

MAGICAL WOMEN WHO DO MAGIC WITHOUT  
BEING MEN: NONTRADITIONAL FEMALE HEROES  
IN A WORLD WITHOUT GENDER NORMS

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## **ABSTRACT**

I examined two nontraditional female heroes in *The Abhorsen Trilogy* by Garth Nix, a young adult fantasy series, using a feminist lens. In the context of the Old Kingdom, where the books take place, gender is not a barrier to taking on roles that, in our society, are traditionally gendered. This allows the females to take on heroic roles without totally giving into or giving up their femininity. In detailing Sabriel and Lirael's heroic journeys and comparing them to traditional female heroes within the genre, I show how their nontraditional female heroism is unique and that it is a direct result of the society in which they exist.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“Locks rarely prevailed over the powers of the Old Kingdom.” – *Sabriel*

Centuries ago, a wall was built between Ancelstierre and the Old Kingdom. The wall runs the lengths of both lands and was designed to keep the two neighboring territories separate. Things are not meant to cross over primarily because Ancelstierre and the Old Kingdom are vastly different places. Ancelstierre is much like any early twentieth century Western society. It is a place of technological advancement, with cars, guns and electricity. In contrast, the Old Kingdom is a place of magic and enchantment. It is described as more medieval than modern. The farther from the wall one goes into Ancelstierre, the more magic fails to work, and the farther from the wall one goes into the Old Kingdom, the more technology fails to work. Time operates differently and even the seasons vary between the two lands. These are the worlds created by Garth Nix in *The Abhorsen Trilogy*. It is in the second of these worlds, the Old Kingdom, where two heroes, Sabriel and Lirael, are born. In true fantasy literature fashion both heroes have special gifts and great destinies. And they just happen to be women.

Though Ancelstierre is more modern than the Old Kingdom, it is also more traditional in the fact that it is a patriarchal society. The Old Kingdom is not patriarchal, nor is it matriarchal. Gender roles do not exist there, meaning that certain things are not expected of women or men solely based on their gender. This is especially important in its application to women, since without gender norms the female characters in the book

are not limited in the taking on of certain roles that are traditionally gendered. The roles that the characters play throughout the books are dictated not by gender but by either ability or choice, which are often determined by blood or birthright. This is significant and unique to these books. It is only in a place like the Old Kingdom, a society that makes no assumptions based on gender, where heroes like Sabriel and Lirael can exist.

### Blood and Birthright in the Old Kingdom

Gender norms and roles do not exist in the post-feminist society of the Old Kingdom. There are, however, roles to be filled. Instead of being prescribed by gender, they are based on birthright, which is determined by blood. There are four prominent bloodlines in the Old Kingdom: the Clayr, the Abhorsens, the Royalty, and the Wallmakers. When speaking of these bloodlines, in the books, it is written “Blood,” capitalized, because these are the most influential and important bloodlines in the Old Kingdom. Attached to these bloodlines are specific birthrights. It is these and, other common bloodlines that give the people of the Old Kingdom their abilities.

If someone is destined to be a monarch, or an Abhorsen, or a Clayr, the blood will manifest itself. It is not even as simple as direct lineage. Sometimes, as readers come to find in the second book of the series, the daughter of a Clayr can have both the blood of a Clayr and an Abhorsen. Though her mother is a Clayr her birthright would not necessarily be as a Clayr. Her birthright could be that of an Abhorsen. It is the blood that matters in the Old Kingdom. In this respect, as in others, to the Old Kingdom, gender is irrelevant.

Of course there have been other female heroes in literature besides Sabriel and Lirael, and these female heroes have even dominated young adult fantasy novels, but

none have been quite like the heroes from Nix's trilogy. The Old Kingdom is a nontraditional society and has produced nontraditional female heroes. A traditional female hero is a woman who either has to embrace her femininity and be the epitome of womanhood or give up her femininity and take on masculine tropes. In a lot of cases she literally must become a man in both appearance and behavior. Traditional female heroes are made to choose: man or woman. They are boiled down to their most basic form of categorization, gender. This is a prime example of essentialism. In *The Pleasures of Children's Literature* Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer define essentialism as "assuming that there's something identifiable as, say, a black soul or a Jewish character shared by all members of those groups" (171). Nodelman and Reimer use the term culturally but it can also be applied to gender. If a hero has to be either feminine or masculine and that is all she is, she has been essentialized. There is no room to even consider her a hero. This supports Nodelman and Reimer's notion that "essentializing denies the possibility of individual growth and change" (171). Just because they are women does not mean they are just women.

In most cases, in young adult fantasy literature, the traditional female heroes give up their femininity and become masculine. They often have to cut off their hair, dress like men, take on masculine names and, for all intents and purposes, become men. They also, typically, have to sneak off to hone their skills somewhere away from the rest of the society. This is because the skills they are perfecting are not deemed acceptable for a woman. In these cases the female protagonist does become a hero, but first she has to become a man. She gives up her femininity in exchange for heroism. In *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, Roberta Trites writes that "trying to gain power by acting male makes [the

female hero] little more than a hero in drag” (5). Two examples of these “heroes in drag” are Aerin from Robin McKinley’s *The Hero and the Crown* and Alanna from Tamora Pierce’s *Song of the Lioness Quartet*. I will describe how they are traditional heroes, and how they function in that role. Discussing Aerin and Alanna’s traditional female heroism, when contrasted with discussion of Sabriel and Lirael’s nontraditional heroism, will show how truly unique Nix’s female heroes are. Further, it will support the theory that nontraditional heroism exists.

A nontraditional female hero is a woman who takes on heroic roles without totally giving up or giving into her femininity. She does not have to choose to act like a man or a woman. She only has to choose to be a hero. She would most likely choose this through action and, before doing so, she would not have to ask herself or society if it is a proper course of action for a woman to take. Her society’s views of gender are free from essentialization and she is free to be a hero based on her heroic qualities. Rather than being essentially a female, who is a hero because she is female, she is a hero who is a hero because she was either destined to be a hero or chose to be. Either way, her heroic qualities are not based on her being female nor are they in spite of it.

Because essentialism denies growth, the term “heroine” will not be used to refer to female heroes. It only highlights the fact that there is a difference between male and female heroes, but in *The Abhorsen Trilogy* there is not, so such highlights are not necessary. Both men and women will be referred to as heroes, and the only differentiation that will be necessary for this paper, regarding gender, will be between traditional and nontraditional female heroes. This differentiation will be used to show how Nix’s *Old Kingdom* is unique and will illustrate how it is set apart from other fantasy worlds.



## Why Fantasy Fosters Magical Women

Magical women who do magic do not exist. Magical women who do magic without being men certainly do not exist. In our world there are socially prescribed patterns that most people follow without thought. These are dictated by gender and are aptly called “gender norms” or “gender roles” (I will use the two interchangeably.) The majority of people are interpellated into modes of behavior, many of which are gender related. In another world these gender norms could be nonexistent. This is how we come to find our female heroes in books. Specifically, we find them in fantasy literature. Fantasy literature seems to have a way of fostering female heroes. It gives them a unique world in which to grow and live. Fantasy worlds are created by the author and thus can be anything.

Sheila Egoff writes in *Worlds Within: Children’s Fantasy from the Middle Ages to Today* that “fantasy has been a vehicle used by writers to express their dissatisfaction with society” (1). She adds “it can evoke a mood or atmosphere that places a work slightly beyond the bounds of everyday reality, or it can wrench that reality out of shape” (1). This is certainly true for *The Old Kingdom*. It is a world totally different from our own, and the lack of gender roles and stereotypes in the Old Kingdom is intentional on the author’s part. Nix writes of his structuring the Old Kingdom: “if a woman could be the Abhorsen, it made sense that women could also be anything else in the Old Kingdom” (email). Nix adds that he intended to create a world that was “less the stereotypical faux medieval fantasy setting” (email). And to contrast the Old Kingdom, he also created the country on the other side of the wall, “Ancelstierre [which] is much more a 1920-ish British-style society, with the gender roles typical of that setting” (Nix, email). Nix

purposefully created the Old Kingdom, a fantasy world like no other, without gender norms. He has given Sabriel and Lirael a place to exist as heroes. He has created a world where they are not limited by gender. Such a world is not a reality, but Nix has made it real.

### Feminism and Post-Feminism

To explore the difference between traditional and nontraditional female heroes and to show the existence of the latter in Nix's *The Abhorsen Trilogy*, I will rely on feminist criticism to examine the readings and the characters. I will use feminist criticism with the acknowledgement that Nix's Old Kingdom is, possibly, post-feminist. That is to say that the society Nix created in the Old Kingdom has transcended the need for gender norms since men and women are capable of performing tasks that might traditionally be gendered. Maggie Humm states that "feminist theory aims to create a deeper understanding of women's situation" (285). Typically, in literature, the women's situation is that of inequality. In the Old Kingdom, however, there are no gender norms. There aren't any preconceived notions about what women and men should and shouldn't do based on their gender, and neither gender is valued over the other. It is not a patriarchal society, and the characters cannot be evaluated as if it were. So, since the Old Kingdom is post-feminist, I will use feminist theory to point out the equity between the genders in the Old Kingdom. I will demonstrate how, without gender norms to adhere to, men and women are free to take on both traditionally feminine and masculine roles, making the Old Kingdom the perfect, and perhaps only, place, where women can be heroes without having to overcome gender related obstacles. This distinction will be

clearer when contrasted with the situations of the heroes in McKinley and Pierce's novels as analyzed using feminist theory in the traditional sense.

