craig argues that Sam's love for Frodo, his protectiveness and

[142] Craig, David. "Queer Lodgings"

jealousy, is a central driver of the plot. Additionally, the fact that Sam finally joins Frodo in The Undying Lands after his wife Rosie's death rather than die and be united with her, shows that the love between these two is prioritized. Indeed the homosocial bond is privileged also in the relationships of Gimli and Legolas, who sail into the west together, and with Merry and Pippin who retire to Gondor and are buried next to one another (Aragorn eventually joining them) – with only Pippin ever noted to have married[143].

The story of Frodo and Sam's trek through Mordor is intensely emotionally turbulent, with Frodo's rejection of Sam on the steps of Cirith Ungol being one of the low points of the entire saga, and Sam's rescue of Frodo one of its absolute highs. With the absence of women from the story, where Sam's love interest is extremely flimsy even as female character's go, and the desexed nature of Tolkien's writing of *Rings* in general[144], the relationship becomes even more charged, in a relative sense. The women of *Rings* tend to be ethereally beautiful, but their bodies are vaguely described and largely untouchable. They are more like goddesses than people, especially to the hobbits. Critic Cathrine Stimpson sees the spider Shelob as a feminine caricature, because she is the one female character described in the most erotic, bodily terms, though they be abject, and that her defeat by Sam is a victory over the autonomous feminine[145]. But this absence of feminine, *human* embodiment then contributes to the fact that, as critic Jes Battis notes, a moment such as when Sam reaches into Frodo's tunic for the ring and kisses his forehead becomes one of the more intensely embodied, erotic moments in the story, which actively contradicts the any idea of the fight against Shelob being a reinscription of normative gender and sexuality[146],.

Tolkien wrote a patriarchal world in such an effortless way, reproducing patriarchal notions of gender roles as a matter of course. Thus, the patriarchy of *Rings* can be almost invisible, until Eöwyn's storyline where she is allowed to rebel and to spout proto-feminist critiques, and be a strangely pivotal, interesting character, whose gender nonconformity is both heroic and needed, yet still framed as wrong. However, due to the marginality of most women characters (especially the non-human ones), the overwhelming focus on strong homosocial relationships between male characters, and because of the largely subtextual nature of the patriarchal world, it is easy and quite tempting to create one's own oppositional

[143] Tolkien, J. R. R. «Appendix B» in *The Return of the King.* 1097-1098
[144] Partridge, Brenda. "No sex please - We're hobbits".
[145] Battis, Jes. "Gazing upon Sauron". 915-16
[146] Battis, Jes. "Gazing upon Sauron". 916

readings, or head-canons, either subconsciously or consciously by focusing on more desirable aspects and eliding the rest: Since elven, hobbit and dwarven cultures lack Eöwyns, they can be imagined as not being patriarchal, especially as they are often portrayed as more gender ambiguous, with hobbits all being diminutive and hairy footed, elves long-haired and mostly beardless, and dwarves all bearded and stocky. Frodo and Sam can be interpreted as lovers or queer platonic soul mates, as can Gimli and Legolas, Faramir as giving Eöwyn freedom from returning to Edoras where she was unhappy, and Celeborn as merely Galadriel's trophy-husband. Yet, it is equally as easy for somebody who actually enjoys the patriarchal aspects of the world to emphasize and enlarge them, to enjoy the text not despite of its rather conservative stance on women, but because of it.

I've been commenting on the differences between Tolkien's novels and Peter Jackson's adaptions – the strengthening of Arwen's role, the emphasis on giving Eöwyn her flowers for her heroics instead of just punishing her, and I think these changes are emblematic of the impact of positive social change and the growing presence of feminist media criticism. The soft, naturalized, textually sanctioned patriarchy of Tolkien was no longer as viable – less palatable and less easy to gloss over. Interestingly, we see a similar kind of realization of the unviability of such representations of patriarchy happening within an author's mind and work as expressed in Le Guin's *Earthsea*.

3.2 No Women Wizards: Patriarchy comes into Focus

Ursula K. Le Guin said upon speaking about the *Earthsea* books, which were at that point three books long and believed to have come to its end, that the series had been a "total bust" when it comes to the representation of women[147]. I do not think she was totally fair on herself in saying this. Even at that time, she had written at least one book centering on a female character in *The Tombs of Atuan* about a girl locked in a strange feminine cult, where many writers chose men and masculine spaces for their every protagonist and setting. Yet, it is easy to see what she meant. At the time, she had written only the first three books and thought herself done. As Melanie Rawls writes in her study of the evolution of women in the series, it is really with *Tehanu* and later stories that gender issues really become a part of the textual discourse of the series[148]. Even though one of the first things we learn of in *Wizard* is that "women's magic" is seen as different from men's magic: "Weak as women's magic" and

[147] Flood, Alison. 'Ursula K Le Guin Film Reveals Her Struggle to Write Women into Fantasy'. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/may/30/ursula-k-le-guin-documentary-reveals-author.
[148] Rawls, Melanie A. 'Witches, Wives and Dragons"

"Wicked as woman's magic" are common proberbs on Gont, the textual exploration of gender largely stays with that. If not for those two sentences, we as readers might think little of the patriarchal bent to the world, because otherwise that fact disappears into the background, only visible in the absence of women in Roke's school for wizardry, just as the reader may think little of the absence of women in most of *The Lord of the Rings*. Those proverbs instantly solidify the fact of the gender discriminatory ways of Earthsea, and yet the topic then slips away. It's mysterious, as a modern reader, but as Le Guin explains, she was writing as if she was a man: She was writing from the perspective of a male narrator and that of Ged, neither of whom is much concerned with gender.

Those sayings are used to explain that the witch who first sees Ged's potential and trains him as far as she is able, is portrayed as ignorant and foolish – unable to tell true magic from false spells, and often using her magic to unworthy ends. "She knew nothing of the Balance and the Pattern which the true Wizard knows and serves"[149], the omniscient narrator states, yet we later learn that she could never have learned it. Wizard is a kind of certified status in this world, which distinguishes the educated magic user who have studied at Roke from the magic user who has not. Yet, while boys and men with magical interest and talent can in theory chose between being a mere weather worker or a sorcerer or going to Roke to become a full-blown wizard, women are not allowed to study at Roke at all. Yet, this inequality in opportunity does not become a focus of the novels before long into the series. In the second book she created a female hero in Tenar, but Le guin says that however hard she tried she could not come up with a woman wizard, perhaps because she had grown up on stories about male heroes and was modelling her wizard on characters like Merlin and Gandalf – so Tenar could not become a wizard like Ged, and in the third book, which she at the time meant to be the end of the series, Tenar has disappeared out of the narrative entirely, and *Farthest Shore* revolves entirely around men.

In the first novel there are two notable female characters, whom Rawls sees as merely embodying the trope of the temptress and the maiden, yet I see something a bit more substantial in them, implying that Le Guin was even now conflicted about gender in *Earthsea*. Ged meets his school friend Vetch again as an adult, living a comfortable life on his home island of On, where he reigns as patriarch over his younger brother and his sister, Yarrow. Vetch's life seems like an ideal one to Ged, and of Yarrow he thinks: "She was not like any

[149] Le Guin, Ursula K. "1 Warriors in the Mist" in *A Wizard of Earthsea* in *Earthsea: the first four books*. 16

person he had known." the narrator adding; "What young girl had he ever known at all? but he never thought of that."[150] Yarrow is bright and light-hearted, skilled at weaving and cooking, and she works to mother her brothers. While she is interested in magic and tales, asking Ged many questions, she is quick to say things go over her head: "I wish I could truly understand what you tell me. I am too stupid."[151] She feels Vetch tells her nothing, and when her brother is there, she is "quick and silent as a little fish" as she serves them and then leaves the men alone, mirroring the actions of Goldberry in *The Lord of the Rings*.

However, after her brother leaves town, she becomes comfortable, as "mistress of her house". There thus seems to be hints of a conflict between the two older siblings, rooted in Vetch's own position as master of the house and refusal to share his knowledge with her. Vetch, on his side seems to love his sister, yet he also dismisses her and feels a level of possessiveness over her. He introduces her to Ged as "my sister, the youngest of us, prettier than I am as you see, but much less clever"[152], implying that he is the seed of Yarrow's intellectual insecurity. Furthermore, he tells Ged Yarrow's true name, Kest – meaning minnow, after Ged has compared her to a minnow: "Defenseless and yet you cannot catch her"[153]. As Ged points out, this was wrong of Vetch. Even if Ged half knew it already, the giving of a true name is a very solemn and intimate thing in *Earthsea*: you can give your own name, but not somebody else's – to do so is betrayal. But because *he* trusts Ged and because he is her brother, her elder, her patriarch, and a wizard to boot, he thinks nothing of giving Yarrow's name to Ged.

