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Stereotypes below the Surface: A Comparative Study of Three Popular Young Adult Novels in the Romantic Fantasy Genre

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Abstract

In recent years, the young adult genre has become increasingly popular and is experiencing a “second golden age.” It might be expected in such novels, when written by women and featuring gifted female heroines, to find some kind of a feminist message. Indeed, the heroines are often perceived as strong and capable. However, they fall in line with several old gender stereotypes. The three novels chosen for this study are: *A Court of Thorns and Roses* by Sarah J. Maas, *Red Queen* by Victoria Aveyard and *An Ember in the Ashes* by Sabaa Tahir. I will show that women, although perceived as strong and capable on the surface, often conform to stereotypes. In order to do this I analyse how women are portrayed from different perspectives. Women are often perceived as passive in romantic situations, and objectified through the normative male gaze. It is interesting that also in novels written by women and mainly for women, the male gaze is prominent. Through this the female reader gains the desire to be objectified, implicitly from the narrative, which is something that works against women’s empowerment in society. Furthermore, the female protagonists rarely, or never, threaten patriarchy in any way and generally work toward reinstating patriarchy which is perceived as the only sensible option. Women in power, who do threaten patriarchy, are portrayed as sadistic witches.

Keywords: Stereotypes; gender; young adult; fantasy; romance; feminism

In recent years, the young adult genre has become increasingly popular and is experiencing a “second golden age” (Strickland). However, the plots and characters of these novels often appear to have several similar aspects. Even when a heroine is described as brave and capable, there are old gender stereotypes below the surface. Much research has been conducted about young adult literature. However, since the genre constantly changes (Strickland), a study of newly published novels should be an interesting addition to previous research. In this essay, I will conduct a comparative study of three popular fantasy novels in the young adult genre, published in 2015, to show that the persistent problem of characters in this genre is that they often are still based on outdated stereotypes. The three novels chosen for this study are: *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (hereafter called *Court*) by Sarah J. Maas, *Red Queen* by Victoria Aveyard and *An Ember in the Ashes* (hereafter called *Ember*) by Sabaa Tahir. All of them were written by American authors and belong to the young adult genre as well as romance and fantasy. *Court* was inspired by the story of the beauty and the beast. It follows a young hunter, Feyre, who kills a wolf in order to feed her family. But the wolf belongs to a magical people called the Fae. For the crime she has committed she must come live in an enchanted court in the Fae realm together with a mysterious captor. The protagonist of *Red Queen* is a young thief who has to steal in order to help provide for her family. When everything has failed her, she is mysteriously offered a place as a servant in the palace. In an accident she finds out that she has magical powers (that only the ruling class should have) and the king and queen decide to pretend that she is in fact royal and give her a place at court. There she struggles to fit in while also working for the rebels. The novel *Ember* follows both the slave girl and resistance spy Laia and the soldier Elias. Laia is trying to save her imprisoned brother by spying for the rebels and Elias is trying to escape the Empire. Both of these goals

are proven to be very difficult. They meet and eventually become friends in the middle of chaos.

The novels were chosen from a list on the web platform Goodreads, which is the largest site for book recommendations in the world (“About Goodreads”). In addition to other features on the platform, members on Goodreads may vote for their favorite novels published in that year. Based on the 2015 list for the best young adult novels (“YA Novels of 2015 (1429 books)”), I have chosen three top-rated novels. However, only top-rated novels that were the first in a series (i.e. not the novel in first place, as it was number four in a series, etc.) were chosen. The reason for this is that characters are often mostly introduced in the first novel of a series and then developed in the following novels. Furthermore, all of the novels have been on New York Times bestseller list in 2015. They are also on Amazon’s list of best young adult books in 2015. Since I would like to study stereotypes in novels that are appreciated by both readers and critics, three top rated novels seemed ideal.

Since some form of feminist stance is often taken in fantasy fiction (Raddeker 154), this might be expected in these novels as well, all of them featuring gifted female protagonists. However, I find that they fall in line with old stereotypes in many different ways. While these novels may not have been written with the intention of reinforcing gender stereotypes, these problematic issues appear implicitly in the narratives. The female protagonists are underdogs: a starving hunter, a thief, and a slave who all fight to support their families. The love interests have similarities as well: A “High Lord,” a crown prince, and a soldier from a powerful family. All of these men are normatively masculine, handsome and possess some kind of inhuman or overwhelming power (magical or otherwise). They also save the female protagonists on more than one occasion. Moreover, all of the novels have female main antagonists. Even a quick overview reveals that the novels are based on old ideas of what female and male characters should be like. In order to study this closer, I will analyze the female characters of the novels from a feminist perspective, comparing them to each other and to the male characters. The purpose of this study is to show that several gender stereotypes can be found in the novels, and how power is distributed among the characters who are supposed to act as role models for new generations of YA readers.

Post-feminism could provide one explanation for gender stereotypes being included in narratives, which will be discussed further in this essay. According to Ana

Jordan, post-feminism is too often inadequately defined (19). She argues for a particular understanding of this term, although stating that there can never be a concept of post-feminism that is accepted by everyone (29). This makes a clear definition even more important and in this essay, her definition will be utilized. She defines post-feminism as a

fundamentally ambivalent perspective that assumes that gender equality is a valid goal but that it has already been achieved. Basic feminist ideas are taken for granted, while feminism itself becomes embarrassingly anachronistic, a product of a firmly bygone social and political era. Gender is depoliticized and feminism becomes a lifestyle choice. (20)

Thus, since gender equality is already achieved, there is no need to be aware of gender stereotypes or sexism that is reproduced in society. This functions against feminism, which assumes that gender inequalities still exist and that women are disadvantaged compared to men. However, post-feminism is not to be confused with what Jordan calls backlash, a form of anti-feminism, which assumes that gender inequalities exist but that either equality is not a desirable goal or that feminism actually works against equality by making women more privileged than men (20). These concepts will be used in the analysis, in order to elaborate the discussion.

This type of study is important because the reading of romance fiction may be involved in shaping the reader's consciousness (Christian-Smith qtd. in Younger 107-8). Of course, what such an impact might be is difficult to discern. Linda Christian-Smith argues that romance fiction may create a traditional feminine identity through both narration and characterization that impacts the reader. While Ann Elizabeth Younger (170) has criticized Christian-Smith, she agrees that these novels might have an impact on young people's ideas of romance and what is expected of them in romantic relationships. She states that romance fiction from the 40s, 50s and 60s reproduced cultural ideologies that defined women by their relationships to men. Today atypical young adult novels give young people the possibility to re-imagine what romance should be like (112). Also Eliane Rubinstein-Avila calls for taking young adult literature seriously and to help young people see the norms that are promoted in texts (372). These aspects are especially important and interesting in fantasy novels, since sexist societies and stereotypical gender roles might be fully accepted as part of a fantasy world, where it would be rejected in a contemporary setting of a novel. Whether the reading of these novels have an impact on young

people or not, it is interesting to investigate what sort of characters are promoted and liked among young people today.