### Traditional Female Heroes in Young Adult Fantasy Novels

Two perfect examples of traditional female heroes are Alanna from *The Song of the Lioness Quartet* by Tamora Pierce and Aerin from *The Hero and the Crown* by Robin McKinley. Both girls take on masculine tropes to become heroes and in the end gain the power and affirmation they deserve based on their acquired masculinity. In both cases, if the girls had not acted outside the realm of their gender defined norms, they could not have become heroes. It is interesting to note that Alanna and Aerin are both female heroes from young adult fantasy novels published in the 1980's. Alanna was first introduced in *Alanna: The First Adventure*, which was published in 1983 and Aerin was seen in *The Hero and the Crown* in 1984. Sabriel was first seen in *Sabriel*, published in 1995 and Lirael first appeared in *Lirael* in 2001. So, it would stand to reason that Alanna and Aerin would have had to come before Sabriel and Lirael, to follow the patterns of traditional female heroes, so that Sabriel and Lirael could have tropes to contrast. Alanna and Aerin laid the groundwork for Sabriel and Lirael, overcoming the obstacles and defying the gender norms of their worlds. Without their hard work Sabriel and Lirael could not exist as heroes, and the Old Kingdom, a place without gender roles, could not exist either. Alanna and Aerin are perfect examples of traditional female heroes, because for young adult fantasy literature, they were two of the first, and most popular, and without them, Sabriel and Lirael could not be nontraditional female heroes.

Alanna, the daughter of a wealthy man in the kingdom of Tortall, wishes to be a knight. She has a twin brother, Thom, who wants to be a mage. Unfortunately for Alanna and Thom, this is not the plan society has dictated: “all girls from noble families studied in convents until they were fifteen or sixteen, at which time they went to Court to find husbands” and “the oldest son of a noble family learned the skills and duties of a knight at the king’s palace” (Pierce 9). Society would have them each do what the other wants, based on gender. If Thom were not the oldest son he would have the opportunity to become a mage, but birth order has dictated otherwise. It would seem the best solution would be for them switch places, which is close to what they do. Instead of switching places, they both assume the role of man. Thom gets to stay Thom—he only dresses in a skirt to get out of the house without their father noticing—but Alanna changes her name to Alan and assumes the role of older twin: “the girl changed into shirt, breeches and boots. Then Maude cut her hair” (Pierce 10). With her hair short Alanna and Thom look identical and both look masculine. Alanna, now Alan, is free to become a knight since she appears to be a man.

This makes Alanna a hero in drag. Though her feats throughout the quartet are heroic and she faces great dangers while overcoming much adversity, Alanna’s journey to heroism is a traditional one. She initially takes on masculine traits, even changes her name to a man’s, simply because she could never have trained as a knight otherwise. This is a direct consequence of Tortall, the patriarchal world in which Alanna exists, and its strict gender roles, which are limiting. In Tortall, the gender roles limit women, but they are also strict for men. As the oldest son, Thom is expected to become a knight, when he would much rather practice sorcery. Thom is of high rank in his family, as well as

society: he is both male and the oldest child. Wanting to become a mage is considered inappropriate for Thom, in large part because of his gender. The rigid gender roles in Tortall put limits on both women and men. Though “hero in drag” is an accurate term, it can come off as somewhat derogatory. Another term that I would use in conjunction with traditional female hero would be “masculine transformation.” This term is also accurate in describing the necessary changes most female heroes undergo to appear masculine, and thus, become heroes. Masculine transformations are necessary in places with rigid gender roles. If only a man can be a hero and a woman wants to be a hero, she must undergo a masculine transformation, shedding her femininity, to become a hero. This is the most common type of traditional female hero. And Alanna certainly fits the mold.

Aerin is the daughter of the king of Damar, but she is not heir to the throne. Her mother, who was a sorceress, was from lands north of Damar; the people of her father’s kingdom did not approve of his marriage and thus they do not approve of Aerin. She looks like her mother and is a reminder to the people of Damar that she does not belong. This is how Aerin is described in the beginning of the book. She is an outsider and most people are not nice to her, even though she is the king’s daughter. This is a common place for the traditional female hero to start: on the outside. Her journey, then, is to become an insider, to be accepted by the people of Damar. It is especially hard for Aerin to accomplish this as a young woman since Damar is a patriarchal society. It would be hard enough to be accepted by a society that labeled her an outcast if she were a man. For Aerin, it is even more difficult.

She learns to ride her father’s old warhorse, Talat, and learns to make a fireproofing ointment called kenet. She does both of these things in secret, because the

society of Damar would not approve of her activities. Her goal is to learn to ride well and use the ointment to help kill the dragons that plague parts of the kingdom. Still she is not seen as a hero. It is not until she is wounded by Maur, the most dangerous dragon, that people start to look at her differently. This dragon is one of the oldest, most powerful evils in Aerin's world, wakened by the threat and maliciousness of the North. She fights him, despite all of these things, is nearly killed, and ends up defeating him. She comes out of the fight with severe injuries and her hair is burnt, making it short, like a man's. She then defeats her evil uncle, who is part of northern forces, with whom Damar is at war. Aerin retrieves the Hero's Crown, Damar's long lost crown, which had been lost for so long it was merely legend to most people. She takes it back to her people, insuring the defeat of the northern forces. Rather than keeping the Crown as a trophy and reminder of all she has accomplished, Aerin gives it to Tor, heir to the throne, reinforcing Damar's patriarchal power structure. Then Aerin marries Tor, becoming queen. She spends the rest of her life teaching other people the skills she learned during her masculine transformation. All of the qualities Aerin took on and all the new skills she learned are seen as masculine by Damarian society. She had to fight dragons, a man's job, and have most of her hair burnt off to even get people to pay attention to her. And only after all that could she be considered a hero. In her thesis, *Women Warriors in Young Adult Fantasy Literature: Transgressing Patriarchal Gender Roles and Reconceptualizing the Female Hero*, Elizabeth Talafuse writes that "Aerin has sacrificed her femininity" in order "to establish her place in the community and to gain the trust of her people" (23). Aerin has become a hero the only way she knows how, by taking on masculine tropes. She, too, is a hero in drag and though Talafuse calls it Aerin's "controversial

masculinity” (24) I would call it conventional. The female hero’s pattern of shedding her femininity and taking on a new masculine identity to become a hero is a traditional one that is present in much of young adult fantasy literature. This, again, is what makes her a perfect example of a traditional female hero.

Though Alanna and Aerin are traditional heroes, this does not mean that they are lesser than Sabriel and Lirael. They came first and, as I stated previously, Sabriel and Lirael could not be nontraditional female heroes if Alanna and Aerin had not challenged the gender norms of their worlds and shown young adult fantasy readers what a traditional female hero is. Sabriel and Lirael are products of the Old Kingdom, and thus have not had to sacrifice their femininity as Alanna and Aerin have. They simply are heroes who happen to be female.

### What is a Hero?

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* Joseph Campbell says many things about what a hero is and what a hero does. There are two definitions in particular that are significant to this paper’s position. Campbell says that a hero is “a personage with exceptional gifts” (29). This is true for Sabriel and Lirael, who are both Abhorsens, necromancers who bind the dead rather than raise them. Clearly, keeping nature in balance is no small feat. In this way both women are heroes in the most basic sense. There is something that sets them apart from others.

“The hero, therefore, is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms”

(Campbell 14). This basic definition of a hero is perfect since it is not limited. Men and women can be heroes. Campbell gives us that much. Also, a hero must overcome an obstacle. Traditionally for women that obstacle is her gender, possibly among other things. It certainly is true for Aerin and Alanna that they must overcome their femininity to become heroes. For Sabriel and Lirael, gender is not an obstacle that hinders their heroism. This definition of hero confirms Anna Altmann's conclusion in her article "Welding Brass Tits on the Armor: An Examination of the Quest Metaphor in Robin McKinley's *The Hero and the Crown*" that "the heroic experience is also the experience of women" (154). I will take this a step farther and argue that though this is true, a great foundation to build on the heroic experience of women is either traditional or nontraditional.



## CHAPTER 2: SABRIEL

“Death and what came after death was no great mystery to Sabriel. She just wished it was.”

- *Sabriel*

### Magic, Death, and Sabriel’s beginnings in the Old Kingdom

In the prologue of *Sabriel* a child is born among travelers in the Old Kingdom. She dies almost immediately and her father, the Abhorsen, has to go into Death and reclaim her. She is returned, baptized and Abhorsen announces her arrival, naming her Sabriel. The travelers are leery of his appearance and vocation. He is extremely pale and just performed necromancy. He proceeds to introduce himself, presumably to calm them: “I am a necromancer, but not of the common kind. Where others of the art raise the dead, I lay them back to rest. And those that will not rest, I bind—or try to. I am Abhorsen...” (Nix, *Sabriel* 11).