Ged protests that Yarrow is not stupid, putting the blame on himself and on the lack of time – implying thus that if Yarrow was given good teachers and the time to learn, she could come to understand and perhaps even gain power like his. Yarrow's potential for magic, or lack thereof is never commented on, yet the fact that she walks around with a tiny dragon-like lizard wrapped around her arm, much like Ged has his otak and the Archmage his raven, seems to signal some level of natural and magical connection. Yarrow thus seems both like a representation of the ideal woman, industrious in womanly arts, quick and silent in her service of men – the woman who stands on the shore watching her men go, and who tearfully runs to embrace them when they return. Yet, there are also hints of a yearning for knowledge beyond

[150] Le Guin, Ursula K. "10 The Open Sea" in *A Wizard of Earthsea* in *Earthsea: the first four books*.155
[151] Le Guin, Ursula K. "9 Iffish" in *A Wizard of Earthsea* in *Earthsea: the first four books*. 151
[152]Le Guin, Ursula K. "9 Iffish" in *A Wizard of Earthsea* in *Earthsea: the first four books.* 144
[153] Le Guin, Ursula K. "10 The Open Sea" in *A Wizard of Earthsea* in *Earthsea: the first four books*. 155

what she is allowed, of talent beyond what she is allowed to develop under the patriarchal system of *Earthsea*.

The other notable woman character in the *Wizard* plays a far more pivotal role, than the rather sidelines Yarrow. Serret is the temptress, first introduced as the nameless daughter of a Gontish lord and his enchantress Lady, who Ged meets her in the meadows while he is out on his herb picking missions. Serret draws Ged out, asking him about his magical skills and training, and teasing him. Ged wants to impress her but she will not praise him, and when she eventually dismisses his abilities it is what first leads him to call forth his shadow, "with the girl's questions and her mockery always in his mind"[154]. That the girl's withholding of praise and her mockery has such a strong impact on Ged can be taken to be show only Ged's pridefulness, which is his great weakness throughout his youth, but it is interesting that it is specifically a girl who makes him feel like this, and later the boy Jasper, who is thematically tied to Serret in many ways: Jasper comes off as highborn to Ged, as Serret is, and he is somewhat characterized in a feminine way, with his fine manners and his association with beauty. While Ged is a village goatherd from a small isle and a smith's son, brawny as well as magically powerful, Jasper is of Havnor, and assumed used to luxury, and he is tall, comely and graceful as a dancer. His beautiful illusions impress everybody but Ged. Like Serret, while Jasper is friendly with Ged, he will not praise him or show admiration for him and delivers slight bits of mockery which always sting Ged. Further mirroring Serret, Jasper's mockery is the cause of Ged fully summoning the shadow again on Roke Knoll.

Ged again meets Serret as the Lady of Terrenon, and while he thought the young Serret ugly, tall and white skinned as she was, the adult Serret is "like the white new moon". In collusion with her cruel covetous husband Benderesk, she has ensnared Ged yet, he pities her, seeing her as a caged, wing clipped thing, just another possession of her husband's. Smiling constantly, yet never laughing, she attempts to get Ged to tie himself to the evil Terrenon, again utilizing through mockery and praise. Yet, this time, she does not succeed in getting Ged to do as she wants and her husband, on hearing her offer Ged that they rule the world beside one another, calls her a betrayer and a disloyal wife, and attempts to throw a curse at her, to turn her into "some hideous thing, swine or dog or drivelling hag".

The story as such is sympathetic to Serret as a woman stranded without allies in a loveless marriage to a person who will literally de-humanize her for disobeying him, yet

[154] Le Guin, Ursula K. "2 The Shadow" in *A Wizard of Earthsea* in *Earthsea: the first four books.* 28-30

Serret is not as vulnerable as Ged first thinks. When Serret shows him the Terrenon, he advises her that a "young and gentle-hearted" person like her should never even look at the stone, but of course she has already touched it and believes it does her no harm. As they later escape together, Serret brutally kills two servants, showing herself to be anything but gentle-hearted. Serret is eventually savagely killed by gargoyle creatures, her transformed gull body ripped apart by beaks and claws, while Benderesk survives. Serret is both villainess and victim here, a tragic figure whose end is reminiscent of the old movie trope, born of the Hayes Code, of the immoral woman (or queer person) who must face their just desserts and die. While Serret is not characterized as the ultimate evil of the novel – and the main antagonistic force is the Shadow, she is the one who lured Ged to loose the shadow, who in setting all the events of the novel in motion is responsible for the death of Ged's otak and of an innocent man. Serret at the end, is not allowed either to be a pure villainess in her own right nor is she allowed to be reformed and live but must be vanquished. Just as Jasper, her parallel, is less dramatically vanquished, never awarded his wizard's staff.

Serret and Yarrow can be seen as mirror images. Where Yarrow is dark skinned, Serret is pale; where Yarrow focuses on domestic duties, Serret has servants to do all such work for her; and where Yarrow is in a state of Being; living life for the joy and the necessity of living; is powerless - "defenseless" yet impossible to catch, Serret spends her life attempting to Do; yearning and working towards power and riches, and yet she is caged in a joyless existence. On that last point she is much like Ged's aunt, the witch, who filled his mind with ideas of glory and power, building in him the pridefulness which would be his downfall in meeting with Serret and Jasper. In the end Ged must face his shadow, representing all his pride, his envy, his demand to dominate, to be most powerful and embrace it, reincorporate it, though now aware of its evil effects. Seeking power and glory is represented as a natural urge, yet one that must be resisted. This is a quite apt description of the life of Ged, but when it comes to the women of the tale, who might very justly desire to wrest some more power out of this patriarchal world, it seems the story leaves only two options: you can Be and conform, as Yarrow does, or you can attempt to Do, and be severely punished.

In the next installation, *The Tombs of Atuan*, the main character is the girl Tenar, who was brought young into the desert to serve as priestess for the Eaten Ones and who, catching Ged entrapped in the underground maze, is slowly convinced to escape with him. Her story is in one sense a reflection on power – Tenar upon being chosen as Arha, gains

power but loses her name, her selfhood and her joy, and to regain it she must relinquish her power. She seems in that way as a parallel to Serret – The seeking of power will only leave you unhappy, and as there was little power in Serret's position there no real power in Tenar's either. She might have the power to command some women and eunuchs around, but her kingdom is made of dust, decay, and desert. It is "barren" as Rawls puts it, a space which despite being inhabited by women, run by women, only drains them of life. Within it they are doomed to infertility. The desert is a parallel to the wizard school on Roke, as gender segregated spaces full of mystical learning, yet only one is portrayed as evil. This imbalance is revised later in *Tehanu* and in *Tales of Earthsea,* where it is revealed that Roke also enforces upon its pupils sterility, magically suppressing their sexual desires. The only thing Tenar has as Arha is certainty and purpose, and in choosing a man, in choosing Ged, she is choosing life, freedom and uncertainty, choosing to become something new and better.

As we learn in *Tehanu*, 20 years after the end of *Tombs*, she could have studied magic with Ogion, but instead choses to become a housewife - a choice Ged does not understand echoing much of the audience. Tenar explains it as choosing women, to try to inhabit womanhood and the feminine power of motherhood instead of chasing after what she perceived to be the male power of magic - yet ironically, she felt she could only chose women through choosing a husband. Rawls writes that only in a world where "ordinary life, especially as lived by women" is Tenar's choice a submission to patriarchy[155]. However, I think we can recognize that while Tenar's choice is a valid and understandable one and one which has a thematic purpose in elevating ordinary people - in the context of the series as a whole, which contained no women wizards thus far and never did write one into the present of the world of *Earthsea,* it is also understandable to be disappointed and saddened that Tenar never grew into her powers. Yet, she does become a dragon lord, and Le Guin clearly sets Tenar up as Ged's equal. As Rawls writes, "The last three books of Earthsea are revisionist history."[156] which lift into the light the question of women's position in *Earthsea* and that of women's mysterious relationship to magic.

Tehanu is the most small-scale story within the Earthsea cycle; travels are limited to going back and forth on the isle of Gont, and the villains are petty and cruel men rather than people trying to change the metaphysics of the world. It is also the novel most concerned with

[155] Rawls, Melanie A. 'Witches, Wives and Dragons". 133
[156] Rawls, Melanie A. 'Witches, Wives and Dragons". 141

women and their oppression in *Earthsea*. The trauma of gendered violence is a theme throughout the book, as Tenar takes in Therru, a child beaten, raped, burned and left for dead by her parents. Therru's own trauma and Tenar's secondhand trauma being centered as Tenar attempts to create a safe place for Therru to heal and flourish and worries what will become of her. Victim blaming is common on the isle, people assuming that if something as horrid as what caused Therru's scars happened, Therru must be evil to deserve such a thing – and the implication is that all trauma should rather be left unsaid, because you can not be sure you yourself will be blamed for it. Merely by her closeness to Therru, Tenar becomes vilified herself, her own life suddenly more dangerous. Therru's appearance shatters Tenar's comfortable existence, shattering the illusion that all is well in the world.

By the start of *Tehanu,* Tenar has just been widowed, but the story largely still focuses on her life inhabiting the feminine roles of adoptive mother of Therru and lover to Ged, yet another aspect is her relationship with the witch Moss. Tenar initially sees Moss as vaguely nefarious, uncomfortably witnessing her coaxing Therru out of her shell, however, the two slowly become friends, and Tenar starts to question the assumptions about women and magic. While wizards are supposedly superior to witches, morally as well as magically, Moss' muddled, wise kindness is sharply contrasted with the knowledgeable, clear cruelty of the wizard that curses and enslaves Tenar, and who kills Moss. Some fans believe Moss to be the same witch as Ged's aunt who first initiated him into magic, yet in any case the two are cut of the same cloth, and the return to the motif of the witch can be seen as a kind of redemption, revising those things we learned in *Wizard* and looking at her with more empathy.