I will structure my essay along the following issues: representations of women in general, the protagonists' incapability, and the evil women in power. In "Silly Girls and Other Representations of Women," the general view of female characters in the novels is discussed, how they are perceived by other characters, and how the reader is encouraged to perceive them. In "The (In)Capable Protagonists" the female protagonists are discussed with regard to different stereotypes, such as women as carers, self-sacrificing, et cetera. In "Evil Women in Power" the main antagonists are viewed in terms of the patriarchal and sexist societies of the narratives. Together, these three aspects will form an overview of the implicit gender stereotypes in the novels.

Silly Girls and Other Representations of Women

In this section, the general view of female characters in the novels is discussed, as well as how they are perceived by other characters and how the reader is encouraged to perceive them. This is done by analyzing how characters treat or refer to groups of young women, by applying the notion of *male gaze*. Furthermore, women's passivity in romantic situations will be studied. In all of the novels, there are issues with how women are described or how they act. By repeatedly depicting girls and women in problematic ways gender stereotypes are reproduced.

In *Red Queen*, there are several women, but how they are described is at times sexist. One example of this is when the younger prince, Maven, retells an incident from a previous dance at the palace to the protagonist, a girl from the working class. In this quote the crown prince, Cal, is chased by girls and rescued by his little brother:

"Big brother [Cal, the crown prince] has to tolerate too many silly conversations and dance with a lot of annoying girls. I remember last year..." He [Maven, the little brother] stops to laugh at the memory. "Sonya Iral spent the entire time following him around, cutting into dances, trying to drag him away for some *fun*. I had to interfere and suffer through two songs with her to give Cal some respite."

The thought of the two brothers united against a legion of desperate girls makes me laugh, thinking about the lengths they must've gone to, to save each other. (Aveyard 174, italics in original)

It is obvious that neither of the brothers have a very favorable view of girls, at least not the ones in court, and neither has the protagonist. Apparently none of the girls has

anything interesting to talk about as indicated by the “silly conversations”. They are also perceived as “annoying.” Indeed, the girls are “desperate”, apparently doing anything for the crown prince to favor them and thereby getting closer to the crown and social power. Although, in this fantasy world, women (including noble women) take part in warfare, learn to use their magical abilities and fight on the same terms as men, the princes seem to possess an innate dislike for these girls whom they often spend time with. Perhaps it would be possible for the princes to feel some sympathy for the girls, since they were raised on much the same conditions in the palace. The princes should know better than anyone the pressure young people at the court face, but apparently girls are silly just because they are girls. The protagonist’s reaction, laughing along with the younger brother, although seeing the situation from an outside perspective, invites the reader to laugh as well. The girls’ desperation becomes comical, ending in an image of the princes running from the girls. Furthermore, one of the young women, Sonya, has tried to “drag [Cal] away for some *fun*.” Fun could possibly refer to some sort of sexual activity. One might wonder if it is the girl herself that has used that word, or Cal when retelling the story to his brother. Of course, this cannot be confirmed from the narrative. However, the word *fun* implies games or something not meant to have any lasting effect. If it is the girl who uses this word, she would be self-disparaging as their relationship would be meaningless. On the other hand, if it is Cal who uses this word, he is the one disparaging her. Either way, a desperate girl, pressured by her family, offering her body to the crown prince to gain his favor, would inspire more pity than humor. However, the princes do not understand the situation these girls are in. Instead, the passage indicates that the girls are perceived as sexually promiscuous and disparaged because of it. Furthermore, it is perhaps the fact that the girls are actively trying to gain the crown prince’s attention that is their greatest mistake. They are trying to take action and through this the power that the active one holds in the narrative and are being punished for it by becoming unappealing to the princes. As is common in fairy stories, they are perceived as the “agent[s] of [their] own demise” (Smith 435), since their activity becomes a metaphor for women’s empowerment and liberation. In fairy stories, this was viewed as a threat to society that had to be quenched and thus the women were punished. This seems to occur today as well.

A very similar scene takes place in *Ember*. In the fundamentally patriarchal society of this fantasy world, women have no place in government or the army

(although exceptions are made). Only men have politically important positions (Tahir 105). Women can only improve their status by marrying a powerful man. As such they are very forward at parties, and dress “tantalizingly” (105). As in *Red Queen*, an image of a group of girls is created: “a knot of silk-clad, bejewelled [. . .] girls lurking near the edges of the tent, some of whom are watching [Elias, the male protagonist] in a disturbingly predatory way” (108). The girls are looking at Elias, who is what might be called an eligible bachelor, young, handsome and heir to a powerful family. Here the girls are subjected to what Laura Mulvey calls the *male gaze*. Although her theory is mainly about film, it is possible to see how different characters in the novels may adopt such male gaze in relation to each other. According to Mulvey, the woman is “tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (834) and both women and men can be claimed to watch women from the perspective of the heterosexual male protagonist. Heterosexual men identify with the perspective of the abovementioned prince and want to be him, so that they can be the ones to objectify and possess the women in the story. The women too watch the heroine and each other through the male gaze, that is, as objects to be desired. Unconsciously they wish to take her place, so that they in turn can be objectified and desired. Mulvey states that men are the ones looking, objectifying, and as such they are active while women, that are objects for the gaze, are being watched and thus passive (837). Also in novels, gazes can be significant in that the reader is asked to “view,” or “read” women through the male gaze. The reader “watch” through the focalized characters and identifies with them, and thus the male gaze is transferred from visual studies to literature.

In these novels, written mainly for women and where the protagonists are female, one should expect the women to set the point of view, to dominate the perspective. And yet, the male gaze repeatedly results in an objectification of women. They dress revealingly to draw men’s attention and become passive sexual objects. What is worse, they are also holding the gaze, as shown by their “disturbingly predatory way” of looking at Elias. As in the previous example from *Red Queen*, the young women taking action (and power) become unappealing, or “disturbing” to the men. They are offering their bodies to powerful men as a means of getting closer to the social and economic stability that they can provide. The difference between the example in *Red Queen* and this one, is that here the young women are not perceived as silly or desperate. Instead they are lurking and scheming predators, which seems

even worse. There are always women willing to have sex with the male characters of the novel, indicating that in this fantasy world, noble women are viewed as sexually promiscuous. This is seen as something negative, since the women are disparaged because of it and perceived as not worth as much.