There are two types of magic in the Old Kingdom, Free Magic and Charter Magic. Free magic is fairly self-explanatory. It does what it wants and many times goes against nature, as is the case in the Old Kingdom with non-Abhorsen necromancy. Charter magic is governed by rules, and its spells are woven together through Charter symbols. Necromancers typically use Free Magic, but Abhorsens use a combination of Free and Charter Magic, mostly the latter, since they use their abilities to keep nature in balance. Necromancers use seven bells, all with different purposes, with different sounds.

These bells can do different things to the Dead, and they are used on different occasions. Part of the reason the Old Kingdom has become so dangerous is because the Charter stones, spelled stones that hold the Charter together throughout the Old Kingdom, are being broken. This is why the Old Kingdom is plagued with the Dead, because it is easier for them to creep back into life in places where the Charter is weak.

It is also necessary to note that when a necromancer raises or binds the Dead, he or she must go into Death. Death is a place. To be precise, it is a river. The river of Death has nine gates, the water near each gate having different characteristics, and the idea is that people must pass through them all until they cannot come back anymore. If someone goes beyond the ninth gate, he or she is gone forever. Anywhere before that, and they are able to come back.

#### Sabriel: The start of her journey to hero

The first chapter picks up eighteen years later, with Sabriel about to graduate from an all girls boarding school just across the wall in Ancelstierre. “A tall, curiously pale young woman stood over the rabbit [which] was, unquestionably, dead” (*Sabriel* 12-13). The rabbit belongs to a younger schoolmate of Sabriel’s and has just been run over. The rabbit is very special to the other girl and Sabriel struggles with the decision before her. She knows she has the ability to bring the rabbit back to life but is hesitant because it is “no great step from bringing back a rabbit to bringing back a person” (*Sabriel* 15). As Abhorsen told the travelers in the prologue, his necromancy is not used to raise the dead. It is used to bind or lay them to rest. This is a rule the Abhorsen must follow and Sabriel

must follow it as well, showing the reader that, on some level, she knows she is meant to do what he does. Sabriel brings the rabbit back from Death the way her father brought her back in the prologue, establishing that she shares her father's special ability. This introduces the reader to Sabriel, and her gift, and it immediately identifies her as a potential hero. Though she has not begun her journey to heroism, the mention of her exceptional gift marks her as a hero-to-be. In other words, by Joseph Campbell's definition, she is "a personage with exceptional gifts" (29), one of Campbell's criteria of a hero. Not only has bringing back the rabbit marked Sabriel as a hero-to-be, her dilemma about whether or not to do so shows that Sabriel has been using her gift the way her father does and thus shows her as marked to follow in his footsteps. This is important in understanding how vocation is determined in the Old Kingdom. It is not by gender, as it would be in historically traditional patriarchal societies. In the Old Kingdom it is determined by bloodline. She is next in line to be the Abhorsen because she is a blood relative of the current Abhorsen to whom the gift has passed; Abhorsens are not defined by gender or birth order or traditional legitimacy. Being an Abhorsen is in Sabriel's blood, and even though her father has not explicitly said that she is to follow in his footsteps, he has been teaching her to use her gift as an Abhorsen would.

Sabriel's father, the Abhorsen, has sent her to Ancelstierre to attend school. She is close enough to the wall to be able to learn and practice magic, but far enough away that she is safe from the evil that plagues the Old Kingdom. While at school "Sabriel rarely thought about what life was really like in the Old Kingdom" (*Sabriel* 19). Abhorsen is still traveling, doing his job of binding the dead, visiting Sabriel a few times a year by magical means. One evening, close to her graduation from Wyverley Academy, when

Sabriel is expecting him to appear, he does not arrive. Stranger yet, one of her schoolmates comes to get her, saying that she heard noises outside and let something in. Sabriel runs to find out what is going on: “The door was open. An intensely dark shape stood there...it carried an absolutely mundane sack” (*Sabriel* 21). It turns out to be a dead messenger, sent by Abhorsen from somewhere far into Death, to tell Sabriel that he is in trouble. She realizes that if Abhorsen could not come himself “that meant he was either dead, or trapped by something” (*Sabriel* 27).

Upon opening the sack her father sent her, Sabriel finds his sword and bandolier of bells: “‘Father’s instruments,’ whispered Sabriel. ‘The tools of a necromancer’” (*Sabriel* 28). Abhorsen is in trouble and he has sent Sabriel the tools that he uses, and that she will someday use. Though Sabriel is young, female, still technically in school, and unfamiliar with the world she is about to enter, she does not question her next move. Nor does anyone else. Just after the encounter with the dead messenger, her magic teacher asks, “You’re going to be leaving us, aren’t you?” (*Sabriel* 28). In response Sabriel “stood up, sword in one hand, bandolier in the other” (*Sabriel* 28) and confirms her leaving: “Yes. Into the Old Kingdom” (*Sabriel* 28). With the weapons he has provided her, and without a moment’s hesitation, she strikes out into an unknown world to save her father’s life; though she does not yet realize it, she, also embarks on her journey to heroism. When she is crossing the Wall, a guard asks her how far she is going. She tells him she does not know, and he replies, “you don’t seem disturbed by your lack of directions” (*Sabriel* 52). His observation shows how confident and dedicated Sabriel is. She will do anything to save her father, even though many of the details are not planned. Her lack of hesitation is heroic in and of itself.

### Sabriel's Journey

Just like most traditional female heroes, Sabriel begins her journey in unfamiliar territory. Though she was born in the Old Kingdom, she does not remember it. She only knows that it is dangerous, and she is going there alone. She is armed with only the tools her father sent her. It is a fairly traditional place for Sabriel to begin, as an outsider to the Old Kingdom. Just as Aerin from *The Hero and the Crown* was an outsider in her own country, so Sabriel is in hers. The main difference is that Sabriel has not lived her whole life in the Old Kingdom, whereas Aerin has grown up in Damar. Sabriel is an outsider because she is unfamiliar with the territory, unlike Aerin, who is an outsider because society has cast her out. Sabriel was sent to school on the other side of the wall for protection, so she could get a quality education away from the dangers of the Old Kingdom. Sabriel does not know how bad things have gotten on the other side of the wall, but her father does. The Old Kingdom has become a very dangerous place where the Dead are not all bound. Abhorsen's job is very critical now. He sent his daughter to school in Ancelstierre so she would be safe. She would be able to hone her skills but be safe from the danger of the Old Kingdom while doing so. Sabriel has not been to the Old Kingdom since she was very young and is not familiar with it. Though she consults an almanac and has faint memories of the Old Kingdom, it is still quite foreign to her. She is unfamiliar due to a lack of experience in the Old Kingdom. Aerin, on the other hand, is an outsider in Damar because of her mother. Society is responsible for Aerin's identity as an outcast. They have restricted her. Sabriel has not been restricted, but physically removed from the Old Kingdom. Society is not telling Sabriel "no".

Unlike Aerin, Sabriel is not looking for acceptance. She is not on a quest to find something she is good at or to find her place in society. She receives a call to action and she goes. Though it can be argued that throughout the course of the novel Sabriel does in fact find a place for herself in society, as the new Abhorsen, and the queen, once she marries the king, these are supplementary in nature. Sabriel's initial goal was to save her father, a heroic quest all on its own. Her journey later turns into something beyond saving just her father. It becomes about saving the Old Kingdom, reestablishing the Charter and the monarchy, which had not been in place for centuries. She wants more than to find her place in society or her father. She ends up wanting to save the world, which is almost every hero's ultimate and eventual goal.

Aerin also had a call to action, but hers was kept secret because, in Damar, dragon hunting is a man's job. Aerin, like Sabriel, also had the goals of saving her father and her country. This is something she accomplished by slaying dragons and reclaiming the Hero's Crown. Once again, these things had to be kept secret. Her father would have never asked her for help. That would have been inappropriate in patriarchal Damar. The roles Aerin took on were masculine, and she, as a woman, would have never been allowed to assume those roles if other members of society had known. In contrast, Sabriel takes on the role of hero, not despite or because of her femininity. She just responds to her father's call for help. Conversely, he does not contact some able-bodied young knight to help him, he reaches out to his daughter because he knows she is the one who can save him. Only she can defeat whatever evil has him trapped because she too is an Abhorsen. Though Sabriel has never been explicitly told that she is to be the next Abhorsen, she has the same gift as her father, uses it the same way, and abides by the same rules. She is to

next in line to be the Abhorsen because she is destined to be by blood. Her gender is irrelevant.