Through the novel, Tenar is disillusioned with the world and with men, the bubble of safety she has built for herself as a wealthy wife popping as she becomes first witness of and then herself a victim to male violence. After years of widowhood, being her own master, and living with women, she is surprised when Ged returns, powerless, after the events of *Farthest Shore*, at his self-sufficiency. Ged makes nothing of doing "women's work", unlike Tenar's dead husband. The factors of her time free of male control, the realization that men could behave differently, and the trauma she has recently experienced at the hands of a man who demanded her submission, contributes to a disillusionment with patriarchy so strong that when her son returns from sea and demands ownership of the farm he's not set foot on in years and starts to act the part of his father, demanding to be served and never serving, and

going about the farm thinking he's running it while she and others do the actual labor, she starts to feel she has failed him as a mother and will not stay with him.

As Rawls documents, the fifth installation, *Tales of Earthsea,* continues the discourse on gender, with it being revealed that the founders of the school of magic on Roke were women, and the origin of the prejudice against women's magic caused by a displacement of blame as a series of wizards waged war and caused natural calamities which were blamed on the weaker figures of the village witches and sorcerers, as they were more palatable, reachable targets for ire[157]. Furthermore, the stories of Elfarren and Ogion's quelling of the earth quake on Gont is revisited, Elfarren shown to be more than the mere waif she was shown as in the mythos Ged knows, with power of her own and agency, and Ogion's power to quell the earth shown to be an expression of use of the previously vilified Old Powers of the Earth, the knowledge of which having been passed down to him from the woman Ard, through Ogion's master Dulse. More women characters performing heroic feats or just ordinary ones of love and kindness, in the clearheaded, multi-talented Darkrose, in the nameless enslaved woman who saves Medra, the housewife who heals a wizard gone astray and Orm Irian who challenges the male-only policy of Roke. In *The Other Wind*, the sixth and last book of *Earthsea*, Ged stays home, "keeping the house", and the focus is instead on Tenar and Therru and the sorcerer Alder[158].

While *Earthsea* started out mimicking the effortlessly patriarchal world that we recognize from Tolkien, it was always a point of some conflict, as we see in Ged's relationship to Yarrow and the appearance and disappearance of Tenar, when Le Guin returned to her world she had become puzzled by many things - among them evidently the patriarchal nature of the world[159]. Thus, her three next novels became a work in revision, and in telling the untold history of women's magic. As Rawls writes, "Power and heroics shift from men to women" and when men are heroes, "Their heroics, however, are performed in conjunction with women or within the structure of values practiced by and associated with women: finding, mending, binding, healing. The texts move from masculine hierarchy to feminine web, from the tower to the house." *Earthsea* on the whole then tells a fascinating story of a world in flux, going from stagnant patriarchy to something better.

[157] Rawls, Melanie A. 'Witches, Wives and Dragons". 135-139
[158] Rawls, Melanie A. 'Witches, Wives and Dragons". 139-141
[159] Quoted in Rawls, Melanie A. 'Witches, Wives and Dragons". 146

3.3 Warrior women and Queens under Patriarchy

Much like Tolkien does in Middle-Earth and Le Guin does in Earthsea, George R. R. Martin's world largely presupposes patriarchy throughout his novels. While there are many differing cultures, who vary slightly in their norms, the basics of the two-gender, patriarchal system largely remains standard throughout, from the Westerosi society, to the Free Folk, to the Dothraki and the Bravosi. Unlike either Tolkien or Le Guin, Martin made a large number of his protagonists women from the beginning. He of course writes in a style where this is easier – as his narrative sprawls and includes 24 point of view characters in total. While the number of named male characters still dwarf that of female ones, due to the focus on the battle for power within a patriarchal society where most wielders and climbers are men, among the protagonists (and antagonists) the genders are a bit more balanced. Another interesting thing about Martin's writing is that it is so-called dark fantasy, which means that rather than focusing purely on epic adventures and romanticized environments, it is more dystopian in nature and includes a lot more brutality and suffering inflicted on humans by humans. Martin has said he wanted to avoid the "Disneyland Middle Ages" of Tolkien and justifies his choices to include things like sexual assault, domestic violence, torture, slavery, and other ultraviolence with it being more "realistic"[160]. This dystopian focus allows the novels to go into things like women's oppression under patriarchy in a more concrete way than the rather romantic lens of Tolkien, and as such the patriarchy of Martin is a lot firmer and more obvious in nature, and his female characters are constantly aware of and struggling with the gender system they find themselves in. Martin has described himself as a feminist, and certainly he has been praised popularly, and by critics for writing women well, in comparison to other male writers, though his feminism does perhaps seem a bit generic, as evidenced by his droll statement "I've always considered women to be people"[161].

The dominant religion in Westeros, the Faith of the Seven, has three goddesses, or female faces of God, in the Maiden, the Mother and the Crone. These represent the roles women are ideally supposed to embody throughout their lives, all defined by their relation to their reproductive status, either as virgins, mothers, or grandmothers and elders. The male gods on the other hand, are the Father, the Warrior and the Smith, the latter two defined by

[160] Fitzpatrick, Kelly Ann. "Game of Thrones: Neomedievalism and the Myths of Inheritance". 120
[161] Carroll, Shiloh. «Masculinity, Femininity and Gender Relations". 63

their capabilities and role in a community, as creators or defenders rather than their reproduction, and even the Father is seen more metaphorically, as representing authority in general. The women of *Song* can thus be split roughly into two groups; those fitting into those narrow roles ascribed by the Seven, being largely gender-conforming, like Catelyn, Sansa, Cercei and Dany, and those who do not – the warrior women or spearwives like Arya, Brienne, Asha and Ygritte. This division is simplified, of course, and could be made otherwise – for example Shiloh Carrol makes the distinction that women generally either try to be warriors or politicians, mapping quite neatly onto my distinction, but I find this one useful because it highlights which characters are playing into on their femininity, even if they are trying to move beyond it, and those who are seen as existing outside of normative femininity.

Daenerys Targaryen, or Dany, is perhaps the most iconic character of the series. We see her go from a traumatized girl entirely reliant on her brother into a woman who believes in her own power, and who has the might and charisma to order armies and take cities. Queen Cercei Lannister is her mirror image in many ways, as the other prominent queen in *Song,* yet where Dany is at least concerned with being compassionate and merciful, Cercei idealizes her ruthless father. Both were unwillingly given away in marriage by their patriarchs, as is a theme among the gender-conforming women of the series; marriage often hinders women's autonomy, especially the bodily, but for some it enhances their power too. Both Dany and Cercei of gain political power through their unwanted marriages, and both suffer marital rape, but their reactions and attitudes are drastically different. Without marrying Drogo, Dany would have stayed under her brother's boot, instead of tasting power and freedom as Khaleesi, and being protected from her brother's abuse - and so even as her sexual autonomy is encroached on, her focus is on the potential, on mastering the situation, on mastering Drogo. Cercei, on the other hand, while not having exactly a happy childhood, annoyed by the differential treatment between her and her brother, the marriage to Robert represents a loss of freedom, and an insult. Like Sansa, she wanted the beautiful prince and was indeed promised him, but Rhaegar was wed somebody else, and then she was given to his murderer. All of which she could stand – except that he whispered a dead woman's name on their wedding night. After that all their sexual encounters are rape, as Shiloh Connell points out[162]. For Dany then, the awful behavior of her brother, his violence, his insults, and especially the way he

[162] Carroll, Shiloh, «Sex and Sexuality». 103

made her fear Drogo, works to make Drogo into a dream in comparison – and additionally the man desires and believes in Dany, if only as an exotic, beautiful symbol of power and myth. While for Cercei, Robert is a disappointment, and she is rudely awakened to the fact that she is not what he really desires at all.

With their husbands' death comes more power – Cercei becomes able to wield the political power of King's landing, Dany gains her dragons and becomes not just a Khal's Khaleesi, but somebody able to rule a Khos all on her own. Yet in both cases this is a subversion of tradition and the gender system. After a Khal's death, a Khaleesi like Dany is supposed to be escorted to Vaes Dothrak to live there among the other widows, and while the members of her Khos, her closest guardians, value her enough to protect her and heed her orders after Drogo's blood riders turn against her, they keep insisting that they must take her to Vaes Dothrak. She is a woman, and a woman cannot be khal. But when her dragons hatch and she walks unscathed through fire, they see that she is blessed with enormous power. Dany is not a mere woman and Khaleesi anymore, the men see – she is special. An exception to the rule. Indeed, critic Sylwia Borowska-Szerszun calls Dany an example of Jane Tolmie's exceptional woman – a "strong woman who rises above a general condition of female disenfranchisement"[163]. And that does ring true – no woman in *Song* is so removed from other women as Dany, with her unique Targaryen ancestry and her dragons, and no living woman has risen to such unquestionable power as she does as queen of Mereen, yet does not the parallel between her and Cercei prove that she is not quite so exceptional in her dreams and desires, and in her experiences?