When another of Elias' friends is rejected by the woman he is in love with (Helene, the only female soldier of their group), the friend is soon thereafter "looking for solace in the back garden with some redhead" (109). As in *Red Queen*, these young women are probably pressured by their parents to make good matches in marriage and are trying to procure a powerful man with the means they have: their bodies. This is expected of them, and Elias uses this to his advantage. This becomes evident when one of Elias' friends says that if Elias reminds the girls that he will become Emperor, they might be able to "get two each" (109), again referring to sexual activity. Elias likes the idea of spending the evening with two of these girls, and if he was not busy he would have gone along with his friend's suggestion (109). Elias is actively against visiting the whorehouses or raping slaves (107) which are common practices for soldiers in this fantasy world. He is generally perceived as a character with high morals and a clear view of what is right and what is wrong. The girls at the party are clearly willing to offer him their bodies, but going along with this would mean taking advantage of the situation. Elias, as heir to a powerful family would be using his station to gain sexual favors from young women. However, Elias has obviously not considered this and does not think he is using the women. Yet, the reader is encouraged to like Elias and to view him as one of few of noble family that sees society for what it is. Thus, the reader is encouraged to accept his idea of these girls. Moreover, the reader is likely to adopt the subjectivity of the focalized protagonist (Nikolajeva 146), which also makes his view more acceptable to the reader. The negative connotations connected to the girls also reinforce the idea that it is acceptable to use them. This becomes even clearer when Elias is discovering an interest for his best friend, Helene. He thinks that she is not "a quick tumble or a night's indiscretion" (Tahir 236). He realizes that "[s]he deserves better", which implies that the other girls do not. It is alright to use them, since they are willing, no matter their situation, which also is the view the reader adopts, through the focalization.

In both *Red Queen* and *Ember* the image of women as sexually promiscuous is repeatedly depicted, whether they are desperate and silly or predatory. In the end, the

young women's social value is based on their husbands. Because of that their primary goal is to find a suitable husband. This has traditionally been a common narrative in young adult romance literature (Younger 111). Perhaps this is not as prominent with regard to the protagonists, but it is still portrayed in a plethora of other characters in the novels. Even more importantly, the patriarchal fantasy worlds created in the novels simultaneously make young women behave this way and belittle them for it.

Promiscuous females are present in *Court* as well. The most prominent example of this is a fertility ritual, where Fae women (magical creatures that mostly look human) are gathering to offer their bodies to Tamlin, the protagonist's love interest, since it is an honor to be chosen for the ritual. Also men gather for this ritual, since they know that after the ritual the leftover women find other people to be with instead. Tamlin is overtaken by "strange magic" (Maas 194), and is unable to control himself, while the women come to him or other men more than willingly. Tamlin clearly has the power in this situation, since he can pick any woman he wants for this ritual, while they are passively waiting to be picked. If the Lords want female company, finding willing women never seems to be an issue. Furthermore, the women are not respected by the men that take advantage of them, as demonstrated by another High Lord who has a "supple-bodied [Fae woman] perched on his lap" (377). The protagonist thinks that the lord will tire of the Fae woman soon, and after that he will leave her. It is the lord who has the power, both over the protagonist and over the Fae woman. He can use and abuse them to his liking, since he will leave her as soon as he *tires* of her. This puts pressure on the Fae woman to keep the lord's attention, if she wants him to stay with her. Nowhere is it mentioned that she could be the one to tire of him.

In *Ember* women are described as fundamentally different from men. Although Helene, the male protagonist's (Elias') best friend, has grown up together with the other soldiers, she is still perceived as very different with regard to feelings, because of gender.

'I have *not* forgotten that Helene's [a soldier, and Elia's best friend] a girl.'

'I am not talking about physically. I'm talking about in her head. Girls think about things like this differently than we do. She's in love with you. And whatever happened between you two is because of it. I promise you.' (Tahir 286, italics in original)

Helene has many traits that could be seen as masculine. She is a very capable soldier and fighter and she can drink her fellow soldiers under the table (286). Her one weakness is that she is a woman and since that is a physical flaw it is the one thing she will not be able to change. This is also demonstrated in how the soldier academy treats her. That she is a woman is something no one is supposed to forget. When they graduate they receive their ceremonial armor, and while they made Elias' "armour to accentuate [his] body's power, they made [Helene's] to accentuate her beauty" (79). Again the male gaze is present. Helene is supposed to be an object for the other male students to look at. It seems that she wants this attention as well, when she "laughs, girlish and preposterously alluring, drawing the attention of the other students" (79). Through the male gaze she is constantly made passive and powerless. The academy is making sure that no one forgets what she is, while emphasizing the differences between women and men.

In *Court* the objectification of the protagonist becomes painfully clear when Feyre, after having entered into a binding contract with one of the High Lords of the Seven Courts, is forced to accompany him to several parties, dressed only in body paint and "two long shafts of gossamer, just wide enough to cover [her] breasts" (Maas 347). The same High Lord later addresses her as his belonging (348) and she submits to his will without actually voicing her disapproval. That he is the one in power is obvious. Moreover, although she does not have the power to change anything, she is ashamed of her position. However, her dress (or lack thereof), is described as pretty and supposedly she is meant to look sexy. Readers "watch" her through the male gaze and desire her place, and thus desire the objectification she is exposed to.

It is probable that the disparaging attitude toward women in these novels is used to emphasize how exceptional the protagonists are and how different they are. Since the women in the novels in general are perceived as promiscuous, the shy protagonists stand out as exceptionally "good" women. However, the representation of the protagonists has issues as well. In romantic scenes with the protagonists, men are most often active and women passive, which reinforce the common stereotype (Smith 427). This is problematic, because romance in fiction may create a traditional feminine identity that impacts the reader's expectations on their own relationships (Christian-Smith qtd. in Younger 107-8). It then becomes problematic if female protagonists do not take initiatives or even are punished when they do, despite the

protagonist being perceived as strong and capable. Here, traditional values are hiding beneath the new-thinking, feminist facade of modern fantasy fiction.

There are many examples of men being active and women passive in these novels. For instance this scene from *Ember*:

He pushes me to the wall, heat flaring from his hands and tingling across my skin, sending my heart into a feverish beat. My own reaction to him, confusion tumbled with head-spinning want, shocks me into silence. (Tahir 276)

He obviously takes initiative and her reaction is silence, even though she wants him. The one who holds initiative holds the power in the scene. However, the issue is not that men take initiatives, it is that it happens very often in these novels (Maas 118, 143, 159, 172, 209, 228, 245, 251, 368, 377, 379; Aveyard 157, 218, 227, 279, 306, 322, 383; Tahir 160, 171, 197, 230, 263, 268, 306, 372, 413). Men take initiative significantly more often than women (Maas 173-4, 203, 210, 246; Aveyard 327-8; Tahir 79, 158, 264, 283, 374), regarding all levels of intimacy, from holding hands to sexual activity. It is also common that the female protagonists consider taking initiative, but stop themselves. This is especially prominent in *Court*, for instance when Feyre wants to lean back into Tamlin's chest, but does not "dare" (Maas 174), or when it is an effort for her not to reach out and take his hand (177). That she does not dare to take action indicates that she either is scared of rejection, which seems a little unlikely since he has shown interest before, or that she explicitly is showing her fear of moving outside of the expected gender norms. Instead she keeps to the safety inside of norms and remains passive, while he is the one in power.

