

**WOMEN WARRIORS IN YOUNG ADULT FANTASY LITERATURE:  
TRANSGRESSING PATRIARCHAL GENDER ROLES AND  
RECONCEPTUALIZING THE FEMALE HERO**

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For Mom, Dad, and, especially, Steven.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

It unearths new worlds. It reveals amazing possibilities. It creates indomitable heroes and role-models. It challenges accepted realities. It inspires dreams and imagination. *It is fantasy literature.* For the young adult reader, fantasy novels offer a glimpse of what Tamora Pierce labels “what if.” By liberating itself from the restrictions of the real world, the fantasy genre proposes new concepts about gender, class, race, and life in general. Growing up in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I was enamored of the images of strong female heroes, particularly those who existed within a fantasy realm. Characters such as the action figure and cartoon She-ra Princess of Power, Robert E. Howard’s barbarian Red Sonja, and the comic book character Wonder Woman were all tough women who competed for my attention against piles of Barbie dolls and Cabbage Patch Kids, Disney’s *Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*, and other representations of passive heroines from Grimm’s fairytales.<sup>1</sup> I became entranced primarily with the image of the warrior heroine, because of her agency, physical abilities, confidence, and resourcefulness. While I adored Anne from *Anne of Green Gables*, Jo from *Little Women*, and Pippi from the many *Pippi Longstocking* books, I admired warrior heroines for openly challenging the image of the tamed and silenced girl. During a period of my life when I was searching for my own voice and sense of self, the warrior women I encountered through books, television, and toys provided models that contradicted the

gendered representations of the overtly feminine and passive dolls with which I was routinely bombarded. While their fearless behavior was noble and exciting, these heroines of my childhood enabled me to conceptualize a world that did not confine women to one type of gendered image. They demonstrated to me and countless other girls and boys what *could be*.

An ongoing issue in literature for all ages is how women and girls find and create their own power in a society dominated by men. The authors focused on in this study address this very concern through continuing the fantasy tradition of creating new worlds in which social and political norms of our own society are challenged and subverted. While Robin McKinley and Jane Yolen have stellar reputations in the fantasy writing world, they also are critically acknowledged and award-winning authors of both children's and adolescent literature. McKinley is the recipient of the 1985 Newbery Award for excellence in children's literature for the *Hero and the Crown* (1984), the prequel to her 1983 Newbery Honor Book *The Blue Sword* (1982). She also holds the World Fantasy Award, the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award, and is listed in the American Library Association's Best Books for Young Adults. Her work in both fantasy and fairytale realms is compelling and widely recognized. Yolen, renowned for her study and use of such forms as myths, legends, fairytales, fantasy, and science fiction, is a prolific author. Her books and stories have won the Caldecott Medal, two Nebula Awards, two Christopher Medals, the World Fantasy Award, three Mythopoeic Fantasy Awards, the Golden Kite Award, the Jewish Book Award, and the Association of Jewish Libraries Award. She is a veritable legend in the children's literature world. Her books *White Jenna* (1988) and *Sister Light, Sister Dark* (1989) printed together as *The Books of Great*

*Alta* in a 1989 book club edition and later by Orb books in 1997, while being fine examples of feminist fantasy, are relatively overlooked in academic research and critical study; however, they prove to be extremely rich resources for this study. McKinley's book *The Hero and the Crown*, while receiving more scholarly attention, is the source of the concept for this thesis and therefore essential to its development.

McKinley and Yolen create stories and heroines that transgress and re-evaluate typical gender norms, thereby providing positive role-models for children and young adults. Both of these novels focus on the maturation process of their heroines as they journey from childhood to adulthood, tracing both their physical and mental battles as they find their place within society. Within the realm of fantasy, these heroines develop into active, autonomous, and authoritative women who carry the banner for women warriors. Examining the journeys McKinley and Yolen's heroes travel from insecure girlhood to formidable womanhood shows a template for empowerment. How these authors demonstrate the realization of the women's rights movement in the 1980s, challenge gender norms, empower girls, and promote the image of the woman warrior provide the focus of this study.