### Sabriel and Mogget

The first thing Sabriel sees upon arrival at Abhorsen's house (where she has gone to "gather a few things [and] check some references" [51]), is a small white cat. She thinks he is just a cat until she sees the collar around his neck that she recognizes as a strong binding spell. The cat's collar is covered in Charter symbols of binding, and has a tiny bell on it, making the cat, who is really a bound Free Magic spirit, serve the Abhorsen. When Sabriel bends down to pet the cat he speaks: "'Abhorsen,' mewed the cat, 'About time you got here'" (*Sabriel* 119) and introduces himself. "You may call me Mogget" (*Sabriel* 121). He confirms that he is a servant of the Abhorsen (and has been for centuries) and informs her that he knew she was coming because "I always know when one Abhorsen falls and another takes their place" (*Sabriel* 131). Sabriel does not believe her father is truly dead or that she must take his place as Abhorsen. Her goal is still to find and save him. She begs Mogget for his help. Though Sabriel has never questioned what she must do, she does feel inexperienced in the Old Kingdom. She realizes that her lack of knowledge will be an obstacle to finding her father, and Mogget, who has obviously existed for a long time, can help her. He vows to help since he is a servant of the Abhorsen, and she is the Abhorsen. This, however, is his only motive, as he is not very comforting or encouraging. His role is guide, but it is clear to the reader it is obligatory. He is only helping her because he must as part of his servitude, not because he believes they can save her father. Part of his guidance is making her realize that if her father is dead, which Mogget knows is the most rational outcome, she is the Abhorsen.

Sabriel is extremely uncomfortable with Mogget giving her this title, partially because she still believes she can save her father, and partially because, though on some level she knew she would take over for him, she does not feel prepared. With Mogget's help, Sabriel can learn about the Old Kingdom faster; he can fill in the gaps of her knowledge. Though their motives are different he will help her.

Sabriel is not alone now that she has Mogget. He acts as a guide and a, somewhat reluctant, companion. He has knowledge of the Old Kingdom and can help her in ways she cannot help herself. Joseph Campbell calls this type of assistance the aid of a supernatural guide. Campbell writes that "the first encounter of the hero-journey is with a protective figure" (57) who will provide "advice that the hero will require" (59). Though Mogget is not the most nurturing or supportive figure, he does have an interest in keeping Sabriel alive. He is protective in the sense that he will serve to keep her safe and he certainly has advice she needs. The Old Kingdom will be much easier for Sabriel to navigate with Mogget at her side. It is also important to note that Mogget goes with her willingly even though he "has only left Abhorsen's House for a few weekends over the last thousand years" (*Sabriel* 234). Mogget knows that the mission Sabriel is on is a dangerous one, but he chooses to go. He chooses to be her guide, to aid and protect her.

Campbell also writes that the supernatural helper is often masculine, as is the case with Mogget: "In fairy lore it may be some little fellow of the wood" (Campbell 59). Interestingly, Abhorsen later tells Sabriel that Mogget has always appeared to him as an albino boy. Before, neither Sabriel nor the reader knew that Mogget could change shape unless his collar was removed, and he returned to his Free magic form. This would indicate that there is significance in Mogget's appearing to Sabriel as a cat. Jennifer



Marchant suggests in her article, “An Advocate, a Defender, an Intimate: Kristeva’s Imaginary Father in Fictional Girl-Animal Relationships,” that “the powerful relationship between adolescent female protagonist and animal plays a vital role in the protagonist’s psychic development” (3). According to Marchant, female protagonists find a kind of intimacy with their animal companions that fills a void and helps the protagonist move on to finding her identity in society. Though Mogget does not have an especially comforting or warm personality, he fills this role for Sabriel, in the guise of a small white cat, perhaps because it is easier for her to connect to and bond with an animal than a human. Marchant would certainly suggest that it is better for her psychic development.

#### Sabriel and Touchstone

While on their journey to find Abhorsen, Sabriel and Mogget find themselves near a large grouping of sinkholes. In one they find what Sabriel describes as “funerary ships...royal ships” (*Sabriel* 202). Inside the ships there are figureheads, wooden replicas of the pilots who operated the ships. Sabriel and Mogget walk around and look inside a few before Sabriel notices one with a nude man inside who looks too life-like. “His expression troubled her, for it seemed too human to be the result of a woodcarver’s skill” (*Sabriel* 205). She continues to notice details that suggest he is not wooden but human. “So she looked without embarrassment, studying fingers, fingernails and skin, noting how perfectly they were carved, right down to the tiny scars on his hands” (*Sabriel* 205). She determines that he is “the victim of some Free Magic spell” and that his “spirit lies neither in Life nor Death, but somewhere in between” (*Sabriel* 206). She wants to save him but would have to risk going into Death to do so. She asks herself “what would father—Abhorsen...or any Abhorsen—do in my place?” (*Sabriel* 207). By asking herself

this question, whether she knows it or not, Sabriel is finally admitting that she is the new Abhorsen. She is asking herself the hard questions an Abhorsen must and is trying to respond in the appropriate manner an Abhorsen would.

She decides to go into Death and bring him back. She makes up her mind easily since she can see that an injustice has been done and it should be righted. She determines that as the acting Abhorsen it is her job to right it. Her journey through Death is dangerous; she is farther into the Old Kingdom than she ever has been. When she returns, his spirit in hand, he thanks her and addresses her by her title, Abhorsen. He can tell by her clothes and instruments who she is. He tells her his name is Touchstone<sup>1</sup>, even though it is a name usually given to a fool or an idiot. While Sabriel is getting water Touchstone and Mogget talk about what happened before Touchstone was imprisoned. There is some sort of spell in control that prevents them from saying much. The reader does, however, get the idea that they both know what happened, Touchstone is responsible, and he should be ashamed. As such the name is fitting. He offers to serve Sabriel “to fight against the enemies of the Kingdom” (*Sabriel* 230). She refuses, telling him that she was raised in Ancelstierre, knows little about the Charter or the geography of the Old Kingdom, and she is only there to save her father, not the Kingdom. She also declares that her name is Sabriel, not Abhorsen.

Touchstone tells Sabriel he was a royal guard and was present during an attack on the Queen. He claims to not remember much, as it happened two hundred years ago, and he has been imprisoned between Life and Death. Since then the monarchy and the Charter have fallen. From his previous conversation with Mogget, the reader can gather that Touchstone feels guilty, and responsible for whatever horrible thing happened

because of the part he played centuries ago. The reader can also gather from his shame and the conversation with Mogget that he may be lying to Sabriel.

Though Sabriel refuses Touchstone's oath to serve her in her quest, she does allow him to travel with them until he can find somewhere to settle. Touchstone is put off but agrees as Mogget pulls him aside in an attempt to enlist his help anyway. Mogget tells him "it's true enough about her ignorance. That's one of the reasons she needs your help" (*Sabriel* 232). Touchstone agrees and the three depart.

As a true hero, Sabriel has saved someone. One might even call Touchstone a damsel in distress. This is a traditionally masculine thing for Sabriel to do. After being saved, Touchstone vows to serve her, as he would any hero who had rescued him. This is unique since Sabriel is female as well as young. Typically it would be the young woman's job to be saved and the man's to do the saving. In the case of Sabriel and Touchstone these jobs are reversed. If it were a patriarchal society in which the rescuing occurred, it would be considered progressive. The Old Kingdom, however, is not a patriarchal society and does not have strict gender roles. As such, this is not a case of gender role reversal since there are no gender roles to reverse. In the Old Kingdom this is simply standard. Sabriel is the Abhorsen and she came across a spirit trapped. She decided to save him because it was her job as acting Abhorsen to do so. Gender never factored into it.

By saving Touchstone, Sabriel has done her job as Abhorsen. In any westernized patriarchal society this act would be deemed inappropriate for her to perform since the act of saving someone is traditionally viewed as masculine. In *Waking Sleeping Beauty*:

*Feminist Voices in Children's Novels*, Roberta Trites writes that the female heroes of feminist children's novels learn to "combine the strengths traditionally associated with femininity with the strengths that have not been" (11). She adds that these female heroes "balance assertiveness with compassion" (12). These statements seem fitting for Sabriel. She feels horribly that Touchstone is initially trapped between Life and Death. She decides to save him not only because it is her duty as Abhorsen, but also because she wants him to be free to live. Sabriel is also compassionate when it comes to trying to tell him how much has changed over the years. These traits are traditionally feminine in nature but mixed with her conviction to do whatever is necessary, Sabriel is a perfect example of that assertive, compassion mixture. She is a true female hero.

The only part of Trites' description that is not exemplified by Sabriel is that she has to learn to combine these strengths. Traditionally this has been the case. Female heroes have had to struggle with balancing their femininity and masculinity, often choosing one over the other. Since Sabriel is a product of the Old Kingdom—in both the sense that she was born there, and the sense that both were created by Nix—it is not necessary for Sabriel to learn to combine traditionally masculine and feminine traits. She is born with both. Because she gives into neither all masculine nor all feminine traits, she does not have to consciously choose how to mix them. She simply does what she feels is right, based on her feelings toward the situation and her duty as acting Abhorsen, not based on whether it is a traditionally feminine or masculine thing to do.