Active women in fairy stories have often been punished in some way, and perceived as the "agent[s] of [their] own demise" (Smith 435), since their activity was viewed as a metaphor for a threat to society that had to be quenched. Some of this can still be seen in novels today. One example from *Court*, is when Tamlin initiates romance and Feyre takes the next step, initiating sexual activity (Maas 245). The morning after, she is forced to leave the court, since he has realized that he loves her and will have to send her away in order to protect her (249). In the narrative, this can function as a punishment for actively initiating a sexual relationship, and as such for taking power as the active one in that scene. Another example of this is found in *Red Queen*, when Mare takes initiative, in an attempt to persuade Cal to choose her and the rebellion over his kingdom (Aveyard 328). But she is mistaken and he does not

choose her. In a way, the structure of the narrative functions as a punishment for daring to be active.

In this section I have shown how the male gaze is present in all of the novels, reinforcing gender stereotypes about women as promiscuous, silly and flirts. When women try to take power and be active agents, they are made unattractive and unappealing to men, and forced to subject themselves to the male gaze and maintain any stereotyped femininity the men find desirable. This reinforces the stereotype that women should be passive in romance. Moreover, constantly reading about passive women and active men, where women explicitly hesitate to act or are punished when active, is problematic. All of this might affect the readers' expectations on their own romantic relationships and in the long run be a contributing factor to a negative development in gender roles. Furthermore, constantly watching women through the male gaze reinforces objectification of women as the norm, even in novels written by women, mostly for women.

The (In)Capable Protagonists

Following my remarks on the passivity versus activity of characters of different gender, I will now study the female protagonists. The intention is to show that although they at times can be defined as strong, they actually often follow conventional expectations.

Deborah Kaplan claims that contemporary fantasy fiction gives girls the chance to “act for themselves rather than being restricted to the stereotyped role of heroine or damsel in distress” (267). Perhaps girls are less restricted in contemporary fantasy fiction. However, behind the “girl power” facade hide old stereotypes. Christine Mains et al. agree with this, stating that female protagonists often are passive rather than active heroes and that the full potential of the female hero seldom is realized (180). Indeed, the female protagonists rarely possess power and despite being described as strong and capable, conform to stereotypes. Female heroes have already managed to create changes in how society view women and have the potential for even greater changes (Mains et al. 189), but such positive development requires strong protagonists in modern fantasy fiction, to carry on the torch. Since strength is such a vague and ambiguous term, it is necessary to clearly define it. In this essay, *strength* will denote protagonists that exhibit norm-defying behavior or possess power

in the story. According to Roberta Seelinger Trites, power is everywhere in novels for adolescent readers (*Disturbing the Universe* x). In feminist theory, power is often discussed in terms of “power to” which means the ability or capability to do things in contrast to “power over” which refers to domination (French qtd. in Trites, *Disturbing the Universe* 6) and it is in the very nature of power to both empower and repress (Foucault qtd. in Trites, *Disturbing the Universe* x). It seems clear that authors, critics and readers prefer a strong female protagonist. Rubinstein-Avila has studied how critics of young adult literature write about female protagonists, and what type of protagonist they recommend. She states that strength rarely denotes physical strength, boisterous behavior or talking back. Female protagonists should use their inner strength without disturbing the patriarchy too much (366). Moreover, Rubinstein-Avila remarks that positive female protagonists often do not conform to typical stereotypes for women. However, most critics recommend protagonists that *do* conform to conventional expectations (366). What critics seem to strive for when using the term *strong*, is a norm-defying protagonist, even if there is a disagreement of which characters that do defy norms.

A woman can be strong *and* be a carer, but it becomes an issue if this image is repeatedly portrayed in novels for young adults. Rubinstein-Avila states that most protagonists that are considered positive by critics also are depicted as “caretakers”, expected to take care of someone or something (366). The stereotype of woman as carer is not a problem in itself. However, to reinforce such stereotypes and hiding them behind a strong and capable surface could affect readers negatively. It is thus interesting, that the stereotype of women as carers is considered positive by critics. What the reader comes to believe represent a strong woman, are actually the very stereotypes feminists are trying to change. As will be shown below, all of the protagonists in this study conform to the stereotype of woman as carer.

In *Court*, Feyre is taking on the responsibility of providing for her father and two older sisters because of a promise she made to her dying mother (Maas 16). Her greatest wish is to live a quiet life with her invalid father and to have the time to paint (18). The wish to paint is often present in the narrative, where Feyre has to repress the urge to study beautiful scenery and wishing for paint and brushes, since she sees it as something useless when providing for a family (56). From the start she sacrifices her own goal for others. Throughout the novel Feyre is dedicated to her mission, but when she meets the mysterious High Lord, Tamlin, the nature of this changes. When she no

longer lives with her family, she cannot physically provide for them. This task is left to Tamlin who has vast resources and can with magical means make them rich and well respected (253). But Feyre cannot let go of her caretaking duties and much of her time is dedicated to trying to warn them of dangers ahead. An example of this is Feyre trying to learn how to write, in order to warn the family about the plague that is threatening the human realm (119). As long as she is unsuccessful in this, she is unable to enjoy her new life. She feels shame when enjoying good food and taking the time to paint: “I don’t know why I feel so tremendously ashamed of myself for leaving them. Why it feels so selfish and horrible to paint. [. . .] I know I shouldn’t, but I can’t help it” (171). Although she is not physically caring for the family, it seems to be in her very nature to constantly try to help them. Caring for your family is of course not strange. However, the family, especially her sisters, are portrayed as selfish, spoiled and ungrateful people. The reader is encouraged to dislike them, and because of that Feyre’s constant struggle to help them seems overly self-sacrificing. It seems that she is conforming to the stereotype of the woman as carer as well as the self-sacrificing woman.