Cercei, having no dragons, no myth, must fight men tooth and nails for her position as queen. From Eddard Stark to her own brother, her father, and her timid uncle Kevan, they all try to take away her power - even her son Joffrey. Tyrion accurately calls Cercei paranoid, yet in a sense she has good reason to be afraid, as her father conspires to remarry her against her will and remove her from her children and Jaime. But because Cercei is not a particularly good or reliable person, let alone queen, it is easy to take the side of Tyrion and Tywin. While her distrust of Tyrion is initially misplaced, born of bigotry, prophecy, and a grudge against him for "killing" their mother in childbirth, Tyrion is not exactly fond of her either and immediately sees her as unfit. Tyrion and Cercei parallel each other in that they both desire most of all to please their father, Tywin, who views both of them as inherently lesser than for

[163] Borowska-Szerszun, Sylwia. "Representation of Rape". 9

their womanhood and dwarfhood. Either of them are only useful to him as tools – Tyrion as a puppet ruler while he's busy at war, Cercei as something to barter off to further the house Lannister's goals and legacy. Cercei imagines herself as "Tywin with teats", as Tyrion puts it, and often mentally ruing the fact of her womanhood – wishing she could switch places with her brother Jaime as they did when they were pre-pubescent and indistinguishable. Critic Joseph Young points out that Cercei's "protofeminist grievances against Westerosi patriarchy […] are deflated by striking objectifications of other women.", her consciousness not able to allow for compassion with other oppressed women. Instead of women as a group being deserving of more rights and safety and respect than they have, it is simply that she, personally, is above other women. Unlike Dany who largely defines herself against Viserys - making it her goal that none suffer under her as she did under him, even as she takes over Viserys' dream of the Iron Throne, Cercei adopts Tywin's toxically masculine ideology as her own wholesale. Her ruthlessness, her hunger for power for the sake of it, her misogyny, it all traces back to Tywin. Unlike any other woman character, Cercei seems to actively hate her own gender, even if she performs feminine beauty and grace admirably most of the time and effectively knows how to utilize female sexuality to her benifit, unlike characters like Arya or Brienne.

For Dany, her womanhood becomes an integral part of her identity, both in public and in private. As Drogo's wife she becomes Khaleesi, gaining some power of her own for the first time and while this power comes with the cost of marital rape, she grows callused to it and tries to take control this aspect of her life, paralleling it with learning to ride her horse. Dany never turns against her role as wife and mother, or her gender, only against the idea that being a woman means she should be passive and give up her power. Because of her heritage, she believes she has a right to the Iron Throne, and when she gets her dragons the people around her start to believe she could do it. For her people she eventually becomes Mhysa – "mother", a goddess figure and a Mother Mary, that mixes divine authority with kindness and caring. Dany embraces this label – it resonates with how she likes to see herself, and while she herself was made barren by her stillbirth, in this way she claims the role of mother and turns it into a source of power for her. She is the "mother of dragons".

Sansa Stark, Martin captures the double-edged sword which is being a gender conforming woman. Her mother Catelyn says "Sansa was a lady at three"[164], and it is obvious

[164] Carroll, Shiloh, «Chivalric Romance and Anti-romance". 41

that Sansa has bought into femininity. She suits her role easily, enjoying feminine work such as embroidery and singing, getting along easily with other women and girls, and having features that are deemed traditionally beautiful, all of which makes her feel superior to her sister who struggles with femininity. Additionally, she loves tales and songs, believing in the idea of chivalry and romance that they present. In critic Shiloh Carroll's words, she is most "romantically minded" and her arc is to be brutally awakened to the fact that the world does not work as in the songs[165]. When she's betrothed to Joffrey, the beautiful prince, she thinks her dreams are coming true, but Joffrey ends up killing her father needlessly and proves himself to be a brute who enjoys tormenting her, while the queen she so admired proves not a shining ideal, but a woman who cares little for Sansa's wellbeing.

Yet, even in meeting with challenges to her belief – like the brute Gregor Clegane or the king's guard knights who will beat her on command, she upholds the knightly ideal even as she learns she cannot depend on knights for protection, much like Brienne does. And Sansa adopts a kind of chivalry for herself in her phrase "a lady's armor is her courtesy"[166]. The strength she develops is decidedly feminine – emphasizing wit, kindness, and gentility/politeness. Her survival at court, through horrid ordeals, is nothing to scoff at, and she even manages to save Ser Dontos' life and to goad Joffrey into a potentially lethal battle solely through her wit. Yet, surrounded by enemies as she is, there is only so much she can do. She's saved from Joffrey by a better match appearing, and is promptly wed to Tyrion, who thankfully decides not to insist on his marital rights, even though he is expected to do so by both his father and Sansa herself. Ultimately, the one who ends up saving her from the prison of the palace is neither Dontos nor Sandor - no person returning her kindness, but Petyr Baelish who has his own selfish reasons for vanishing her, and she ends up in another court, playing different yet equally dangerous mind games with Petyr and her aunt Lysa.

Many find Sansa's naivete to be a bit annoying, but in context she is no different from many sheltered children in her beliefs. Sansa was woefully unprepared for the world by her upbringing. Her mother Catelyn is, like Sansa, a feminine, beautiful, and widely admired woman. She has lived a good life. For all that she grew up during a war, she never saw much of it herself, and while she did not get the man she wanted and was betrothed to, she did get Ned. They got a rough start, married without knowing one another, but by the time we meet

[165] Carroll, Shiloh, «Chivalric Romance and Anti-romance". 41
[166] Carroll, Shiloh, «Chivalric Romance and Anti-romance". 44

them, the two are comfortable and loving with one another as evidenced by their easy conversation and sex life[167]. Which puts them in deep contrast to Cercei and Robert, or her sister Lysa and John Arryn. She and Ned is characterized as opposites, she warm, joyful, and of the Faith of the Seven, he cold, stern, and of the Old Gods, and while Catelyn has found happiness in the north with her children and with Ned, it is clear that she prefers the south. She has been dislocated from her family and her country, but this is the norm for women, and she is at peace with that. The only real gripe between her and Ned at the start, is over Jon Snow. It is not the fact that Ned has a bastard – that's normal. It is that he makes the unusual choice to raise Jon as one of their own children, implying he values Jon as much as Robb, and the mother as much as Catelyn, which feels as if it dishonors her. The status quo bothers her not at all – but deviation to it does. She raises her daughters to be good wives, the way Ned raises his boys to be leaders and warriors, expecting that the girls will be married off to safe men and experience only peace. It does not occur to talk to her daughter about the ugly things in life, because preventing those things is her and Ned's job in choosing for them a good husband.

Her sister Lysa, married to John Arryn on the same day Cat wed Ned, highlights Catelyn's fortune. Unlike her sister, Lysa was deeply unhappy in her loveless marriage to the much older Arryn. Lysa was two years younger than Catelyn, only about fifteen years, and had already been forced to abort a child, made with the boy she loved (and who in turn loved her older, more beautiful sister). Her evidenced fertility was supposed to be a selling point, but she suffered from many miscarriages and stillbirths, and when one of Lysa's children eventually did live, he was sickly, suffering seizures. Both Lysa and Catelyn is proud of their children, with Catelyn talking pride in mothering many children and furthering the Stark legacy - hoping to have yet another son with Ned as the story of *Song* begins, but Lysa's pride is seen as misplaced, since her son is so sickly. Her son's sickliness is placed on her shoulders, Catelyn immediately comparing Lysa's Robert to her own sturdier son Rickon, and she ends up agreeing with the men's position that the child should be separated from the mother, such that he can be hardened. And we as readers understand her judgement, because while Lysa cannot be blamed for Robert's seizures, she is guilty of infantilizing him – treating him as younger than his years and encouraging entitlement and cruelty in him. This blaming of the mother for the child's defects is mirrored in Cercei and Joffrey. Joffrey is a rotten boy –

[167] Young, Joseph. «Enough about whores". 3-4

healthy, strong, and pretty, but with no sense of morality at all. This is something his father Robert is aware of and Cercei, much like Lysa, is in denial of. Robert, not wrongly, blames Cercei for it. In following in her father's ideological footsteps, she teaches him that he is entitled to all the power and respect in the world. Yet, Robert also models cruelty and impudence to him, in his harsh treatment of Cercei, which traverses from name-calling to rape to physical violence, and in his entitlement toward women. Robert has fathered a million bastards, and is fond of wenching, ignoring entirely the fact that because he is king no woman may easily refuse him. Afterwards he abandons them, sometimes leaving them to face Cercei's wrath, or to raise a child alone.

As a parallel to Eöwyn as shieldmaiden in *Rings*, Martin portrays many similar female warriors, knights or spearwives, as Ygritte calls herself. These women are distinguished by their embracing of martial arts and the presumed masculine quality of physical strength. Not all of these women are seen as gender non-conforming according to their own culture's ideas – as Shiloh Carroll notes, there is some diversity in custom in regard to women warriors in Martin's world[168]. Most prominently, among the wildlings beyond the wall, spearwives are seen as a normal part of Mance's army. It is only in Jon's perspective in which Ygritte's existence is made strange. Meanwhile, the Iron Islander Asha Greyjoy is captain of a reaver ship of her own and works as her father's left-hand man, and in the southernmost house Dorne, the bogland house Reed, and the northernmost house Mormont, not much is made of woman warriors, as many of the Sand Snakes, Oberyn's beloved bastard daughters, (most prominently Obara) are characterized as great warriors, taking after their father, while Meera Reed nonchalantly acts as her brother's body guard, and house Mormont is headed by the She-Bear, lady Maege - as yet unmarried and mother of five warrior daughters. Naturally perhaps, these women from cultures marginally more accepting of woman warriors seem more comfortable in their femininity or lack thereof, than the two women warrior characters who are most fleshed out and most iconic – those of Arya Stark and Brienne Tarth.