It is not too difficult for the reader to realize that saving Touchstone is a sign that Sabriel is on a quest to save the Old Kingdom, whether or not she knows it herself. Later, after Sabriel, Touchstone, and Mogget have been traveling together, encountering many

dangers, Sabriel finds out who Touchstone really is. He was the illegitimate son of the queen<sup>2</sup>, not a just royal guard, but he was there the night of the attack on the queen, his mother. It turns out his half-brother, Rogir, was behind the attack. Rogir was greedy and used Free Magic to try to take over the Kingdom. He has since become a Dead Adept, one of the most powerful types of Free Magic creatures, and now calls himself Kerrigor. He also happens to be the force behind Sabriel's father's imprisonment. Touchstone's guilt was over not being able to stop his brother from destroying their family, the Kingdom, and the Charter. Though Sabriel believes she is on a journey only to save her father, her destiny is to save the Old Kingdom, reestablishing both the Charter and the monarchy. Touchstone wants these same things, and though Sabriel does not expect to gain an ally when she saves him, as fate would have it, that is exactly what she gets. Together, with Mogget's help, Sabriel and Touchstone save the Old Kingdom. It is an even partnership, and they work together to accomplish the tasks of finding Abhorsen and saving the Kingdom. Though Sabriel is not described as having an impressive amount of physical strength, she does hold equal power in the group because as Abhorsen she wields the bells. In combat it is true that Touchstone would be stronger and more capable than Sabriel. Touchstone was a Royal Guard and has been trained in combat, unlike Sabriel who grew up at an all girl's school in Ancelstierre and had not tested her fencing skills against real enemies. But both are expected to perform whatever roles are necessary.

### Sabriel as hero

Sabriel, Touchstone, and Mogget find Abhorsen trapped in Death in an underground reservoir. Sabriel goes into Death, finds him, and releases him, using the proper bells. While they are running through the river of Death to get back to Life, they discuss the events that have recently occurred. Abhorsen tells Sabriel how proud he is that she came but that he is also scared. He also tells her that Kerrigor is somewhere in Life. Many of the questions Sabriel has for her father are about why he sent her to school in Ancelstierre and he answers “because the Clayr advised me to do so. They said we needed someone...who knows Ancelstierre. I didn’t know why then, but I suspect I do now” (*Sabriel* 367). The Clayr are a community of women who have the gift to see into the future. They advised Abhorsen to keep Sabriel safe in Ancelstierre because they knew her knowledge of the territory would help in saving the Kingdom. It has always been clear that Sabriel is special, and this marked her as a future hero from the very beginning. She now finds out that she was destined to be the hero the Old Kingdom would need. Her duties as Abhorsen and hero are entwined and she has embraced them fully.

Abhorsen explains to Sabriel that he believes Kerrigor has gone across the wall to Ancelstierre to find his body, which has been buried there to keep it away from him. While Abhorsens have been fighting against Kerrigor for the past two hundred years, it is Sabriel who will finally defeat him. Abhorsen instructs Sabriel to take Touchstone and Mogget and go across the wall. There are many Dead creatures in the reservoir, sent by Kerrigor and ready to attack. Sabriel is confused when Abhorsen asks for the sword and the seventh bell. This is the bell that sends all near it into Death—even the one who rings it—past the ninth gate, and beyond being brought back. She understands that Abhorsen

does not expect to live. He tells Sabriel that it is his time to die and that this “is the rule that governs our work as the Abhorsen...you are the fifty-third Abhorsen” (*Sabriel* 382). In doing this he has officially passed on the position of Abhorsen to Sabriel, and established that he is dying. Now they both know he will not live. Before Sabriel did not believe the possibility that her father was past saving. She is now ready to accept what Mogget told her when they first met; her father is gone and she is the Abhorsen. They hug and cross back into Life.

While Abhorsen stays in the reservoir, sacrificing himself, since he was beyond saving, Sabriel, Touchstone, and Mogget continue to Ancelstierre. They fight a great battle at the boarding school where Sabriel began her journey. In the end Sabriel binds Kerrigor the same way Mogget once was bound, as a cat with the bell that causes the dead to sleep. Sabriel is hurt badly and nearly dies,<sup>3</sup> but when she passes through Death there are many Abhorsens’ spirits there pushing her back. She lives and reigns as Abhorsen for many years, marrying Touchstone, and becoming queen. Though it was clear to the reader when Sabriel and Touchstone first met that he was a possible love interest, they never let it get in the way of their mission. They did not kiss or talk about a relationship, but were focused on the goal and put duty first. Together they rule the Old Kingdom, spending years stabilizing the monarchy and the Charter, setting things right. Since Sabriel saved Touchstone there are two true rulers of the Old Kingdom, and with Kerrigor bound the Kingdom becomes a better place, free of the Dead who used to plague it. With Sabriel as Queen and Abhorsen, the people of the Kingdom feel safe. The Old Kingdom flourishes as a direct result of Sabriel’s heroism.

Sabriel has come into her own as a hero. She has found her father, saved the Kingdom, and found her place in society. This is a traditional ending for a hero's journey and even a traditional ending for a female hero's journey. The biggest difference is that Sabriel accomplished it all without becoming a "hero in drag", as Trites calls many female heroes. She had no gender related obstacles to overcome since the Old Kingdom is not a place that adheres to any traditional gender roles. Sabriel is a perfect example of a nontraditional female hero. She did not give into her femininity completely or give it up to take on masculine traits. She fought bravely, using the abilities she was born with. She was focused and determined. None of these things were prescribed by her gender. It was based on her birthright as Abhorsen. Sabriel is a hero who happens to be female.



### CHAPTER 3: LIRAEAL

“Lirael felt it was her duty to find it” - *Lirael*

#### Lirael’s beginning in the Glacier of the Clayr

The reader first meets Lirael on her fourteenth birthday. She has grown up in the glacier of the Clayr but is immediately marked as an outsider. She both looks and behaves differently than the rest of the Clayr. Her mother disappeared and died when Lirael was very young “taking the secret of Lirael’s paternity with her” (*Lirael* 14). At this point in time, Lirael is fairly young and all she wishes for is to be like the rest of society. She wants what many adolescent girls want: to fit in. What she doesn’t know then is that she doesn’t belong in the Glacier of the Clayr, but it is the only world she knows and she is struggling to belong.

The Clayr are a community made up entirely of women. “The Clayr did occasionally take lovers from amongst the visitors” (*Lirael* 23) and “often bore children fathered by visiting men...for some reason they almost always had girls” (*Lirael* 19). They do not need men to make their community function. Only women live in the Glacier and though they are hospitable to male travelers and even take them as lovers, aside from sex, they do not need men. Their duty is to See into the future to keep things the Old Kingdom safe from great evil. The Sight is the gift of seeing into the future and, sometimes, the past. They don’t always know when they are seeing. Individually the Clayr see bits and pieces of possible futures and join together to get the whole picture.

There is a secret room within the glacier where the Clayr stand, hands linked and with their powers combined, a whole image is projected. How much is seen varies each time but always the Clayr try to use the information to better the Kingdom. Often their visions warn of great danger and, the Clayr take this information to the monarchs. They are trying to help maintain a balance, to keep the Kingdom in order, and overall to keep its people safe. This act of keeping things as nature intended, make the Clayr a perfect example of Annis Pratt's Green World Archetype. "The green world of the woman hero [is] a place from which she sets forth and a memory to which she returns for renewal" (Pratt 17). Pratt writes that the Green World is "a state of innocence that becomes most poignant as one is initiated into experience" (Pratt 22). Throughout her quest, Lirael often reflects on her time spent in the Glacier. Before leaving she is a child, but part of her call to action in an acceptance of responsibility. As with any heroic quest, Lirael grows and matures, rather quickly, because of the experiences she has on her journey. Her Green World, the Glacier, looks very different to her once she has been all over the Kingdom. It represents a safer place, a home. Though it is clear that once she has left the she will not return—because her destiny is elsewhere— this Green World will always be hers, her home, where she began.

The most obvious marker of Lirael's difference is her appearance: "the Clayr had brown skin that quickly tanned...as well as bright blond hair and light eyes" (*Lirael* 18). Nix describes Lirael as "a pallid weed among healthy flowers" (18) because her looks are opposite to those of the Clayr. "Her white skin burnt instead of tanning, and she had dark eyes and even darker hair" (*Lirael* 18). She is immediately marked as an outcast by her physical differences. Altmann states that this is a typical starting point for a hero (146).

Lirael is, in Altmann's terms "a marginal figure, alienated from the world around her, outside the normal pattern" (146) much like Aerin, the hero in *The Hero and the Crown*.

Not only does Lirael look different, she also does not possess the ability of the Clayr, called the Sight. By Lirael's fourteenth birthday she still has not received the Sight. Because of this, she is not only treated differently, but also as a child. Because she has not received the Sight she is not a proper adult and is required to wear children's robes, which make her stand out even more than she already does: "the Clayr marked the passage to adulthood not by age, but by the gift of the Sight" (*Lirael* 16). The Sight is what makes a Clayr a Clayr, and if Lirael does not develop it she will not be considered a proper Clayr. Since possession of the Sight marks adulthood for a Clayr, Lirael is neither a full Clayr nor an adult. She is marked as an outsider from the very beginning, by her appearance and lack of ability. Her identity, thus far, is only as outsider. Her mother was a full Clayr and, by this alone, Lirael believes she is entitled to the Sight, to become a full Clayr herself. It does not matter that she does not know who her father is because the Clayr's mating habits involve taking on lovers not husbands. Who the father is does not matter for any of them. The Sight is passed down from the mother's side. In a way Lirael does not even feel like a member of her family, much less her society as a whole. Her view of the world is limited to the Sight and the Glacier. Her sense of self is contingent on these two desired identities. Lirael is searching for her true identity when the reader first meets her, looking for a sense of self, which she thinks can only be achieved by receiving the Sight, thus becoming both a proper Clayr and an adult.