Also in *Red Queen*, the female protagonist Mare, is providing for her family, in the only way she can, by stealing. Her family is reluctant to accept this help since they see it as morally wrong. Mare does feel bad about stealing from her own community, but since this is the only way she can do something for the family she feels desperate (Aveyard 14). Moreover, she has also assumed responsibility for a boy in the village, whom she cares for. When he is conscripted she is willing to risk everything in order to save him, by trying to steal enough money to pay for smuggling them both out of the country (25). Once the opportunity to bring her brothers back from the war arises, she takes it, and leaves the responsibility of providing for the family to them (87). Thereafter she is dedicated to her own survival and the rebellion she is part of. It may seem that she thereby is giving up her role as the carer, but she is constantly trying to protect the friend, and puts his safety above the rebellion that is so important to her. The friend is aware of this, and constantly tells her that she does not have to protect him (166). However, she does not stop and asks the rebel leader to keep him away from the rebellion (193). But it is all in vain and he is captured by the royal guard (256). Predictably she instantly tries to save him. She would have traded herself for his life (257), but decides to stage a rescue mission. When the friend sees

her, he whispers that he knew that she would rescue him (264). Indeed, it was not difficult to predict, since she never gives up the role as the carer.

In *Ember*, the protagonist, Laia, is a carer in a different way than the previously discussed protagonists. Everything she does is fueled by her wish to save her brother and the guilt she feels for leaving him behind in the beginning of the novel. She constantly uses the thought of her brother to get through terrifying situations, sometimes even hearing his voice in her head (Tahir 100). As such, her actions are driven by her failed role as carer. She also feels responsible for another slave girl who accompanies Laia on some of her adventures, as shown when they are close to being detected outside of the academy: “The Commandant will catch us. Skies, I shouldn’t have brought Izzi [the slave girl]. I shouldn’t have put her at risk” (273). Moreover, she is a carer in a more literal meaning of the word. She is a slave and as such has to take care of her mistress by cleaning and washing clothes, among other things. Laia commits to the role of carer of her brother and friend, but naturally wants to escape being a slave.

As stated above, depicting female protagonists as carers is not a problem on its own. However, if it is done constantly, and presented as part of their very strength, it becomes a problem. Strength signifies a norm-defying protagonist, but caring seems like a typical stereotype among female protagonists, and not norm-defying at all. This stereotype is reproduced in all of the novels and can be assumed to be part of many novels published in recent years. It seems that strong young women should also be responsible, which is fine, but some exceptions to this rule would have been refreshing.

Furthermore, Younger states that a positive female protagonist should be independent even when in a relationship. She recommends romance literature for young adults that defy tradition and where the protagonist, although enjoying the romance, sees “the relationship as simply another aspect of her existence, and not the central space in her life” (112, underlining in original). It is not falling in love, or getting married that is the issue. Instead, the problem is that the protagonist loses herself, her interests and her life goals and gives everything up for the relationship. These types of narratives reinforce the idea that a woman needs a man in order to be happy, as well as heteronormativity (among other issues that lay outside the scope of this essay). Thus, like Younger, I view independence in a relationship as a positive trait in female protagonists.

The protagonist is repeatedly distracted by men in *Ember*, even at times which are crucial to her goals. Laia is driven by her wish to save her brother which proves to be very difficult and also a task that must be done quickly. However, when Laia finds the resistance and asks them for help, she quickly becomes distracted by a man that she finds attractive: “I realize I’m staring and glance away, heat rising in my cheeks. Suddenly, the looks he’s been getting from the younger women in the cavern make sense” (Tahir 58). This would not be a problem if Laia had not just a few hours before witnessed the murder of her grandparents, who raised her, and her brother becoming captured, to be interrogated, tortured and executed. That Laia at this difficult moment has time or interest to stop and think about the attractiveness of a man makes her seem easily distracted and weak-willed. She is upset by the traumatic experience, but tries to suppress it and to act indifferent and capable so that the resistance will trust her and help her (90). However, her fascination with the man is shown at several times, for example when she later catches herself staring into his eyes for too long (93). That he has such a great impact on her at such a difficult time, indicates that men are very important in Laia’s life. Laia is not portrayed as an independent woman. She is easily distracted by handsome men and cares instinctively what they think of her. Here, Laia’s strength is hiding the stereotypes that are reinforced in her actions. She is strong when she decides to seek the rebels and ask for their help. But once there, the stereotype of women as flirts shines through the narrative. This might be difficult for a reader to detect without close-reading. Romance is expected in this novel that belongs in the genres young adult, fantasy and romance. However, as shown above, to be this distracted by men after such a traumatic experience, when desperate to save her brother, is definitely not empowering.

Court is perhaps the most conventional romantic fantasy novel of the three in this analysis. This can be seen in Feyre’s lack of independence. After having lived at the court for a few months, she is sent away for her own protection. Once back with her family she realizes that she was indeed in love with the High Lord that abducted her and that she needs to get back to him. But Tamlin, the High Lord, has been abducted himself, by the evil Fae queen and Feyre decides to try saving him. The odds are against her, but she is willing to die for this grand gesture, despite only having known Tamlin a few months: “If Amarantha ripped out my throat, at least I would die doing something for him [. . .]. At least Tamlin would know it was for him, and that I loved him” (Maas 289). Here Feyre is demonstrating her lack of

independence. It seems that this romance is the most important thing in her life and she states herself that she would be willing to give up everything to free him. She even goes as far as selling her soul to another High Lord (334). Feyre may seem strong and active when she goes on her quest to save her beloved. However, the fact that she is utterly self-sacrificing is just another reinforced stereotype. Self-sacrificing female protagonists were popular decades ago, however this now seems to be repackaged as *strength*, glorifying the self-sacrificing female (Rubinstein-Avila 369). Furthermore, this is deceptive, as Christian-Smith states: “a young woman may [. . .] be portrayed as independent, self-sufficient and strong, but she ultimately capitulates to her ‘true’ need and desire to be attached to an appropriate male” (qtd. in Younger 111). This is clearly the case in *Court*. Feyre has her own goals: she would like to be a painter and perhaps to travel the world. However, once she meets Tamlin everything else is forgotten and she is willing to die in a quest that seems utterly hopeless.

Red Queen differs from the other novels and in many passages of the novel Mare, the protagonist, is depicted as independent. Although she does fall for the prince she knows that her revolution is more important. As they are sharing their first kiss, she thinks that he one day will realize that she is a rebel and thus his enemy. She does not think that their relationship will last through that (Aveyard 228). She is not willing to give up her beliefs for him. That one of the three novels shows a protagonist that keeps her independence although being in love is a good sign. Showing different types of protagonists, and different approaches to relationships, makes this issue less of a problem than it would have been if every protagonist fully lost herself in her love interest. This indicates that at least some of the novels published today show approaches to relationships, where the protagonist does not forget her goals or is expected to give everything up in order to stay in that relationship. Regarding this, the protagonist of *Red Queen* is a positive example for young readers and a refreshing change to the protagonists of the other novels in this study.