Diana Marques points out that both Arya and Brienne reject femininity, or at least that femininity constructed around the term "lady" [169]. Always compared to her older sister Sansa, the lady incarnate, Arya is always falling short in the eyes of her mother and her septa

[168] Carroll, Shiloh. «Masculinity, Femininity and Gender Relations". 64
[169] Marques, Diana. 'Power and the Denial of Femininity in Game of Thrones'.

– With less interest and ability in needlepoint than in swordplay, and with her lack of gentility and humility, despite her wealth of confidence, charisma and charm. She is also called ugly, nicknamed "Arya Horseface" by her sister's friend, and believes it. Despite their physical and temperamental differences, Arya being a slight little girl with a big mouth and big feelings, and Brienne a big boned, tall, and broad woman who is quiet and gentle, this alleged "ugliness" is a thing the two share. For both of them it is women who disabuse them of their feminine self-worth first: For Brienne, a motherless only child, she is warned by a septa that no man could actually find her attractive and those who claim otherwise are lying. While Arya constantly faces comparison to her more feminine, older, sister, and titters from other girls.

In response to this alienation from femininity, Arya becomes a bit of a reactionary, reproducing misogynist messages about women like "most girls are stupid", making her somewhat akin to a modern day "not like other girls" archetype of anti-feminine girl. She says she doesn't want to be a lady, and is more comfortable crossdressing as the boy Arry, or in a girl's serving garb, than she is dressed as a lady, as evidenced in her discomfort when a noble lady makes her dress up[170]. Brienne, while equally uncomfortable with the term lady, and with being made to wear feminine clothing – having cut her hair and taken to wearing armor, does not parallel Arya in internalizing misogyny, at least not that kind directed at other women, but has low self-confidence as a result of her rejection by society, accepting the view of herself as an aberrant, monstrous figure. Both women are encouraged by male relatives to pursue their interest in swordplay, which in conjunction with their discouragement by women hints to the way that women are complicit in upholding patriarchal gender norms, and how mothers are often given the greater responsibility for making daughters into wife-material, while men are more concerned with upholding masculinity in men and boys, as we see in Randyll Tarly's brutal treatment of his son, Sam, and in the way Jon tells his brother Bran not to look away when his father lops a man's head off, because "he'll know" – hinting that Ned Stark, like Tarly, upholds a standard of masculinity in his boys, where making oneself calloused to violence and death is considered necessary.

Interestingly, Ned sees Arya is a mirror to her aunt Lyanna, who is known as a beauty, and who was perhaps even more interested and skilled at swordplay than Arya, and less hindered, being allowed to spar alongside her brothers – perhaps a consequence of being

[170] Carroll, «Masculinity, Femininity and Gender Relations". 74

the only daughter and motherless, like Brienne[171]. Tomboyishness like Arya's and Lyanna's is often perceived more positively in girls than the opposite for boys, as Halberstam notes - with girls being seen (by men especially, as seen in Jon Snow and Ned view of Arya) as taking on positive masculine traits, rather than boys taking on negative feminine traits. Yet it is also assumed that it is a transitory phase, assumed to be followed by a regression to normal femininity and heterosexual marriage in adulthood.

Both Carroll and Marques see these warrior women as an example of the "exceptional women" of Jane Tolmie[172], being women who must reject femininity to succeed, making their own way as heroes rebelling against a patriarchal system. An interesting idea is that the women's exceptional nature among women is emphasized by them being contrasted with other figures, like Arya is with Sansa, and Brienne and Asha is with Jaime and Theon, and yet I softly disagree on several points – one is that Jane is speaking of stories where a woman protagonist emerges as the sole exceptional woman, whereas here we have quite a number of women existing in this role of the warrior woman – too many perhaps for them to be reduced to them merely being too exceptional. They are not just contrasted against a sea of silent, passive marginal women either, but by a diversity of more gender-conforming, feminine women who are more or less also struggling against the same system of male domination as they are. Arya might insist she is nothing like Sansa, but as the story goes on, the reader can't help but see that despite their differences in personality, they are both oppressed and they both struggle against that oppression, though their methods may vary. Neither of them are necessarily more or less of a heroine than the other.

Yet, this diversity in types of women, is somewhat undercut by the way that Martin never really conceives of any communities of women[173]. The female characters are largely estranged from their fellow women, meaning that the women of Martin's world are usually alone in their struggle, at least within their own narrative. Thus, in another sense, all these women do fit quite neatly into the trope Tolmie describes in her essay, because as Tolmie notes, their stories focus on them as individuals making a place for themselves within a sexist world, and it is unlikely that their stories will end with the smashing of patriarchy and universal gender liberation or anything of the sort. Tolmie rightly questions the popularity of

[171] Lyanna's and Ned's mother, Lyarra Stark is not mentioned at all in *Song*. Martin has said "she died" but her date of death is much unknown:
[172] Tolmie, Jame, «Medievalism and the Fantasy Heroine"
[173] Carroll, Shiloh. «Masculinity, Femininity and Gender Relations". 19

this story structure and the potential of such stories for feminist discourse, hinting at the need and potential for fantasy stories which move beyond individualist empowerment narratives.

Despite her marginal role as a woman dead long before the start of *Thrones,* the mythic figure of Lyanna deserves some more consideration. Critic Lynsey Mitchell sees Lyanna Stark as a kind of Helen of Troy figure – a woman whose alleged victimization was used to justify war, and whose identity thus becomes less important than her existence as a symbol of pure femininity[174]. Hence why all people remember of her otherworldly feminine beauty, even though Ned believes she looked and acted like Arya who of course sees herself as the opposite of a beautiful lady. Lyanna's personality is flattened in memory, to fit into the myth, and it is also never considered that Lyanna might have eloped with Rhaegar, instead of having been kidnapped.

Perhaps we now can guess, after the reveal of Jon's parentage in the HBO adaptation, that it was likely not such a simple matter as Lyanna being kidnapped and raped, but a rather more morally grey story of a young girl falling in love with and being seduced by a much older man and wanting to choose her own destiny rather than be married off to Robert, whom she did not care for. According to Mitchell, such ambiguity (which might in other cases might have doomed her to dishonor) had to be elided such that Lyanna became a more perfect victim such that her victimization could be used to justify war. War is characterized as a way of defending a woman's honor, while really, it does nothing for women or their honor, while dooming countless more vulnerable women to death and rape and other suffering. As Mitchell writes, one woman's rape becomes the justification of the rape of millions during the "just war" it is used to justify. And we see the truth of this statement about war play out with the ravaging of the riverlands, seen through Jaime and Arya's eyes in *Clash of Kings*. Especially one scene is illustrative of this point - when Arya overhears a man bragging about witnessing the Mountain, Ser Gregor Clegane, initiate a gang rape of a young girl after her father appeals to his knightly honor to protect her[175].

As Carroll and many other critics have pointed out, there is a lot of sexual violence in *Song* and its HBO adaptation, perhaps gratuitously so. Martin has defended this creative choice in a few different yet flaccid ways, with an appeal to historical authenticity[176], but as Carroll notes "it is impossible to truly know the Middle Ages" which Martin purports to

[174] Mitchell, Lynsey, «Re-affirming and rejecting the rescue narrative"
[175] Quoted in Carroll, Shiloh, «Sex and Sexuality». 89
[176] Carroll, Shiloh, «Sex and Sexuality». 85

portray, and real historians like Gillian Polock finds many ahistorical tidbits to poke fun at in *Song*[177]. Yet, as Carroll notes, the claim that of authenticity are circular – "they influence the imaginations and medievalist thought patterns of the fans, who then argue that the Middle Ages was a time of gritty violence, which then influences popular culture to further use violence and rape as "markers of medieval authenticity."" And allows "writers to avoid taking responsibility for the choices they make about the show and to continue without examining the reasons why they find violence, rape, and abuse just as important in creating a Middle Ages as are the tropes of feudalism, armor, and weapons."[178] Such claims, appealing to the false idea that the "gritty" medievalism of such works as Martin's is more authentically medieval than the real Middle Ages or medieval tales which Helen Young documents[179], seem only serve to deflect criticism and avoid facing the fact that every element within a fictional story, especially those which are fantasy stories, exist as a creative choice of the author.

Martin has also pointed out that none complain about the violence in his stories, only the sex[180]. This latter excuse is easy to dismiss: Sexual violence and domestic violence will always be more controversial than violence, because while violence of the kind in medieval wars and tourneys and fisticuffs is not generally something we modern individuals face much, sexual and domestic violence is still faced by many people, and portrayals can dredge up traumas in readers, as Fitzpatrick points out[181]. Some of course believe sexual assault has no place on the page or on screen, while others bristle at men, or just people who are assumed not to have experienced nor will ever be likely to experience this kind of violence, authoring such portrayals.

Carroll argues that readers and viewers often mistake portrayals for endorsement, but to give such fans a bit more credit, it is more likely that they find the portrayals exploitative. In the HBO adaptation, with its playing up of Dany's assault, Cercei and Jaime's graveside thryst, Theon's sexualized torture, and the general use of naked female bodies as set dressing, the scenes certainly seem to be. Yet, as Carroll notes Martin does not generally write rape scenes for titillation – these sex scenes are largely meant to be unnerving rather than erotic.