### **Fantasy: Freedom of Possibilities**

The fantasy genre provides a unique platform on which authors can voice feminist issues. Fantasy critic Sheila Egoff explains, "Fantasy has been a vehicle used by writers to express their dissatisfaction with society, to comment on human nature, and to bridge the gap between visible and invisible worlds" (1). But what is fantasy? Brian Attebery, another prominent fantasy critic, explains that fantasy is "making the impossible seem

familiar and the familiar seem new and strange” (*Fantasy* 3). He describes fantasy as “a form that makes use of both the fantastic mode, to produce the impossibilities, and the mimetic, to reproduce the familiar” (*Strategies* 17). Highly acclaimed fantasist Ursula Le Guin contends that fantasy “is a different approach to reality, an alternative technique for apprehending and coping with existence. It is not antirational, but pararational; not realistic, but surrealistic, superrealistic, a heightening of reality...It employs archetypes...It is a journey into the subconscious mind, just as psychoanalysis is” (*Elfland* 84, 93). Yolen calls the fantasy novel “a story of magic...It tells us of the world as it should be” (*Touch* 54, 56). Fantasy fiction contains elements of the implausible, the magical, and the marvelous coupled with a verisimilitude of human experience and emotions, while tackling the universal theme of good versus evil. In concert with this idea, Charlotte Spivack argues within her 1987 *Merlin’s Daughters*, “The events in fantasy fiction may be physically impossible, but they are not psychologically impossible” (4). Fantasy is primarily metaphorical and symbolic in her estimation. As an example, she contends that the quest motif in fantasy is a metaphor for personal meaning and identity (4). Metaphorically, fantasy can be an agent through which the author promotes social awareness and change. Majorie Allen in *What Are Little Girls Made Of?* (1999) describes fantasy as “a way for authors to explore basic truths as poets do. Their work becomes an analogy for real life, and each reader is likely to discover a different personal meaning. The fantasy genre, because it allows for different meanings, gives authors the freedom to explore social concerns more creatively than realistic fiction” (37). Fantasy enables us to view our world in a more imaginative and revolutionizing way.

Fantasy literature progressively depicts society's evolving perspectives and priorities. For example, Mary J. Du Mont's 1993 study published in *Voice of Youth Advocates* examines shifting representations of women in young adult science fiction and fantasy novels and is cited by Cathi Dunn MacRae in her book *Presenting Young Adult Fantasy Fiction* (1998). In the study, forty-five books from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s (fifteen from each decade) were evaluated according to various criteria. Observed in the study were an increasing percentage of women protagonists within each new decade and a correlation with more active and less passive women characters. More interestingly, while intelligence increased as an important quality in female characters, the value of physical beauty decreased (12-14). MacRae, through interviews with young adult fantasy readers, determined that girls appreciate female strength in literature, while, conversely, distrusting and disapproving of sexism displayed in older titles (35).

### **The "Tough" New Woman**

In the wake of the 1960s and 1970s women's movement, writers as well as others in popular media were reconceptualizing images of women in order to promote new possibilities for women in society. The indomitable Ellen Ripley from the 1979 science fiction movie *Alien* was a powerful new female protagonist, especially when compared with the 1970s sensuous and glamorous *Charlie's Angels*.<sup>2</sup> For the tough new woman of the 80s, muscle and aggression with uncompromising determination were prized over weakness, glamour, and softness. Sherrie A. Inness examines the image of the tough woman in *Action Chicks* (2004). She relates the rise of the physically and emotionally strong woman in the 1980s to the rise of the women's movement: "Feminism questioned

the notion that women are ‘naturally’ not aggressive, incapable of handling the same challenges as men. Feminism also taught women to question the gender status quo. What emerged were women who pursued many different roles previously held by men. In the workplace, women demonstrated that they could be tough, competitive, goal-oriented, and aggressive. They became soldiers, police officers, fire fighters, and construction workers – all jobs that had been considered too rough for ‘ladies’” (*Action* 5). As women’s lives were changing in the 1970s and 1980s, so were the representations of women in movies, television, literature, and magazines. Such images reflected the new status of females while “teaching real women dramatically different ideas about what it means to be female” (*Action* 15).

The trend of powerful women continued on into the 1990s with television and cinema characters such as *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*’s Sarah Connor, *Xena: Warrior Princess*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *G. I. Jane*.<sup>3</sup> These female heroes depict determined and athletic women fighting to escape the confines of traditional gender roles that keep them from being active, powerful, and aggressive. Tough chicks like Sarah Connor, Ellen Ripley, Xena, and Red Sonja are not primarily concerned with establishing peace and finding their place in society; rather, for some of these warriors, survival is their goal, while others fight for revenge or even pleasure. Such tough women also prove, according to Inness, “that masculine characteristics, such as toughness, are not biologically defined but are instead a carefully choreographed performance that either a man or a woman might engage in” (*Tough* 179). Social and cultural beliefs that females cannot be as physically resilient and capable as males uphold the patriarchal system, marginalizing women. Therefore, the media’s portrayal in more recent decades of

women who are physically and mentally able to display aggression and power undermines patriarchal concepts of women.