Both in *Court* and *Red Queen*, the protagonists are initially depicted as capable and feisty but soon change. They are capable of providing for their families by stealing or hunting. Feyre (in *Court*) overcomes many challenges, captures or kills several deadly magical creatures. Mare (in *Red Queen*) always has a plan and tries to do something when faced with challenges. She also learns to use her magical abilities in a short amount of time. Moreover, both of them are prone to talking before

thinking. They could both be described as strong protagonists. However, as time passes, the portrayals of both of these characters change. In *Court*, Feyre becomes self-patronizing and starts blaming herself for things that are not her fault, as for instance when she decides to go back to the Seven Courts to save Tamlin she feels guilty about not trying harder to solve the mysteries at the court. Her overwhelming self-disparaging attitude makes her seem both powerless and overly dramatic:

I'd known something was wrong. I'd known he was in trouble [. . .]. [A]nd yet I'd stopped looking for answers, stopped fighting it, glad - so selfishly *glad* - to be able to set down [. . .] that [. . .] part of me [. . .]. I'd let him send me home. [. . .] I hadn't tried to save him. (268, italics in original)

Indeed, she has not yet taken any real action. She was abducted by Tamlin and then forced to leave him, which she accepted without much of a complaint. However, it seems that she was manipulated by characters in the novel from the start, which she does not seem to understand. That she blames herself is unnecessary. Furthermore, she has very low thoughts of herself as evident when she is surprised that the High Lord thinks that saving her life is worth the trouble (137) or when she thinks of herself as a coward (242). Also Mare in *Red Queen* feels that she is to blame for everything that has happened, even though she was manipulated from the very beginning as well.

'I'll protect you as long as I can,' [Cal] whispers. [. . .] 'I don't deserve it,' I mutter back, but I squeeze his hand in thanks all the same. *I betrayed him, I ruined his life, and this is how he repays me.*" (Aveyard 357, italics in original)

It is obvious that most of what has happened is not Mare's fault. Still, she blames herself. Moreover, she is self-patronizing when she repeatedly refers to herself as a *little girl* in her thoughts (183, 337). This might be a reflection of the fact that other people do this as well, for example calling her "little lightning girl" (189). At one time when she is running alongside a man she thinks that her "little legs fight to keep up with his long strides" (110). She is literally belittling herself. She is a young woman and should be treated as such, both by others and by herself. As these characters are portrayed as capable on the surface, with regard to abilities, it is odd that they repeatedly disparage themselves. It is difficult to find a purpose of this. Perhaps the protagonists' attitudes are meant to increase drama or to make them seem more like victims at the end of the novels, making them more like damsels in distress, that need saving (which to some degree happens in all of the novels). The narratives initially

show strong and capable protagonists, which gradually change. But the change is not entirely easy to discern and if unnoticed by the reader, the portrayals send an ambiguous message. If these clearly pretty and gifted, even strong, young women cannot accept themselves, how will the young readers be able to accept *themselves*?

The protagonist of *Ember*, on the other hand, is portrayed differently. She is scared and self-patronizing from the very beginning. She does not view herself as capable of anything. Although she is always questioning her own abilities, she is always active. She does things despite being terrified, which could make her the bravest of the three female protagonists. In many ways she does defy expectations. However, the narrative gets in the way. Perhaps if Laia was alone and not held back by the structure of the narrative, she would be able to show her strength more clearly to the reader. Instead the second protagonist, Elias, is constantly there to save her, as demonstrated when he effectively brings Laia and her friend Izzi back to the academy undetected (Tahir 274) or when she is attacked by shadowy creatures and Elias is there to save her (188). Thus the opportunity of making Laia a capable and active heroine is missed. Instead she is sacrificed in order to reinforce gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles.

Rubinstein-Avila states that “few, if any, [female protagonists] threaten patriarchy or challenge mainstream societal norms” (367). This is indeed true for these protagonists. Although they may seem like strong characters on the surface, they do conform to many stereotypes if studied closer. None of them threaten patriarchy in these novels. Conversely, in *Court*, the protagonist helps to reinstate patriarchy. In *Red Queen* the queen takes power. However, instead of ruling herself, she gives the title as king to her son continuing the patriarchal tradition. In *Ember*, the patriarchy continues as well, the emperor being replaced by another male ruler. There was a slim chance that the female soldier (not the protagonist) would have won the title of empress. But at the end of the novel it is revealed that she was not destined to win (Tahir 445). The omniscient half-gods that seem to rule behind the scenes knew she never actually stood a chance against the three men she was fighting. There seems to be a recession in this area. Female protagonists in some of the most popular fantasy novels for young adults in 2015, do not seem to fight patriarchy at all. In the eighties female characters were often cast as heroes, embarking on epic quests. The worlds in which they had their adventures were at times patriarchal, giving the heroines the chance to cast off old structures (Raddeker 156). This is obviously not the case in

these novels. Although patriarchal societies are portrayed in these fantasy narratives, the protagonists of the novels do not fight it or threaten it.

To conclude this section, although many of the protagonists can be seen as strong, they still follow expectations in many ways. When gender stereotypes hide below strong surfaces, narratives redefine what it means to be strong. A strong female is capable and feisty, but also a self-sacrificing carer who is willing to give up her life goals in order to stay in a relationship. This development is the opposite of empowering and thus dangerous. Moreover, female heroes in novels have the capacity to change the way women are viewed in society (Mains et al. 189), making these novels even more important. However, that necessitates that strong and capable heroes are portrayed, and not protagonists that are strong only on the surface.

Evil Women in Power

In this section, I will discuss the theme of the evil witch. The purpose of this discussion is to demonstrate that the antagonists can be seen as empowered women fighting against patriarchy or as representations of the danger of diverting from patriarchy. Moreover, the evil women are created by the structure of society, which can function as a more or less successful critique of patriarchy.

All of the novels have female main antagonists that can be seen as evil witches of the stories. It is important to note that of course not every young adult, fantasy novel has female antagonists, and thus men can be represented as equally evil. However, all of the novels in this study actually have women as antagonists. Hélène Bowen Raddeker sees a recent development away from women rulers as nurturing and beneficent in fantasy fiction, toward sadistic female rulers or discriminatory matriarchies. This can be interpreted as a reflection of contemporary post-feminism (161). Post-feminists claim that gender equality is already achieved, and that it is unnecessary to be aware of feminist issues (Jordan 20). However, when unaware of these issues, the danger of reverting to a prefeminist sexism is much greater.