[177] Both quoted in Fitzpatrick, Kelly Ann. "Game of Thrones: Neomedievalism and the Myths of Inheritance". 125 + 126
[178] Quoted in Fitzpatrick, Kelly Ann. "Game of Thrones: Neomedievalism and the Myths of Inheritance". 127
[179] Quoted in Fitzpatrick, Kelly Ann. "Game of Thrones: Neomedievalism and the Myths of Inheritance". 121
[180] Carroll, Shiloh, «Sex and Sexuality». 85
[181] Fitzpatrick, Kelly Ann. "Game of Thrones: Neomedievalism and the Myths of Inheritance". 127-128

However, they are often told from the perspective of perpetrators or outside observers, and victims are rarely allowed space to speak of or consider the trauma of sexual assault. Only villainous characters like Cercei and Mirri Maz Duur really mention their experience as sexual assault and have their plot driving actions directly motivated by their trauma[182]. Although one could say that Dany sublimates the act of dealing with her trauma onto her fight against slavery - It is in her prohibition of rape that her crusade begins, as she is told that to forbid people of raping the people they've enslaved is nonsensical since slaves are to be done with as their masters please – including rape and brutality[183]. Only then does Dany's focus shift to slavery.

As critic Joseph Young puts it, characters' sexual ethics is often used as an alternative vector to the ethics of violence, in communicating where characters lie on a moral compass[184] – a statement both Shiloh Connell and Sylwia Borowska-Szerszun mirror. But usually, it is the men who gain character development thus: The positive sexual relationship between Ned and Catelyn, or Jon and Ygritte reflects positively on Ned and Jon, while for characters like the Mountain, Joffrey, Ramsay and Roose Bolton or Craster, their sexual predation is used to mark them as villains. A view of the story of the rape of Jeyne Poole is that it exists wholly to develop Ramsay as a villain and to somewhat redeem Theon from his time as a callous womanizer, abusing his position of power over women. Sansa experiences two parallel scenes of men planning to and indeed beginning the preamble of sexually assaulting her, before changing their minds – first with Sandor Clegane, then with Tyrion, and with both of them the scene seems more about developing their character than hers, to show their moral ambiguity, but ultimately that they are not as evil as much of the world around them, or, in the case of the Hound, as evil as they would like to see themselves as[185] [186].

Tyrion is a particular example of this since he, inverse to Theon's development, shows a downwards spiral. One of the foundational stones of his backstory is that of Tysha; a commoner he met while young, bedding and marrying her spontaneously, only for Jaime tell him, pressured by Tywin, that she was a sex worker he had hired, and for Tywin to have her gang raped by his men, paying her a coin per man, and forcing Tyrion himself to participate. This has left him with convinced no women will ever love him, but fond of sex workers, and

[182] Borowska-Szerszun, Sylwia. "Representation of Rape". 9
[183] Carroll, Shiloh, «Sex and Sexuality». 92
[184] Young, Joseph. '"Enough about Whores".
[185] Carroll, Shiloh, «Sex and Sexuality». 96
[186] Young, Joseph, «Enough about whores». 5

he is generally kind to them, wanting the "girlfriend experience", and with Shae he goes further than normal, bringing her to King's Landing. He wants to think of her as his lady, however much he tries to remember she's not. When he is accused of treason, however, Shae testifies against him, breaking his heart and confirming all his fears[187]. Tyrion later finds her in his father's bed and brutally murders her before letting her speak, a scene that both emphasizes that Tywin and Tyrion are not as dissimilar as Tywin insists, but also marks a turning point where Tyrion becomes more like Tywin - more calloused and ruthless. In Essos, when he gets the chance, he sleeps with sex slaves despite their inability to consent, and in one instance, maliciously demands sex to spite the woman's disgust with him, further signaling his downward spiral[188].

Not only men are perpetrators of sexual violence – Jon's first encounter with Ygritte is seen a test of his allegiances, thus he doesn't feel he can say no, and as Carrol points out both Cercei and Dany have sex scenes with other women where consent is somewhat muddied[189]. Cercei recreates her own marital rape by Robert in her assault on Taena. Dany has a parallel scene, where her handmaiden Irri helps her achieve orgasm, which is similar in the uneven power dynamic between parties but is perhaps somewhat less problematic because it is presented merely as a utilitarian arrangement and there is no focus on pain and domination as with Cercei who tries to inhabit the male sexual power of the rapist. Further, even in many scenes usually deemed consensual, as with Cercei and Jaime's sex scenes, or that between Asha and her shipmate, the sex is at the very best under-negotiated rape fantasy, where the women at first protest verbally and physically before being overpowered and ceasing their protests[190]. In the wake of the HBO adaption, where they changed the sex scene between the Lannister twins at their father's funeral site, making it more physically aggressive and more obviously rape, Martin said the scene might have "disturbed for the wrong reasons" since the scene was supposed to be seen as consensual – but consent in that encounter was always somewhat troubled[191].

Critics who write about Martin's depiction of sexual violence, such as Carroll, Young and Borowska-Szerszun, generally agree that he is not merely using sexual assault

[187] Carroll, Shiloh. 'Chivalric Romance and Anti-Romance'. 50-51
[188] Carroll, Shiloh, «Sex and Sexuality». 91
[189] Carroll, Shiloh, «Sex and Sexuality». 103
[190] Carroll, Shiloh, «Sex and Sexuality». 99-100
[191] National Post. "George R.R. Martin Says Game of Thrones Rape Scene May Have "disturbed for the Wrong Reasons""

simply for titillation or shock value, but is adding characterization through these scenes and usually clearly depicts sexual violence as morally bankrupt, yet it is often perpetrators and not victims who gain most characterization, while victims are largely mum about any resulting trauma unless it feeds into their villainy as with Cercei or Mirri Maaz Duur – this leads critic Borowska-Szerszun to compare *Song* unfavorably to Robin Hobbs writing, which instead center victims' stories of trauma, pain and healing[192].

Upon the release of the HBO adaptation, some viewers were surprised to see queer characters, to the point that Martin has been asked to explain their inclusion[193]. The adaptation made explicit the relationship between Renly and Loras which was only subtextual in the novels. Carroll problematizes the choice to have two straight female characters engage in lesbian sex, only to find it lacking, while having no sapphic characters, not any explicit gay male representation or characters[194], a discrepancy which seems to cater to the titillation of a presumed straight, male audience. While Renly and Loras' inclusion is a very welcome one – their characters subverting stereotype with them both being seen as beloved masculine paragons, and the little we see of their romance painting a beautiful image of devotion, yet it is all merely implied, to the point a reader who is willfully blind to such stories might easily erase them from view. Fans also read queer subtext in the omnivorous Oberyn Martell, in Jon Connington's infatuation with Rhaegar, and in the fights between Illyn Payne and Jaime. Furthermore, the inclusion of characters like the former male sex worker Satin and Varys, who was born into enslavement in Lys - famous for its sex slavery, implies a world filled with lust for male bodies, but there is no such parallel for women. Perhaps because the women of *Song* are so isolated from one another. The most clearly queer element might be Renly's rainbow guard, which of course plays with modern symbols of queerness. Renly shows admiration for Brienne as a woman standing outside of gender norms, seeing a kindred spirit and wanting to gather her to his side. Yet, of course, Renly and the queer hope he personifies is cruelly dashed to pieces.

Thus, patriarchy as it exists in Martin's world is a much more contentious, problematized thing within the text than that in the world of Tolkien, and his female characters are many and complex, and their stories of lives lived within or struggling against

[192] Borowska-Szerszun, Sylwia. 'Representation of Rape". 17-18
[193] Aegon Targaryen. "George R.R. Martin on Writing Gay Characters". https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MZ9BQzjEYMk. 0:15
[194] Carroll, Shiloh, «Sex and Sexuality». 101-102

the confines of patriarchy are very compelling. The fact that the world of *Song* is not romanticized punctures the dissonance between the mythic narrative and the way that women are treated within it. Yet, his reliance on sexual assault and abuse as a tool to signal the moral evil of men and of war, can seem a bit of a crutch, since he seems less interested in the trauma such events cause the victims, and while his world does include queerness it is still marginalized and made disposable. The "grittiness" of his world serves to both subvert and reconcile Martin's vision with the patriarchal, hierarchical fantasy world of Tolkien, but also serves as an easy excuse not to deal with criticism, without facing the fact that the making of his world a patriarchal one where rape is normalized and people are homophobic is not an inevitability, but a creative choice.

3.4 Gender Egalitarianism and Casual Representation

Whereas the fantasy texts of Tolkien, Le Guin and Martin construct patriarchal worlds, Jemisin's fantasy trilogies largely focus on gender egalitarian societies and there is an effort made to portray many different kinds of strong women and soft men, as well as to include gender queerness and queer sexuality, even if her protagonists are largely heterosexual cisgender women. This means, ironically, that the texts have less to say directly *about* gender than in Martin for example, in that they have fewer conflicts focused on a character's unique gendered experience, and the messaging regarding gender is therefore more metatextual than textual – it is in meeting with the reader that it gains a message. By representing societies where people do not care about maintaining patriarchy or heteronormativity, the reader is invited to feel the potential for our own world to become more like them, giving the texts a visionary, utopian feeling – even as *Broken Earth* is a rather dystopic series in other ways critic Erik György recognizes a feminist utopia in its treatment of gender[195]. Additionally, this also allows women and queer people to enjoy the fantasy fiction without confronting patriarchy and gendered oppression, thus letting readers enjoy the story, themes and characters, without the added weight of the dystopia of patriarchy.