### Lirael's search for identity and the Disreputable Dog

On her fourteenth birthday Lirael has decided to kill herself since she cannot become a Clayr. She goes to the top of the Glacier and overhears a conversation between King Touchstone and the Abhorsen Queen and two of the Clayr. They discuss a great evil in another part of the Old Kingdom. The monarchs leave and the two Clayr, Sanar and Ryelle, find her. They address the issue of not having the Sight, telling her that there is still time to gain the Sight. They tell her that “often the later it is, the more strongly it wakes” (*Lirael* 70). They offer to give her a work post to busy herself working rather than worrying. She requests to work in the Library to the Clayr, a place that holds not only books, but other magical things. When asked why Lirael answers: “it’s interesting” (*Lirael* 75). This is the first time the reader sees Lirael’s curiosity. She is offered an opportunity to work, to actually do something. Lirael is shown here as an active character with a sense of agency that is often lacking in female heroes. She wants to go find something to do, to *make* things happen rather than wait passively for something to happen *to* her. Though she does not have the sight, she is able to be of use to the rest of her community. Interestingly, she chooses the Library, a place about which she has a great amount of curiosity. She wants to explore, which is something the other Clayr do not seem to be keen to do. The Clayr are described as more reserved and spend their time Seeing and not so much doing. Lirael, on the other hand, wants to explore and do things with her time. This is the first time the reader sees Lirael get excited about anything. She is seen as curious and seems genuinely thrilled to be given a job to do. Her differences are suddenly presented as a positive and she has assumed an identity, as a third assistant Librarian. Nix writes that “She had been accepted” (81).

Lirael spends time in the library exploring and gets into a few scrapes before she finds a companion. She uses Charter magic to unlock things she probably shouldn't be touching and goes into rooms that are off limits. At first she is hesitant to start her explorations. Nix writes: "Fear and curiosity fought inside her for a moment [but then] curiosity won" (101). Lirael has embraced her curiosity and coupled it with her post as Third Assistant Librarian has assumed an identity and one that is very different from the rest of the Clayr.

After some time Lirael is promoted to Second Assistant Librarian. While she is exploring in one of the off-limits rooms one day, Lirael accidentally sets loose a creature. She is running and trips, falling onto a table. To regain her balance she reaches up and, instead of grabbing table, gets a small figurine of a dog. She runs out quickly, leaving the creature locked in the room. Lirael is scared but takes charge, deciding that "she had got herself into trouble and should get herself out" (*Lirael* 113). She spends days looking in various parts of the library, reading books to figure out what the creature was and how to bind it. While looking for that she comes across a book that has a spell to create a dog sending. A dog sending would not be a real dog but she wants a companion, "someone to talk to" (*Lirael* 135). Lirael starts using the Charter marks to create the sending,<sup>4</sup> as she read to do. The dog figurine happens to be with her when she begins and somehow the spell takes over and instead of creating a dog sending, Lirael brings the dog figurine to life. Lirael is shocked at this, as it was not what she intended, as well as by the dog's introduction, which is a lick on the face accompanied by speaking: "I am the Disreputable Dog" (*Lirael* 145).

Nix writes that the Disreputable Dog “seemed in most respects to be exactly like a real dog, albeit a speaking one” (147). As Lirael and the Dog get close, Lirael starts to notice how strange the Dog is. Her collar is covered in Charter marks, signifying that she is possibly something more magical and interesting than just a dog, or even just a sending. One night Lirael goes to her office in the library to find the Disreputable Dog reading a book. The Dog was turning the pages with “a paw that had grown longer and separated out into three extremely flexible fingers” (*Lirael* 148). At first Lirael is worried that the Dog is some Free magic creature that will hurt her, but the Dog calms her, letting Lirael touch her collar, which is covered in Charter marks, and says “you needed a friend...I came” (*Lirael* 152).

The Disreputable Dog is a supernatural guide for Lirael, much like Mogget was for Sabriel. The difference is that where Mogget only went with Sabriel because he had to serve her, the Dog chose to come to Lirael and actually likes her. She gives Lirael sound guidance and permission to be different. She encourages Lirael to explore and read and is herself a companion, thus giving Lirael things she needs and had never gotten from anyone else. This all makes the Disreputable Dog a prime example of an animal companion. Marchant writes that this type of “powerful relationship between adolescent female protagonist and animal plays a vital role in the protagonist’s psychic development” (3). Marchant compares this type of bond to a bond between an infant and the “imaginary father” defined by Julia Kristeva. This “imaginary father” enters the protagonist’s life during a period called abjection, which is described as “any point in which someone is temporarily or permanently in a state of in-betweenness” (Marchant 4). It is certainly true that when the Disreputable Dog enters Lirael’s life she is in a state of

in-betweenness. She is an adolescent, which is the liminal time between childhood and adulthood. Marchant writes that “adolescents may have an especially strong need for imaginary fathers” (5). The Disreputable Dog acts as Lirael’s imaginary father, guiding her and filling needs as no one else has.

The Dog helps Lirael figure out how to defeat the creature she unleashed, helping her break into the Chief Librarian’s room to steal a sword, the sister sword to Binder, the Abhorsen’s sword. The sword responds to Lirael immediately, and Lirael uses it to bind the creature. Lirael asks the Dog to help her, but the Dog says she will only advise since it is Lirael’s problem to solve. The Disreputable Dog gives Lirael something no one else ever has, power over her own actions. Lirael binds the creature successfully, and the Dog merely says “I knew you would” (*Lirael* 180).

Marchant writes that a large part of this type of girl-animal bond is characterized by being chosen, saying that “the imaginary father’s love is for that child alone” (7). This is the biggest difference between Mogget and the Disreputable Dog. Mogget chooses to go with Sabriel because he is bored and is bound by Charter magic to serve the Abhorsen. The Disreputable Dog chooses to come to Lirael because Lirael needs her and the Disreputable Dog likes Lirael. The Disreputable Dog is Lirael’s imaginary father,<sup>5</sup> without whom Lirael would not develop as she does. As the imaginary father, the Dog encourages Lirael in ways no one ever did and helps Lirael in ways Lirael didn’t even know she needed. The Dog takes care of Lirael in a way that encourages growth.

### Lirael's heroic qualities emerging

The next time the reader sees Lirael is five years after the binding of the creature she let loose. It is now her nineteenth birthday and she has spent the last five years exploring the library, with the Disreputable Dog at her side. She still has not received the Sight but has read about and learned a lot of new Charter magic, knowledge she and the Dog use to explore. Lirael has totally embraced her curiosity and her magical abilities have grown. The Disreputable Dog tells her, when she starts to pity herself for not having the Sight “none of the others are half the Charter Mage you are” (*Lirael* 296).

While exploring deep within the Glacier, they find a door with Lirael's name carved into it, in an old, unused language. When Lirael touches it she feels a surge of energy through her body. Nix writes: “it was clear the door was a major work of magic” (*Lirael* 298). At first Lirael believes it is a crypt, but the Dog helps Lirael read the other word on the door, the one that is not her name, and they find that the second word is “path”. It is obvious to Lirael, the Dog and the reader that this room is not only special, but was intended for Lirael to find. Whatever is inside was meant for her, exhibiting to the reader that Lirael's destiny lies beyond the door. At the Dog's urging, and with some hesitation from Lirael, they both enter. Inside Lirael finds *The Book of Remembrance and Forgetting*, a Dark Mirror and a set of panpipes. All of these things were waiting there just for her. This is the first sign that the reader gets that Lirael is indeed special. She obviously has a destiny, doing something she had never heard of. She reads the book, for what feels like days, “for Lirael had lost all knowledge of time” (*Lirael* 323), finding out how to use the Dark Mirror and the panpipes. There are seven pipes on the panpipes and they are the same seven as the bells on the bandolier of the Abhorsen, another fact Lirael



learns through reading. When she is finished reading *The Book of Remembrance and Forgetting*, Lirael decides it is time to leave. To her it has felt like days since she first entered the room, and she is afraid people will be looking for her.

While rushing out of the room to make it back without missing too much time, Lirael runs into a large group of Clayr. At first she thinks she is in trouble, but instead of being angry they greet her. It seems that Lirael has not been gone for days but merely a few hours, not enough time for them to be worried or angry. Instead of scolding her they inform her that Clayr of long ago saw her in this place and prepared these things for her. Though she has not yet received the Sight, she has “been given other gifts, gifts that will be sorely needed by the Kingdom” (*Lirael* 424) and “claimed a birthright of sorts tonight, one that has waited long for your coming” (*Lirael* 423). The Clayr have seen her somewhere else as well, and they proclaim that she will face many trials, and though she may not see, she will remember. “For with the Dark Mirror, and her new-found knowledge, she could see into the past” (*Lirael* 452). The words the Clayr speak to Lirael only solidify her upcoming ascent to heroism. Her destiny has been handed to her both by those who prepared the room and her tools, and also by the Clayr who have just told her how important she will be. Lirael’s discovery of the room shows the reader that Lirael will, without doubt, be playing a heroic role in the future. She is destined to do so.