Such images of strong and defiant women, however, are a double-edged sword. While female viewers hail these heroines as representations of women's potential for strength and physicality, men lust after these tough chicks' in their skimpy clothes which emphasize their busty and toned physiques. Such sexualized images, mostly created by male directors, writers, and producers, objectify women and project the male fantasy of the sexy vixen. Their female audience, particularly adolescent and young adult girls, feels pressure to model these heroines' athletic, yet slim physical appearances to gain both attention and acceptance within patriarchal society. For example, it is during adolescence and young adulthood when the highest rates of eating disorders occur among women. It would appear that the media's tough chicks encourage both healthy and destructive behavior; they provide a template for strong, independent, aggressive, dominant, and physical women, while sexually objectifying these women as the embodiment of male fantasy sex kittens.

McKinley and Yolen, however, depict dominant and physical heroes who are not characterized solely through their appearances. The authors slightly color and illuminate their characters with brief descriptions of their hair, eyes, and height, but they do not clearly outline their physical shapes, describe them in sexual terms, or overly emphasize their beauty. While Aerin and Jenna attract the attention of men, their authors do not attribute such fascinations to any particular physical features. Readers are attracted to their personalities and actions, rather than their bust sizes and short skirts. Girls can relate to Aerin and Jenna's physicality in terms of potential for action instead of potential

for wearing a halter top. McKinley and Yolen preserve their tough chicks' dignity by freeing them from sexual objectification and endowing them with many laudable attributes, such as bravery and physical agility.

### **The Revolution of the Feminist Fantasy Writer**

Influenced by the 1960s women's movement, writers of feminist fantasy fiction not only cast strong female characters in their books, they also endeavor to change the format of the fantasy novel. Spivack identifies several literary strategies feminist fantasy writers deploy that differentiate them from their male counterparts: they reevaluate and recreate traditional gender roles; they employ a female point of view on traditionally masculine subjects; they utilize circular as opposed to linear plots; they include themes of the Celtic world's matriarchal society (8-9). She also contends that these writers apply three particular motifs subversive to the patriarchal fantasy form: the renunciation of repressive political and social power, the appreciation of mortality versus the desire for immortality, and the depolarization of values from absolute to subjective (10, 12, and 13). Roberta Seelinger Trites in *Waking Sleeping Beauty* (1997), defines feminist power as being more concerned with an "aware[ness] of one's own agency than it is about controlling other people" (8). Feminist power, therefore, represents positive forms of autonomy, self-expression, and self-awareness (Trites, *Waking* 8).

Women writers in the 1960s and 1970s, such Ursula Le Guin, Patricia McKillip, and Anne McCaffrey, wrote feminist fantasies with strong female *protagonists*; however, Robin McKinley and Jane Yolen were among the first to write novels of development and transformation featuring young female *warriors*. McKinley's and Yolen's novels

deploy literary strategies identified by Spivack for subverting patriarchal stereotypes and incorporating feminist concepts, and their heroes subsequently promote the tough woman image that surfaced in the 1980s.

Such books, peopled by those who are self-empowered regardless of gender, speak not only to adults within society but also send strong messages to the young, who are still in the process of shaping their own identities. Fantasy created for and read by young adults and children still adheres to the traditional goals of children's literature: "to instruct, to enlarge horizons, to make moral judgments, and, in particular, to help the young come to terms with themselves and with the situations in which they find themselves" (Egoff 266). Fantasy literature is particularly useful for young readers, who respond to idealism and imagination, contends young adult fantasy writer Tamora Pierce, creator of Alanna, the young woman warrior in her *Song of the Lioness Quartet* (1983, 1984, 1986, and 1988). Fantasy, according to Pierce, "opens the door of the realm of 'What If,' challenging readers to see beyond the concrete universe and to envision other ways of living and alternative mindsets" (50). An important goal of the young adult is to find a place in society, which is also the theme of many fantasy novels. Characters either find or make their own place, thus making fantasy "the literature of empowerment" (Pierce 51).