In the world of *Inheritance*, there are apparently many patriarchal societies in existence, among the Hundred Thousand Kingdoms, but they are not the focus of the novels. Instead, the stories are set in the societies of Sky and the Shadow, both dominated by

[195] György, Erik. "The Women of N. K. Jemisin". 63

Arameri, who hold to a gender egalitarian standpoint and likely enforce this standard among their closest allies as an imperial nation. The first head of the Arameri was the woman Sheresad, and since, either men or women can inherit the throne of the Arameri family dynasty. Yeine's struggle is against two siblings, and there is no implication that the brother's gender should earn him any extra consideration. Instead, it is the sister who is assumed to win, because she is the most cold hearted and brutal of the two. Yeine on her hand was raised into Darre culture, which is matriarchal. Darre is in many ways a total inversion of patriarchal society, and thus more of a dystopic mirror than a hopeful utopic alternative, with men taking on the stereotypes, expectations, and burdens of the role of the woman as wife in patriarchal cultures. They are infantilized and disenfranchised – not allowed to be warriors or leaders, just husbands and care takers. Yet, one divergence from this mirroring effect is the way Darre women must suffer through a coming-of-age ceremony where they are set against a man to fight, either to overpower him and win or lose and be raped by him. If a woman wishes to hold power, to be the leader, the ennu, as Yeine is, you don't necessarily have to win, but the fight must be one against a great opponent and you must fight tooth and nail. The relative difference in strength between men and women is thus played with, and symbolically overcome or made peace with on an individual basis, without this biological trait counteracting the idea of woman as superior. We never learn whether Yeine won or lost her fight, even though she's asked many times – perhaps to imply that the answer really doesn't matter. Not to the Darre and not to us as readers. Whether or not Yeine won, it must surely have been a traumatic event.

Among the gods gender egalitarianism is a given, yet the genders of the gods do seem to somewhat align with traditional ideas of masculine and feminine: the god of light and order, Bright Itempas, is and was always male, fitting the traditional division of the world into masculine and feminine. Yet, chaos – the anthithesis to the masculine order is not portrayed as undisputedly feminine though, but as both masculine and feminine, in the gender fluid Nahadoth, though he usually takes the form of a man within the books and uses male pronouns. The two of them are old lovers as well as enemies, a binary pair, hetero but not heterosexual. Enefa, the feminine life and death goddess, Gaia and Persephone, comes into existence after the two, and exists in a more embodied, more human way than either of them, much as woman are traditionally seen as more "of the body" than men are. She becomes both little sister and homewrecker, because the messiness of life and death pairs better with chaos than with order. Further there is an emphasis on strong women, with the prominent female

characters in *Hundred thousand kingdoms* both in the sense of physical strength and in the sense of showing resolve and hardiness. Yeine is a trained warrior and ennu, the princess Scimina is ruthless both with words and a blade, and the god of war, Kurue, is a goddess. Meanwhile the prince Relad is a soft-hearted alcoholic, and Yeine's closest ally, beside the enefadeh, is Viraine who is quietly intelligent, efficient and kind, with delicate freckled skin and long braids, is revealed to be gay later on. Similarly, in *Broken Earth* you have physically and mentally strong female characters in Essun and Nassun, the mother and daughter with immense orogenic power, and in the headwoman of the community Castrima, Ykka, who exudes a confidence[196]. Meanswhile, men are often softer or more vulnerable: Essun's mentor and friend Alabaster is as hard-headed as Essun, but emotionally brittle (and queer), and the doctor Lerna is soft-spoken and kind to the point that Ykka sees him as weak.

As noted, in *Broken Earth* no differentiation is made between girls and boys, whether in village creches or in the Fulcrum, where Damaya is brought, and people of either gender can be of any caste, or get rings, or become guardians. As critic Erik György notes, two of the world of the Stillness' great mythological/historical figures are women – both the first Sanzed emperor, and the bodyguard Shemshena who saved another emperor[197], proving that women truly have the potential to inhabit any role in this world. Still, there is a tendency toward scenes aligning with typical gender roles. Characters who are abusive or murderous tend to be male, as with Jija, Schaffa and Gallat, as are world enders like Alabaster and Hoa, yet it is not always so. Damaya was shut in a barn and given away to be killed by a mother who turned on her on a dime, much like Jija turned against and killed Uche. Essun has destroyed cities too. Nassun wanted to end the world. The moments when the genders of the perpetaters of oppression aligns with the common reality of gendered oppression perhaps allow moments of catharsis, without diminishing the escapism and utopian vision of gender in the novels at large. Yet the removal of the definitive gendered nature, it reveals that at heart of oppression it is always the abuse of power – gender is only one vector.

One way in which gender, or rather *sex*, is still equally important in either of Jemisin's series is in the area of reproduction. In *Inheritance*, while homosexuality is accepted among the Arameri, Viraine still marries a woman, in order to procure heirs, and in *Fifth Season*, Syen is ordered (in not so many words) to go sleep with Alabaster to produce a

[196] György, Erik. "The Women of N. K. Jemisin". 69
[197] György, Erik. "The Women of N. K. Jemisin" 71-72

supposedly genetically superior orogene for their ranks. One of the reasons Syen loathes Alabaster at the beginning of the story is that while she sucks her emotions in and gets on with it, he acts as though he is the one most agitated by their forced encounters when she is the one doing the most of the work and the one who will be pregnant for months on end. Once she learns that Alabaster, for one thing, is gay, and for the other, has been asked to do this a hundred times before – it's not one or ten moments of discomfort for him, but a lifetime, is around the time she forgives him. Yet, Syen was perhaps still right to be annoyed – However equal they are in terms of gender, reproduction still asks more of her than of him.

With Alabaster's sexuality we again see the story's dynamics mimick those of instances of homophobia. Alabaster is pushed to have sex with women while both his male long-term partners are killed by the Fulcrum and thought these are not acts stemming from the same roots as homophobia in our world, the emotional effect of reading these scenes might be the same. When Alabaster and Syen find happiness with Innon, starting their queer little family, it is as devastating to read about Innon being murdered and Essun's mercy killing of Corundum as it would be if their family were shot down in a hate crime. With Damaya/Essun's friend Tonkee, we do get something which suggests a certain level of queerphobia. Tonkee is a trans woman, who was born into a Yumenescene family and Leadership cast, yet she was othered for her change in gender as well as for her eccentricity in wanting to be more of an Innovator than a Leader[198]. Here, the real bigotry of transphobia is combined with the fantasy idea of caste discrimination, and while Tonkee landed on her feet, she ends up estranged from her family having to make her own way, much as many real trans people must. But importantly, as György notes, Essun early notices that Tonkee is trans, but never makes a big deal out of it – and this and the narration suggests that transness is not commonly discriminated against in the Stillness at large[199]. Another trans character is the tuner Dushwha, who is a very marginal character, yet are still notable for being non-binary, uncomfortable being pushed into performing either gender by their Syl Anagistine guards. Both Tonkee and Dushwha's stories are ones of power imposing gender onto its subjects, and especially in close insular spaces like families or prisons. The Stone Eaters are able to change their body at will, taking any shape they like, but the Stone Eaters we come to know as characters; Hoa, Antimony and Steel, all maintain their bodies in a form matching their gender as humans, which suggests their gender expression is a means of comfort and a tie to

[198] Jemisin, N. K. *The Fifth Season*. 308-309
[199] György, Erik. "The Women of N. K. Jemisin". 69-70

their humanity for them. Dushwha is not involved in humanity like the three of them. They are among those stone eaters have become more inhuman, either because they've forgotten their humanity, or willingly let it go.

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Generally, in High Fantasy there has been a trend toward importing the patriarchal system of not just the writer's present, but of the imagined past. Yet, with time, there seems to have been a movement recently from from the more naturalized and soft portrayal of patriarchy of Tolkien towards a solidified, more problematized portrayal; A shift we see happen in comparing the earlier to the latter half of *Earthsea*, and see fully expressed in Martin's world. In Tolkien then, patriarchy is a nearly invisible part of the status quo only really coming into view when we meet Eöwyn and see her struggle against the confines of her gender, and in the beginning of *Earthsea* patriarchy is also naturalized. While it is immediately spotlighted in the misogynist Gontish proverbs "weak as women's magic" and "wicked as women's magic", systemic gendered oppression does not become a recurring theme in the original trilogy. Only after years of distance, did Le Guin return to *Earthsea*, seemingly because her portrayal of gender, among other things, felt incomplete, and on her return the domination of women by men becomes more obvious and more problematized, and a resolution is approached.

Martin, on the other hand, started from the assumption that his world was going to be dark and dystopic in nature, with one element of that being the systematic oppression of women – leading to a more firmly established patriarchal system, which is less naturalized and more problematized. While in the largely softer approach of Tolkien can make the world feel less intensely hostile to female or feminine readers, reading as less oppressive and hostile in some ways than that of Le Guin's *Earthsea* or Martin's world by allowing gaps for reader imagination, the more solidified, dystopic approach facilitates more direct discourse around gender, as in Le Guin's later *Earthsea* stories, or Martin's *Song* where women are prominent characters on the same line as men. Martin especially, is often praised for his many, relatively diverse female characters, exhibiting different body types and both masculine and feminine strengths.