The Clayr show her their vision of her on a lake with a sick boy. She must go, so they send her down the river with her new tools. As parting words they tell her “you must remember that, sighted or not, you *are* a daughter of the Clayr” (*Lirael* 527). At the first chance Lirael gets, with the Dog’s encouragement, she uses the Dark Mirror. She has to go into Death to use it, something she has never done. But she goes and does not seem

afraid. She uses the Mirror to see her parents. She finds, through looking into the past, that her mother had a vision of Lirael and approached a man, whom she did not know, to father an extraordinary child. Lirael's mother said "a single night may beget a child...as it will, for I have Seen her" (*Lirael* 549). When Lirael is out of Death the Dog tells her "So you are a Remembrancer now" (*Lirael* 564). This is the second identity Lirael assumes. She has found a place in society, one she did not even know existed. She is different, but this different is not proven to be negative but unique. She is special.

Down the river Lirael and the Dog do meet a boy, though it is not the one she was sent to find. Instead they find the prince Sameth, Sabriel and Touchstone's son, and Mogget. Lirael and the Dog decide to save Sam and Mogget, since their water vessel, a bathtub, is sinking. The boy Lirael was Seen with was Sam's friend, Nicholas, and, as they are both trying to get to him, they decide to work together to find him. The first thing they need to do is stop by the Abhorsen's House. While on their way to the House, Lirael and Sam talk about their vocations. Lirael tells Sam she is a Remembrancer, which he has never heard of, and Sam announces that he is the Abhorsen-in-Waiting, but does not wish to be. Sam tells Lirael that he is afraid of Death and that he is "supposed to be studying *The Book of the Dead*, but I can't stand looking at it" (*Lirael* 591). Lirael finds it odd that he, the Abhorsen-in-Waiting, does not want anything to do with his job. She also finds herself curious about the bandolier of bells. "She had a sudden urge to put on the bandolier and walk into Death to try the bells" (*Lirael* 592). Sam "felt a sudden urge to let her take the bells, as if that might somehow break their connection with him" (*Lirael* 592). Lirael also asks to read *The Book of the Dead* saying "I can't explain, but I feel that I must read it" (*Lirael* 593). Sam hates the book and the bells and cannot stand to touch

them, but Lirael is drawn to them immediately. This shows the reader that Lirael is becoming a hero. She has been given a call to action, and, like Sabriel, follows it, without much question. She is drawn to even more tools and is strengthening her abilities. It is interesting that she wants to have knowledge of something she has never known and has been warned is dangerous. Her curiosity has been piqued yet again.

The group finally reaches Abhorsen's House and immediately Lirael recognizes the dining room as the room where her mother told her father of her vision of their child. "Lirael had seen all of this before, in the Dark Mirror...the chair had been occupied by the man who was her father" (*Lirael* 682). It is here that Lirael realized that her father was Abhorsen and Sabriel is her sister. A Remembrancer, she realizes, has the combined gifts of an Abhorsen and a Clayr. This explains her natural attraction to the bells and *The Book of the Dead*. The clothes that are brought to her, by the sending servants of the House, have even been prepared specially for her. This realization comes to Lirael in a flash and she tells Sam. "I'm your aunt," Lirael explains (*Lirael* 684). Interestingly, Mogget, who is not usually one to disclose information unless asked directly, explains further: "Once I realized Sam was not the Abhorsen-in-Waiting, I kept my eyes open for the real one to turn up, because the bells wouldn't have appeared unless her arrival was imminent" (*Lirael* 685).

Lirael is overwhelmed. Suddenly she has more purpose than she would like. She still identifies as a Librarian and has added the identity of Remembrancer. Now she must also add Abhorsen. Sam, on the other hand, is relieved. He tries to comfort Lirael, saying that he understands how she feels, but that she should be happy she has found something she can do, since she will never have the Sight. Lirael says "I wanted to belong" (689). It

is Mogget who says to her: “You belong here” (689). Lirael has been curious and explored with the Disreputable Dog. From the very beginning she was different and throughout her life, that difference has been presented as special and unique. She has always wanted to belong, has been searching for who she is. She has become many things, a Librarian, a Remembrancer and now Abhorsen-in-Waiting. She has found a place in society and even a family. She has been given special abilities and now has a mission.

Lirael follows the traditional pattern of finding her place in society before doing anything else. This is typical of a traditional female hero. For instance, in *The Hero and the Crown*, Aerin had to explore, like Lirael, and establish herself in society before anyone else would acknowledge her heroism. What makes Lirael nontraditional is that her perception of non-acceptance was not based upon gender, and the society has always had more faith in her abilities than she has had. Though self-deprecating to begin with, she does not shy away from her new responsibilities because she recognizes that she has people relying on her: the whole Kingdom, it turns out.

Unlike Sabriel, who acted heroically from the very beginning, Lirael had to grow into her heroism. It took her years of exploring, physically and psychologically, and bonding with the Disreputable Dog for her to begin to act heroically. She needed time to grow into her abilities and discover how to benefit from her differences. It is important to note that Lirael is younger when the reader first meets her than Sabriel was when she was first introduced. Though their backgrounds are different and their journeys differ, just as Sabriel is, Lirael too is a nontraditional female hero. This is evident in the way she takes to tasks unhesitatingly. She does not know what danger will await her on the river. She

knows that there will be danger there but she goes anyway because it is her duty to do so. It takes her years to get to that point, which is typical for most female heroes, and even typical for most heroes in general that, regardless of gender, they must grow into their heroism. Once Lirael is summoned by a call to action, she reacts just as her sister Sabriel would, as an active agent.

### Lirael as hero

“She was an Abhorsen now, and there was a great task ahead of her” (Nix, *Abhorsen* 350). The third book in Nix’s series begins with Lirael and Sam trapped in Abhorsen’s house, with thousands of Dead blocking all above ground exits. The Dead cannot come into the house, or even cross the river that surrounds it, but Lirael and Sam need to leave to reach Nicholas and save the Kingdom. Lirael is scared, but she refuses to show it. Her commitment to her duty as Abhorsen is the most important thing. She has fully assumed the role of hero.

As she, Sam, Mogget and The Disreputable Dog prepare to leave the house—they have decided to exit by way of underground tunnel— Lirael catches sight of herself in a mirror: “she saw a warlike and grim young woman...she no longer wore her librarian’s waistcoat...but she couldn’t completely let go her former identity” (*Abhorsen* 37-38). She takes a piece of her red waistcoat, which marked her as a librarian, and ties it around her finger as a reminder. Nix writes that “she might not wear the waistcoat any longer, but part of it would always travel with her” (38). Lirael has taken on many identities as she matures through life. She began as an outcast little girl and has grown to meet every expectation her mother had for her. She has been transformed from aspiring Clayr to a

fully actualized hero. She is an Abhorsen-in-Waiting, a Remembrancer, and a Second Assistant Librarian. Not only has she found her place in society, she has found a family. She was an orphan before, no mother, no father, so out of place. Her only companion was a magical dog. Through her journey to heroism she has found a sister, a nephew and new appreciation from the Clayr. They, too, have come to recognize her abilities as unique, and as important to the welfare of the Kingdom.

After a dangerous journey, Lirael, Sam, Mogget and the Disreputable Dog reach Nicholas and the evil he has unknowingly been fostering. It is the climax of the story and looks to them like it might be the end of their very world. By this point Sabriel, Touchstone, Ellimere (their daughter and heir to the throne), Sanar and Ryelle have arrived to help fight. The great evil they have been destined to try to stop is called the Destroyer, or, Orannis. Nobody knows how to stop it. They only know that it is extremely old and very powerful. They know it was bound and broken before, so Lirael decides to go into Death and use the Dark Mirror to See into the past, and figure out how to bind it. It is Lirael's power as Remembrancer that will save the Kingdom. "Only Lirael knew how Orannis could be bound anew...she had to make it happen" (*Abhorsen* 450).

Lirael is the only person who knows how to save the Kingdom and not only has she accepted the task whole-heartedly, she is driven to do so. She thinks of it as her responsibility, to everyone. In the end it is an ensemble of heroes who save the Old Kingdom: Sabriel, Touchstone, Sam, Ellimere, Sanar, Ryelle, Lirael, the Disreputable Dog and even Mogget. They combine their power and the power of the bells to bind and break Orannis. They use all of their abilities and talents together to defeat the Destroyer. But it was Lirael's knowledge of how that got them to that point. Without Lirael's

abilities as Remembrancer, without her strange mixed parentage, without her Dark Mirror or the Abhorsen's bells, the Kingdom would have perished. Though it took the strength of many to bind and break Orannis, it was Lirael who made the biggest difference. She started out as a little girl yearning to belong and has become a hero though and through. Her knowledge and abilities saved the world! Without her, it would have been hopeless.

Lirael overcame many obstacles, none of them gender-related. The series ends with her a hero. Sadly, the Disreputable Dog dies in the battle. Her parting words to Lirael carry the most important message in regard to her heroism. She tells Lirael that her time has come and Lirael needs to go on with her life, as it is natural to do: "You have found your family, your heritage; and you have earned a high place in the world. I love you" (*Abhorsen* 512). Though the Dog must leave her, she leaves Lirael with a strong sense of accomplishment. Lirael has achieved everything she wanted, and more. She does not need the Dog—her Imaginary father—any more.