The implications of post-feminism or backlash in literature can be seen in the fairy story *Rapunzel*. According to Angela Smith, early fairy stories portrayed evil witches as old hags and even as maternal. This changed drastically in the versions of *Rapunzel* from 1980 and forward. Thereafter, the witch was described as a beautiful woman, taller than the men of the story, with “red hair, heavy eye make-up, and a

corset” (431). This version of the witch is not maternal at all. Smith sees this change as a reaction to the emancipation of women that took place around that time. The witch’s dominating and powerful demeanor emphasizes the threat that liberated career women were thought to pose to society. The witch poses a threat not only to men, by emasculating them, but also to women since she undermines their biological roles as mothers (436). Thus, Smith believes that the change of the witch is a warning against the gender shifts in politics in society (431). This is interesting, because such great advances had been made to emancipate women, but later versions of *Rapunzel*, from 1993, explicitly reject women’s empowerment. The story acts as a warning against giving women such power and “of the dangers of diverging from traditional gender roles” (436). Based on Smith’s reasoning it can be implied that also the witches of the novels in this study has feminist and post-feminist messages. Like the witch in *Rapunzel* after 1980, the antagonists in the novels in this study are beautiful, deadly and threatening. As such, they could be read as warnings of the implications of empowering women. This is most likely a sign of post-feminism and not backlash, since the authors probably have not explicitly tried to reject women’s empowerment in their narratives. Instead this shows how unimportant feminist issues are perceived to be in contemporary society. However, in the three novels, the antagonists rebel against patriarchal societies that deny them power and could thus be interpreted as critique of patriarchy. This will be discussed further below.

In *Court*, the main antagonist, Amarantha, is a high Fae from another continent. She is the only powerful woman in the novel that is actually part of the plot. Amarantha was previously part of a foreign Fae king’s army, as his “most deadly commander” (Maas 129). She was sent to the Seven Courts as a diplomat. But she defied the king’s orders and decided to claim the Seven Courts for herself. The king accepts this, but will not tolerate such defiance a second time, which Feyre overhears two servants discussing (372). This indicates that the king is more powerful than Amarantha. As the most deadly commander in the king’s army, her physical ability to fight should be superior. However, it is through charm and cunning that she deceives the High Lords, literally stealing their hearts, and through that their magical abilities, rendering them virtually powerless (although superior to the other Fae) (395-6). Although Amarantha is powerful enough to practically own the High Lords and their courts (342-3), once the spell is broken by the protagonist, Feyre, Amarantha is quickly discarded. Apparently the king’s commander is not powerful enough to battle

even one of the High Lords of the Seven Courts, on equal terms: “Amarantha screeched, kicking at Tamlin [the High Lord that Feyre is in love with], lashing at him with her dark magic [. . .]. She couldn’t touch him” (405). The image created is not one of an epic battle between somewhat equal enemies, but rather a hysterical woman battling a superior man. Despite being a legendary commander, her power lies in her cunning and charm, and not in any other ability and this is not enough for her to control the courts. Either way, Amarantha is powerful, but not powerful enough and more noticeably not more powerful than the lords and king.

In old beliefs in witchcraft, worldwide, the witch’s source of power was thought to be her sexuality (Rountree 224). Andrea Dworkin believes this is because men fear women’s sexuality “as a projection of their fears about their own sexual prowess” (qtd. in Rountree 224). Whether this is true or not is difficult to judge. Smith states that the witch is perceived as predatory and dangerous since she is described as more alluring (435). Amarantha is certainly sexually assertive, as evident when she uses her power over the courts to gain sexual favors from one of the High Lords. Her allure, cunning and charm have proven to be a threat to the High Lords, since she actually was able to become queen. However, the protagonist soon breaks the curse and the High Lords regain their power. The protagonist helps reinstating patriarchy and the evil woman, who thought she had the right to rule, is killed. Thus, this can be seen as a strong message against matriarchy. It could also be a reflection of contemporary post-feminism and the effect it has had on society. Fantasy fiction has often had feminist themes (Raddeker 154), however post-feminist ideas have become prominent in recent fantasy fiction (161). Since we have come so far with regard to emancipating women, the need to show women’s empowerment in popular culture is thought to be less prominent (Storey 164). However, the danger with post-feminism is reverting to a pre-feminism sexism instead. If women in power are repeatedly depicted as evil, patriarchy reverts to being the only sensible option. The other novels exhibit similar post-feminist tendencies, as will be shown below.

The evil woman in power is evident in *Red Queen* as well. While reading this novel it was increasingly puzzling why the queen was constantly mentioned as the antagonist, when it was the king who was perceived as having more power than the queen, as the protagonist observes: “like any queen, she hates the power the king holds over her” (Aveyard 110). Although the queen can provide advice, it is the king who has the power to make decisions (84). However, the king blames the queen when

their plans go wrong (246-7). The queen is thus disadvantaged. If she does something right the king receives credit, but if she does something wrong she will be blamed. This is a situation which she does not seem to accept and at the end of the novel she takes the power from the king. She uses her cunning to come into position to murder the king, and she uses her power, both as queen, and her magical ability, to make it look like the crown prince is the murderer. She has won and shown that she indeed was the more powerful person. But instead of rejoicing over a capable woman finally taking power in one of these novels, the reader is encouraged to hate the queen because of her sadistic behaviour.

Throughout *Red Queen*, the reader is encouraged to blame the queen for everything that happens. Mare thinks of her new title as princess as “the queen’s weapon” (171), not even mentioning the king although he was the one giving the orders. It is also the queen that the protagonist seems most afraid of and not the king (192). Once the queen has won, the king dies gracefully. The queen uses her magical abilities to force Cal to pierce his father with a sword. In this moment, the king is portrayed as a betrayed husband and a loving father. He tells Cal that he is not to blame himself later (335-41). It is easy to forget, that the king indeed is no saint and has made several mistakes. He is the one who has had the power to change things in the country, but has chosen to continue the exploit of the working class. In the end, the king’s forgiving attitude makes the reader feel sorry for him, blaming the queen for everything bad that has happened.

Furthermore, the queen is blamed because of other things as well. In this novel mothers in general are said to be responsible for raising their children correctly, making them good people (182). The queen is also the one who is supposed to lead the king in the right direction, which the previous, good, queen was believed to be capable of (182). With the evil queen at the king’s side, the reader is encouraged to think that it is no wonder that the king is making bad decisions and the young prince becomes evil. The queen was responsible and is now to blame for everything. This makes the reader wish for a sensible man to take back power, again showing a post-feminist perspective or a sexist perspective. This could be viewed as sexist, since no women are portrayed as suitable candidates for the throne, whether among noble class or rebels. Not even the protagonist would be a good option on her own, although she could be an empathic queen if Cal was the powerful king. Cal is an option for the crown on his own, as would the dead king be, had he still been alive, since he showed

such redeeming qualities when dying. In the dying scene, the king is forgiven by Cal and the protagonist. The reader is invited to believe that he was misled by the queen and misunderstood and that he would have been a good king from the beginning if accompanied by the right queen. Either way, the reader along with the protagonist understands that patriarchy is the only way, since there are no capable women present. That the best combination to rule is seen as a loving queen and a strict king could, furthermore, reinforce gender roles. Women are seen as emotional and loving, in charge of raising children, while men are strict and the ones in power.