### **Magic and Maturation: The Young Adult Fantasy Novel and Bildungsroman**

Perhaps the most important element of fantasy that fascinates and enthralls children is magic. Pierce considers magic "the great equalizer between the powerful and the powerless" (51). Through magic, characters are able to subvert physical strength,

emphasizing the power of the mind over the body and intelligence over brute force. While magic is charming and a cornerstone of the fantasy genre, it does not overshadow the heroism of McKinley's warrior Aerin; rather, it is a tool she uses to vanquish her enemy. Aerin's gift of magic reflects her inner strength and wisdom; yet, it does not overshadow the physical strength and agility she employs to defeat the monstrous black dragon Maur. McKinley allows Aerin to dually demonstrate her fighting skills, physically, with a sword, and mentally, with her magical gift. Yolen, however, uses magic as a metaphor for psychological development and harmony. The Altite women in her books magically call up their dark sisters, who are their alter egos that voice the thoughts and feelings the Altite women repress, while they physically help them in work and in battle. Such magical entities function to portray the woman's journey to find equilibrium between her unconscious mind and socially driven ego and to symbolically represent a strong and balanced mind. Furthermore, they double the number of women in battle, thereby amplifying the Altites physical force and strength in numbers. In the moonlight, the Altite warriors are a fearsome and formidable foe. Utilized to support the author's message and progress the plot, magic entices and captivates the reader. Magic enables fantasy to be "the stuff of pure wonder, the kind that carries over into everyday life and colors the way readers perceive things around them" (Pierce 51).

The focus of this study is the young adult fantasy novel of development, the coming-of-age story or the *bildungsroman*. Le Guin considers fantasy the most appropriate medium through which to depict the journey to self-knowledge and adulthood: "The events of a voyage into the unconscious are not describable in the language of rational daily life: only the symbolic language of the deeper psyche will fit

them without trivializing them” (*Child* 65). This journey, she suggests, is not only a psychological one but a moral one as well; a journey to recognize good and evil, even the evil within oneself. Being an adult means being able to accept responsibility for one’s actions, being able to understand one’s mortality, being able to act autonomously, and being capable of evil (Gates et. al. 130). Understanding one’s ability to be evil is a Jungian concept that pervades such fantasy books as McKinley’s *The Hero and the Crown*, Le Guin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea*, and J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Ring*. Jung contends that one must face his or her shadow, that which he represses and denies as socially inappropriate behavior, or it will eventually consume him. Aerin faces her shadow through her battle with her uncle Ageded, her evil mirror image that represents the malevolent force she could become. Similarly, Ged, the young wizard in Le Guin’s *Earthsea* books, unleashes a terrible evil that threatens worldwide destruction. However, when Ged finally confronts this evil demon, he realizes the demon is the shadow of himself. He then calls it by his own name and sends it back to the depths of the underworld. Also, the wizened wizard Gandalf from Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* acknowledges his capacity for evil, when he refuses to touch or to use the magical ring. Doing so would risk his becoming wicked and mad like Sauruman, the wizard who has been corrupted by the evil flowing through Middle-Earth. These three characters possess incredible powers, powers over life and death, which make them more susceptible to the great temptation of evil. They are, however, able to responsibly wield their power by recognizing its potential for danger and the severity of the damage it may cause.

The young adult fantasy novel addresses the adolescent’s obstacles and rites of passage on the journey to adulthood: bodily changes, relationships and dating, sexuality,

parents, loneliness, autonomy, fear, death, and violence to name a few (Gates et. al. 130). The characters within these novels are young adults who face these challenges, discover a sense of self, and achieve adulthood, thereby proving that their problems are solvable. Le Guin also suggests that fantasy is more true to real world issues of all ages than is realistic fiction, particularly because fantasy considers evil a problem without an easy or clear solution – a truth the child must come to acknowledge. Expounding on the Jungian self's inherent capacity for evil, Le Guin argues that for a child to grow up into a responsible adult, "He needs to see himself and the shadow he casts. That is something he can face, his own shadow; and he can learn to control it and to be guided by it. So that, when he grows up into his strength and responsibility as an adult in society, he will be less inclined, perhaps, either to give up in despair or to deny what he sees, when he must face the evil that is done in the world, and the injustices and grief and suffering that we all must bear, and the final shadow at the end of it all" (*Child* 70). Reconciling their potential for good and evil allows the heroes and, subsequently, the readers to understand their place within society.

Both McKinley's *The Hero and the Crown* and Yolen's *The Books of Great Alta* follow the journeys of young female warriors who traverse the paths from girlhood to womanhood; as such, both novels are *bildungsromans* that explore the development of the heroine's character and personality. The heroes must face separation, tests of courage, love, death, power, and eventually must return to or recreate society. Aerin's and Jenna's journeys represent their search for individual meaning and power within their respective societies. While Aerin returns home a hero and a Queen, Jenna is the hero and catalyst of a new society in which she too is a Queen. They demonstrate the potential for

greatness, bravery, and power in women; they are an inspiration for the image of the new tough woman of the 1980s and 1990s.