Lirael's heroism, by the end of these books, is not in question. Her transformation is obvious. She grew and changed, but did not hide or exploit her gender in the process. She was true to herself, never compromising her beliefs or her sense of self. Her growth was natural and she never felt societal pressure to hide any part of herself. She never gave up her femininity nor did she give into it. She never changed her name or pretended to be a man. She became who she was meant to be. She honored her birthright, not a socially prescribed pattern dictated by her gender. Thanks to the Old Kingdom, a world where there is no socially prescribed pattern to be dictated by gender, Lirael is a hero who happens to be female, not a female hero. Her heroism is not defined or limited by her

being female. It simply is, thanks to the Old Kingdom's post-feminist lack of gender norms.



## CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSIONS

“Trying to gain power by acting male makes her little more than a hero in drag, which is indeed irritating and retrograde.” – Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Waking Sleeping Beauty*

By detailing Sabriel and Lirael’s journeys as nontraditional female heroes, contrasting them with traditional female heroes, like Aerin and Alanna, and using support from authors like Trites, Altmann, and Marchant, it is impossible to deny that Sabriel and Lirael are different.

Unlike traditional female heroes, their journeys are not limited by gender. They do not have to pretend to be men, as Aerin and Alanna do. Sabriel and Lirael are not heroes in drag. They gain power by being brave, curious, determined and caring, attributes that are not categorized by gender in the Old Kingdom. The non-patriarchal society of the Old Kingdom allows them to be heroes who happen to be female, rather than female heroes. They both overcome various obstacles and develop unique and special abilities. The difference is that those obstacles and abilities are not defined by their gender.

Because Sabriel and Lirael are products of the Old Kingdom, it would stand to reason that if they are nontraditional female heroes, the Old Kingdom that Nix has created is nontraditional. In *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, Trites writes that a feminist children’s novel “is a novel in which the main character is empowered regardless of gender” (4). This is certainly true of the Abhorsen Trilogy, implying that Sabriel and Lirael might not only be nontraditional female heroes but also feminist heroes. There is a problem with this implication: Sabriel and Lirael do not “experience some gender-related

conflicts” (Trites 4). Though they are empowered regardless of gender, it is not a conscious choice. The society of the Old Kingdom does not have to consider men’s and women’s issues. Unlike in Tortall or Damar, where Alanna and Aerin exist, the Old Kingdom’s society does not have to consciously decide to accept women filling certain roles. This is because the society Nix created has transcended the need for gender related conflict by eliminating gender roles altogether; that is to say, he has created a post-feminist society. Tortall and Damar act as examples of societies in which feminist heroes can emerge and thrive, making Alanna and Aerin examples of feminist heroes. In both cases, the female heroes have to overcome their gender. In the end they are honored as heroes, but the authors of these novels had to subvert gender roles to make it so. Nix’s Old Kingdom has no gender roles to subvert. It is past feminism and the people there live in true gender equality. Since Sabriel and Lirael are nontraditional female heroes as well as post-feminist heroes, and this is a direct result of the Old Kingdom, which is nontraditional as well, the Old Kingdom, too, is a post-feminist world. Trites writes that “a major goal of feminism is to support women’s choices, but another that is equally important is to foster societal respect for those choices” (2). The society of the Old Kingdom does both of these things, but so do the societies of Tortall and Damar in the end. The Old Kingdom supports and encourages Sabriel’s and Lirael’s choices and actions, but it does so inherently. Their being female is irrelevant. In contrast, the societies of Tortall and Damar have to be shown how to see past gender. Alanna and Aerin had to be examples of women who can act like men to gain power. They must show other people that gender should not be a barrier. Sabriel and Lirael become heroes by merely being themselves and using abilities that they were born with and have been

encouraged to use. Sabriel and Lirael do not have to show people that gender is not a barrier in the Old Kingdom because, there, gender is already not a barrier.

It is interesting, then, that such a perfect example of a post-feminist world, with true post-feminist heroes, who are not limited or guided by their gender, was created by a man. It leaves the reader wondering if Nix did this on purpose. As far as the genre of young adult fantasy goes, his Old Kingdom is the first world of its kind. As far as female heroes go, Sabriel and Lirael are the first of their kind. And whether or not the Old Kingdom was meant to be a post-feminist society, why would a man have to be the first one to create such a place? Perhaps the answer to this is in concert with what Diana Wynne Jones, author of *Howl's Moving Castle*, says about writing female heroes. She writes, "for a long time I couldn't write a story with a female hero. The identification was too close" (web). She claims that she "kept getting caught up in the actual tactile sensations of being a girl" and that she knew to write a hero who was realistic she would have to have more distance than that. Perhaps this is why Nix was able to write Sabriel and Lirael. Since he is not female, it might have been easier for him to write a female hero and not get caught up in "tactile sensations." Perhaps he was far enough removed from the physical experience but close enough to the social and familial experience of strong women to manage a balance since Nix said he "had no difficulty creating strong, capable women characters, because I knew so many, all the way from childhood up" (email). Whatever allowed Nix to create strong heroes like Sabriel and Lirael, it is clear that he, at least, had positive female role models to model them after.

Sabriel and Lirael are heroic in every way a hero can be. They overcome obstacles, fight battles, and embody courage and determination. The difference is that no

part of either of their journeys is limited by their gender, nor are they benefited by it. The Old Kingdom has transcended feminism and can only be described as a post-feminist world. Sabriel and Lirael are the first heroes of their kind in the young adult fantasy genre, but they are sure not to be the last. Just as Alanna and Aerin paved the way for Sabriel and Lirael, so too will Sabriel and Lirael's journeys have forged a path for future female heroes. When the next generation of female hero comes into her own, it is fair to say that she, and those who will follow, do so thanks to Nix's post-feminist Old Kingdom, Sabriel and Lirael, and their efforts to further show that women can be heroes. Period.

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<sup>1</sup> It is unclear why Nix chose ‘Touchstone’ as name given to a fool. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a touchstone as follows:

“Touchstone, *n.*

Quotation evidence from 1481-3 (first cited in *Accounts of the Exchequer of the King's Remembrancer*)

This is one of the earliest 20% of entries recorded in OED

OED includes about 2600 entries first evidenced in the decade 1480—1489 (words such as *modern, pilot, repose*)”

Perhaps Nix thought Touchstone an appropriate name for him because he was a Royal Pilot who has been in repose for 200 years. According to the OED all three words pilot, repose, and touchstone became commonly used around the same time.

The OED also gives this as a definition of touchstone:

“b. fig. That which serves to test or try the genuineness or value of anything; a test, criterion.”

Perhaps Nix gave him the name Touchstone because he failed his mother, the queen, and also failed the kingdom. Perhaps this is seen as a test and since he failed he is a fool. Or it could be the comparison Nix frequently makes between Touchstone and Kerrigor.

Touchstone is also the name of Shakespeare’s fool in *As You Like It*, one of the most famous fools in literature. Shakespeare’s Touchstone is a fool in the manner of a court jester; he is supposed to be amusing for the

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entertainment of others. In *As You like It* “Touchstone does not represent a point of view to be trusted in this play” (Barton 367) and Nix’s Touchstone considers himself a fool because he trusted foolishly.

<sup>2</sup> In the Old Kingdom the rulership is passed through the bloodline of the royal parent, to the child with the ability and desire to rule—sometimes that child is male, sometimes female, and, sometimes illegitimate. In a patriarchal society this would never be allowed. A King, or any man, could have an illegitimate child, a child with a woman who is not his wife. But if a woman did this in a patriarchal society she would be punished to the fullest degree, even killed for her actions. If she were Queen she would no doubt lose her throne as well as her life. In the Old Kingdom, this is not so because it is not a patriarchal society. The Queen gets to keep her throne, her life, and her son. Touchstone was raised in the castle with the Queen’s legitimate children. This is further support that the Old Kingdom is a post-feminist society.

<sup>3</sup> Some might see Kerrigor’s attack on Sabriel as a gendered attack, with Kerrigor being the aggressor and Sabriel as the one being overcome. The attack, however, is not gendered, and it is not merely an attack. There is a battle going on when Kerrigor advances on Sabriel. He has already attacked many other people and turns his attention to her because she is the reason he has come at all. He has come for her, not because she is a woman, but because she is the Abhorsen. He would attack anyone, any Abhorsen, in this manner. Sabriel is no exception.

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<sup>4</sup>A mage creates a sending out of Charter marks. They typically act as servants. At the Abhorsen's House and within the Glacier of the Clayr there are many sendings, all performing a different task. They typically do not speak and often their tasks are limited.

<sup>5</sup> It seems strange to characterize the Disreputable Dog, who is a bitch—a female dog—as a father figure. She a parental figure for Lirael as she helps and guides in Lirael's growth and development. She acts as both parents; she is a nurturing mother as well as a challenging father. It is a limitation on Kristeva's part to rely only on the Freudian concept of girls needing meaningful relationships with their fathers more than with their mothers. Marchant's article still supports the parental role the Disreputable Dog fills for Lirael. She is no doubt an animal companion and an "imaginary father". She fills these roles even if the language to describe them is limited.

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