Lastly, the Commandant in *Ember* is another example of an evil woman in power. She is the leader of the country's greatest military academy. Not only is she portrayed as utterly evil, she takes pleasure in inflicting pain on anyone. Apart from her sadistic behavior, her actions can more clearly be explained by the society in the novel. The academy accepts at most one female student each year (for no explained reason), and with the very harsh climate of the school, she was probably at a disadvantage from the very beginning. To survive and avoid rape or other terrifying things that happen at the academy, she would have to become a better fighter than the other male students; weakness was not an option. At one point she was still not powerful enough and was raped by someone. That the responsibility is placed on women to avoid rape is a sign of the misogynistic society of the novel. Instead of teaching the citizens of society that rape is wrong, women are encouraged to learn to protect themselves and hide their bodies. That even a gifted fighter like the Commandant is raped indicates that the situation for most women, even women of higher social class, must be impossible. The Commandant accepts this situation, adopts the motto "always victorious" and learns that weakness is not an option. She hated the child that was the result of the incident and wanted to kill it as soon as it was born. Instead she left the child for a tribeswoman to find, in what she later regards as a moment of weakness (418-9). When she after six years is reunited with her son (Elias, one of the protagonists of *Ember*), she hates him as a sign of her own weakness and takes as much, or more, pleasure in tormenting him as others. Moreover, she had to face the disapproval of her father, whom did not like her being chosen to join the military. However good she was at fighting and could do anything that a son would have been able to, she was not good enough and with the patriarchal society of the novel, she is not allowed to inherit the position of head of the family. Even though she is Commandant of the academy, her father does not express any pride in her. When

her son is reunited with the family, he is taking the place as heir (184, 419). As such she not only views the son as a sign of her own weakness, but a competitor for her father's attention and the place as heir. Weakness is unacceptable to her, and she is willing to do anything to win power and recognition in a world that rejects her only because she is a woman. The evil deeds she commits in the novel and her alliance with the demon, are her only ways of gaining power, which otherwise is impossible for her as a woman, if she does not marry a more powerful man (which does not seem to interest her). Also her sadistic behavior can in some ways be explained by her harsh past and although it is difficult not to hate her, it is also possible to read her as a victim of society. At one point she tells Laia, the female protagonist, that perhaps it would have been kinder to carve up Laia's face and take away her beauty the first day Laia came to the academy. In that way she would not have been as appealing to the students and would have been less of a target. "Beauty's a curse when one lives among men" (278), she says when she leaves and this probably applies just as much to her own situation as it does to Laia's. Thus, the Commandant's evil deeds could be interpreted as a critique against the patriarchal society. She is a result of society, and as such society must change, as to not create any more female monsters.

By studying the evil women's backgrounds and motivations it has been shown that they can be read as victims of society, and therefore as critique of such societies. However, the critique is not always clear. Since they are all portrayed as such evil and sadistic characters, the reader must read closely to see that they are actually victims. Since it is difficult to sympathize with the evil women, the potential critique might rarely actually reach the reader. Instead there is a risk that the reader sees these evil individuals as the problems, rather than structures in society. This risk is substantial, since to follow society's rules generally is perceived as the mature choice. Trites states that villains who refuse to acknowledge limits on power professed by society could be likened to rebelling adolescents. To accept society's rules is the mature choice and as such the one the reader will accept. As no reader wants to associate themselves with immaturity, sympathizing with the antagonist becomes difficult (Trites, "Harry Potter Novels as a Test Case" 481). When the critique does not reach the reader, another message emerges, about unfit female rulers and women as fundamentally weaker than men. If these post-feminist tendencies are repeatedly portrayed we come increasingly closer to sexism. As target readers, there might be a

risk that young adults are affected by that message, which would contribute to a negative development regarding gender equality.

Conclusion

Having analyzed the three novels, I agree with Raddeker that it indeed “becomes less and less easy to generalize convincingly about women’s fantasy as the market keeps expanding” (155). This surely applies to young adult fantasy as well. My objective was to analyze the extent to which best-selling (i.e. most read) novels in the young adult fantasy genre, still contain such elements as disparaging of women as individual agents, and other gender stereotypes. Fantasy fiction has often contained feminist messages and worked toward the emancipation of women, against patriarchal stereotypes. However, in the novels studied in this essay, post-feminist tendencies are visible and although female characters may seem strong on the surface, they often follow old conventions. Although the novels do contain gender stereotypes, they can not be called anti-feminist (backlash) (Jordan 20). There is no evidence suggesting that the authors are actively working against women’s empowerment. Instead, the post-feminist aspects visible in the novels, mirror views in contemporary society. Although backlash does exist, I do not believe it is the most common view on gender equality. Post-feminism, on the other hand, the positive notion that gender equality is already achieved, seems more common. The novels in this study can be seen as a consequence of post-feminist society.

Furthermore, this study has shown that the power needed for individual building of character can be seen through the male gaze, which objectifies women and eventually diminishes their access to power. This reinforces the stereotype that women should be passive. Moreover, constantly reading about passive women and active men, where women explicitly hesitate to act or are punished through the structure of the narratives when active is problematic. All of this might affect the readers’ expectations on their own romantic relationships and in the long run be a contributing factor to a negative development in gender roles. Furthermore, constantly watching women through the male gaze reinforces objectification of women and it becomes the norm. It is interesting that also in novels written by women and with young women as the main readers, the male gaze is implicitly included in the narrative. This indicates just how prominent this phenomenon is in contemporary

society, since it is probable that this is not a conscious choice by the authors. However, there is a possible critique against sexist and patriarchal societies in these novels. This critique is seen in the antagonists' backgrounds and motivations, but since it is difficult to sympathize with these characters, the critique might not always reach the reader. Instead, the evil individuals are seen as the issue, rather than the victims of society.

Despite being described as strong and capable, the female characters of these novels often conform to stereotypes. Female heroes have already managed to create changes in how society view women and have the potential for even greater changes (Mains et al. 189). Such positive development requires strong protagonists in modern fantasy fiction, to carry the torch. For this development to be possible, awareness of feminist issues needs to be raised so that post-feminist or even sexist messages are not included implicitly in narratives.

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