### **The Study**

In Chapter 2, I explore the various ways in which McKinley demonstrates her political assessment of traditional gender roles' repressive nature. Furthermore, analysis of the ways in which McKinley depicts Aerin's journey to womanhood includes discussions concerning her physical and mental quests and Aerin the woman warrior as a 1980s female role model for young adult readers .

In Chapter 3, I unravel Yolen's creative incorporation of folk narratives and historical accounts within the actual narrative of the *Alta* books. An examination of the matriarchal society of the Altite Hames includes a discussion concerning women's education and training as warriors. In addition, I investigate the importance of feminine spirituality within the context of feminist studies.

Concluding the thesis, Chapter 4 incorporates a study of how young adult literature explores issues of power and affects the adolescent female reader at a particularly critical stage in her development. Children's literature and feminist studies formally intersect in an analysis of the subversive nature of such feminist texts as *The Hero and the Crown* and *The Books of Great Alta*. Finally, I discuss how the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s has influenced both the images of women in the media as well as a female migration into such male-dominated arenas as sports and the military. McKinley and Yolen's depictions of female empowerment not only represent the ideals that were brewing within the feminist movement, they offer hope for new generations of

girls who will grow up in a society where the statuses between the sexes are equalizing and the lines between the genders are slowly blurring.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> She-ra is a mid-1980s Mattel doll created in concert with the He-man action figure. A weekly TV show and comic book series depict her saving her community from the Evil Horde and his gang of misfits. Robert E. Howard's Red Sonja, while written in the 1920s, was converted to film in 1985, and portrayed a redheaded warrior avenging her sister's death and protecting a fantasy world from the evil machinations of a megalomaniacal queen. Wonder Woman is an Amazon Princess comic book character, created in the 1940s, who fights evil tyranny and the Nazis with her bulletproof bracelets, super-strength, and unbreakable truth telling golden lasso. In the 1970s, Linda Carter brought the warrior princess to a new generation of girls.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen Ripley, the stoic heroine of the 1979 science fiction horror film *Alien*, displayed the revolutionary image of a gaunt, shorthaired, make-up less, yet sexy tough chick who faces and destroys a vicious and parasitic alien.

<sup>3</sup> In 1991, *Terminator 2*'s Sarah Connor shocked the world with her new, impressively sculpted and muscular physique that complemented her flinty and combative new attitude. Her character underwent a major overhaul, transformed from the defenseless heroine of the 1984 *Terminator* movie into the sequel's angry hero. Xena is a fabled Amazon warrior who defends the weak, often fighting the gods and other mythical characters with her agile sword fighting skills and distinctive ululating battle cry. Buffy is cultural phenomenon who blends the bubble-gum popping vapidness of the stereotypical blonde cheerleader with the brave and aggressive fortitude of the vampire slaying warrior. *G.I. Jane*, the gritty 1997 movie about a fictional female character who joins the Navy Seals, became pseudonymous for women in the armed forces who feel they must prove that they are physically capable of performing on par with their male counterparts.

## CHAPTER II

### CHALLENGING GENDER AND FACING THE SHADOW IN *THE HERO AND THE CROWN* (1984)

Robin McKinley on several occasions has asserted that she writes about “girls who do things.” In a genre primarily dominated by men, she introduces one of the first and finest “consummate female hero[es]” (MacRae 125). In her 1985 Newbery Medal acceptance speech, McKinley confesses, “I wished desperately for books like *Hero* when I was young: books that didn’t require me to be untrue to my gender if I wished to fantasize about having my sort of adventures” (*Horn Book* 403-404). Her book *The Hero and the Crown* challenges gender norms that have prevailed in fantasy fiction and offers an extension of “both sides of our gender-specific horizon” (404). While Cathi Dunn MacRae categorizes *Hero and the Crown* as a feminist fantasy in her book *Presenting: Young Adult Fantasy Fiction*, McKinley’s work does not simply defend and depict the feminist mantra that women can do anything men can do; it explores the differences and importance of the woman’s quest in comparison to the man’s. Traditional gender roles are reevaluated and recreated in the novel, not simply inverted. McKinley elevates the controversy of women’s power to a deeper exploration of women’s potential and purpose. By examining McKinley’s manipulation and transformation of gender roles in *Hero* through names, labels, archetypal patterns and characters, as well as exploring different trends in feminist fantasy writing employed by McKinley, plausible alternatives

to societal gender norms become evident. Aerin functions as a role model for young readers through her display of typical adolescent anxieties coupled with her tenacious spirit and search for inner truth and strength. As she matures into a powerful woman, Aerin portrays a metaphorical potential for greatness women can achieve. The woman as the heroic figure is depicted as a laudable and convincing character who transgresses the boundaries of gender to show the universal possibilities in us all, men and women.