Stories of women like Eöwyn or Tenar, or Dany, Sansa or Brienne, struggling against a patriarchal society are compelling. They allow for feelings of vicarious catharsis in readers regarding elements of gendered oppression such as rape culture, sexual assault and

harassment, being pushed to uphold heteronormative gender roles and beauty standards, and other experiences of gendered oppression. However, the portrayal of oppression can also make it a hard and potentially triggering read for some, and there is especially a risk of portrayals of gendered violence and abuse coming across as merely fetishistic. Additionally, since the setting for this oppression, if not the oppression itself, is of an antiquated nature in comparison to our own modern western societies, the stories avoid questioning the status quo of modern gender relations, perhaps leaving them as a comfortable read even for people who are hostile to conversations about women's rights in the present. Furthermore, as Jane Tolmie notes, stories of women making a place for themselves in such oppressive worlds, even when written by women, do not usually end with them changing the world to be less oppressive to women. These stories, despite being deeply compelling, full of conflict and catharsis, are not generally sources of hopeful visions of human gender relations for readers to be inspired by.

Author N. K Jemisin instead largely invents fantasy societies or worlds which are gender egalitarian in nature, as evident in her *Inheritance* and *Broken Earth* trilogies, and interestingly this largely generally leads to there being less discourse around gender within the narratives. Yet it also leads to representations of women not feeling "exceptional", with women easily appearing in every kind of smaller or larger role within societies. This allows for power fantasies for women which more resembles male power fantasies, in that their gender is not made an extra burden to them and they are allowed to be merely heroes, even as there is still room for a more indirect kind of gender related catharsis. It also allows for easier representation of queerness and of trans people, unlike in patriarchal worlds where the sexism is generally yoked to queerphobia and anti-transness. In Jemisin, we see an alternative way of portraying gender, which makes a statement for egalitarianism through representation of it – inspiring readers to want and work for our own gender system to evolve into something more like the egalitarian ones in Jemisin's work.

Thus, after the discarding of the soft, naturalized patriarchy of Tolkien, there seems to be two general approaches to gender in modern High Fantasy; On the one hand the patriarchal world which is framed in a harsh dystopic light, where women's struggle (and that of queer and trans characters) is a key part of their individual stories and the vicarious experience of their pain in the face of gendered oppression and the prompting of textual discourse on gendered oppression is part of the appeal. On the other, there's the gender egalitarian world, where female characters and queer and trans ones are allowed to be the locus of power fantasies on the same level as (cis, straight) male characters and the reader

instead can focus on conflicts and themes entirely divorced from gender or gendered oppression.

This is of course a bit of a simplification; to name one divergent example, Terry Pratchett included in his *Discworld* both deeply patriarchal societies and quite gender egalitarian ones, as well as that of a monosexed dwarven race who were seeing the sudden emergence of a second gender.

Yet, speaking on the choice of between either a "gender oppressive" or "gender egalitarian" world, I personally value both these approaches, believing that both a utopian and a dystopian strain of fantasy has their place. Thus, while the less taxing, more joyously utopian gender egalitarianism has a lot to offer us, there is no need to entirely leave behind stories which have patriarchal or otherwise gender oppressive worlds. Some writers and readers want to engage deeply with specifically gendered oppression, after all. Yet, I am personally hoping we will see more diversified versions of these stories, including and centering on more queer and/or trans characters, and perhaps engaging with different gender systems and more fantastical versions of gendered oppression. The excuse of historical "authenticity" for the inclusion of gendered violence should be retired, as well as the accusation of gender egalitarianism or diversity as being anachronistic. Fantasy being Fantasy, it is all a matter of creative choice.

Conclusion:

I hope I have made a compelling argument that fantasy fiction should be taken seriously, not because it is not escapist, but because the escape it offers has always been a way of trying get to something true, to express a vision which communicates a longing, or a warning, or an alternative. As Ursula K. Le Guin said, in accepting an award for her life-time contribution to literature, echoing Tolkien's defense of "escapism":

> "I think hard times are coming when we will be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now and see through our fearstricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being. And even imagine some real grounds for hope. We will need writers who can remember freedom; poets, visionaries – *the realists of a larger reality*"[200] (My emphasis)

Emerging in part from Tolkien's frustration with the forward march of the Anthropocene, fantasy has become a genre which is closely tied to the natural world, where the magic of fantasy is often equated with knowledge of and oneness with nature, easily opening up for environmental messaging about protecting nature against attempts to destroy it, as well as seeing the inherent value in even the inanimate parts of nature and the necessity of seeing oneself as part of nature instead of separated from it and . It also allows for hyperobjects such as climate change to be made legible by translation into mythic narratives where natural forces are represented as magical, conscious entities, whether with the goal of emphasizing the necessity of a united response to an encroaching climate crisis, or as a way of making our ecological destruction of the earth hold moral and emotional weight through anthropomorphism, imagining the earth as an entity owed respect and reparations.

Yet with its focus on "going back" to an imagined past, as established by Tolkien, the genre has also inherited some elements which we most would consider socially regressive today, as with the focus on monarchy and hereditary hierarchies, or norms of whiteness and white supremacy, and hetero-patriarchy. Tolkien romanticized monarchy through the depiction of the destined king Aragorn and created an ahistorical vision of harmony between classes in the Shire, an element which was reproduced by Le Guin in *Earthsea* with the character or Arren – both Aragorn and Arren functioning of symbols of unity. Yet in later

[200] National Book Foundation. "Ursula Le Guin" (National Book Awards Acceptance Speech). 1:26. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Et9Nf-rsALk –

fantasies like Martin and Jemisin's we see that aspect being problematized and rejected, with the powerful often being shown as corrupt and cruel.

In Tolkien we also see a norm of whiteness and the creation of a racialized moral binary between the good, white characters on the one side and the evil, non-white characters on the other, which while influential in fantasy is partly or wholly rejected in these later texts, with Martin whose orc-like characters are white ones, non-racialized and non-humanized ones, and who struggles with the drive to include non-white people in his world, while also desiring to maintain a norm of whiteness, ending up partly reinforcing orientalist and "white savior" narratives and partly subverting them. Meanwhile, Le Guin and Jemisin largely focus on non-white characters in worlds full of people of color, with Le Guin offering an inversion of the tendency to depict white as norm and brown as foreign other without creating narratives about race, whereas Jemisin interacts fully with topics of race and colonialism in her series, in *Inheritance* through depicting the white Arameri who have subjugated all other peoples and themselves, and in *The Broken Earth*, through the portrayal of the brown empires of Syl Anagist and Sanze, who subjugate other races in the form of the Niess and the tuners or the orogene, and how their callous exploitation also extends to the earth itself, and contributes to the continuation of the climate apocalypse.

In terms of gender and sexuality, we see a tendency towards patriarchy in High Fantasy, with Tolkien's world being one of a naturalized, soft type of patriarchy which exists mostly in the background and only comes into full view when the character of Eöwyn appears, who espouses discomfort with gender roles, and for whom crossdressing and going to war is largely portrayed as a symptom of a sickness she must expel. Heterosexuality is likewise normalized, yet the strong focus on homosocial bonds over hetero- ones allow for plentiful queer readings. In Le Guin's *Earthsea*, we see her replicate this naturalized patriarchy, the phrases "wicked as women's magic" and "weak as women's magic" being the closest the narrative comes to pulling the patriarchal nature of the world into focus, yet in *Tehanu,* years after her previous ending to the series, Le Guin returned, writing a novel largely centering on the struggle of Tenar as a woman in Earthsea, dragging the patriarchal nature of the world into sight, a process continued in later installations.

Martin's *Song,* on the other hand included depictions of patriarchal control and violence from the start, patriarchy thus being firmly in focus from the start, and the struggle of his many female characters against the strictures of their gender and against male control is core to what makes *Song* so compelling – yet he has been criticized for his many depictions of

violence against women, showing the difficulty of writing stories about patriarchal worlds. On the one hand, the struggles of the female characters can be interesting, and relatable, full of the potential for catharsis for female readers, yet the frequent depictions of women in facing the violence of a patriarchal society can also be alienating and triggering as well, and such scenes of violence can sometimes seem to exist merely to titillate or shock or to be naturalizing sexual assault.

Jemisin on the other hand, breaks with this trope by focusing on worlds which are largely gender egalitarian, thus allowing female characters more agency and more power, and allowing female readers to enjoy female power fantasies without the added weight of patriarchal violence. Since this naturalized depiction of patriarchy is built on western notions of patriarchy, it also serves to make queerness marginal, as we see in Martin's tendency to include queer characters only in subtext. Meanwhile Jemisin's gender egalitarian worlds includes queer relationships and gender-queerness, as expressed in both of her series, most notably in Alabaster and Tonkee. She thus allows female and queer readers to see themselves in the story, without having to engage directly with stories of gendered oppression, yet she also creates through her narrative moments which allow for an indirect catharsis, as these characters still face oppression from the society for reasons besides their gender or sexuality.

Overall, my reading of these High Fantasy texts evidences a continual engagement with ecological themes, while there has been a movement toward a confrontation of the regressive elements present in inherited motifs of monarchy, racial hierarchies, and gendered oppression, often expressed through moving away from a romanticized framing and toward a more dystopian framing of the fantastical worlds' status quo, as we see in Martin and Jemisin. Yet, Jemisin's texts also feel utopian in their gender egalitarianism, and in their focus on change for the better, both socially and ecologically; Empires falling, earth being rebalanced and nature being reelevated; Arcs which echo similar ecologically happy finales in Tolkien and Le Guin. This makes me hopeful that the High Fantasy genre will continue evolving and becoming more multifaceted, including more diverse voices and more diverse worlds, while hopefully keeping its connection to the natural and all its ecological themes and narratives which are of course only becoming increasingly relevant and necessary.

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