*The Hero and the Crown* traces Aerin's journey from bumbling young princess to valiant and monumental queen. Aerin, an isolated, motherless child, is shunned by the people in the land of Damar for being the daughter of a "witch," who bespelled the king into marrying her. Her only friend is the heir to the throne, Tor, who begins to fall in love with her. By rehabilitating her father's disabled warhorse Talat and discovering the proper formula for kenet, a fireproof ointment, Aerin hopes to find adventure and earn a place of respect in her father's kingdom. After being mortally wounded by the great black dragon Maur, Aerin is called to a magical haven in the forest, where Luthe, an immortal, helps Aerin to heal and uncover the relationship between the true story of her birth and the mysterious evil brewing in the northern region of the land. Leaving the forest with Talat and Gonturan, the mystical blue sword given to her by Luthe, Aerin goes in search of her uncle Agsded, the source of the northern witchery. Even though she is bewildered by how much he looks like her when she faces him, Aerin ultimately defeats Agsded and reclaims the Hero's Crown, a source of power, protection, and honor for Damar. Upon her return home, Aerin leads her people to victory in the great battle between Damar and the northern horde. After her father Arlbeth dies from battle wounds, Aerin marries Tor and rules by his side as queen.

McKinley seems to be creating in Aerin an ideal for modern young women – a character who maintains the brave and noble exterior of the typical male hero, while embodying the resourcefulness, determination, and personal integrity that resonate in the culmination of her personal quest for self. In doing so, McKinley expresses her dissatisfaction with the restrictive gender norms and provides, through Aerin, a means for her readers to come to terms with the gender roles imposed upon them by society and the possibilities that can come from extending and challenging those boundaries. In her 1998 discussion of fantasy writers in the 1980s, Sheila Egoff states, “the new fantasists still hew to the traditional purposes of children’s literature – to instruct, to enlarge horizons, to make moral judgments, and, in particular, to help the young come to terms with themselves and with the situations in which they find themselves” (266). As a role model, Aerin exemplifies the power and success that can come from questioning, reevaluating, challenging, and violating the stifling gender roles of her, and in essence our, American society. *Hero and the Crown* is not simply a parody of phallogentric fantasy writing. McKinley does not merely invert the binary gender roles in the novel; rather she redefines and extends them, which results in a more powerful and poignant feminist argument. In her article “Parody and Poesis in Feminist Fairy Tales,” Anna E. Altmann explains the ideology behind this concept, “The problem with this tactic [basic inversion of opposites] when it is used on the binary opposites of masculine and feminine gender roles as they have been constructed in our society is that simply inverting the binary does not displace it” (24).

## Gender and Nomenclature

McKinley initiates her 1984 book of feminine power with the word *Hero* in the title. A term usually regarded as a masculine descriptor of a brave warrior or a courageous and strong man, McKinley uses *hero* in a gender-neutral context, though the hero of her book is in fact a woman. Marjorie Allen in her book *What Are Little Girls Made Of?* explains the logic implied by distinguishing between hero and heroine: “In literature, a heroine tends to be the leading female character in a book, and she usually needs rescuing; a classic hero is self-sufficient and quite apt to rescue others. Heroes are never victims; they won’t allow it. In contemporary society, as well as in children’s literature, the role of victim is all too often applied to females” (37). Rather than allowing herself to be victimized and saved like a traditional heroine, Aerin clearly demonstrates her heroic qualities not only by facing the great black dragon Maur, but also through riding alone into a sea of northern fighters in the novel’s final battle scene. She rescues her father from attack and saves her country.

Throughout the novel McKinley continues to breach gender norms by creating names and labels that are either gender-neutral or reversals of typical gender-specific signifiers. For example, the protagonist’s name is Aerin, which is a homophone for both Aaron and Erin. The former name is the masculine form, while the latter is the feminine spelling. McKinley’s hero’s name is an amalgamation of these spellings, suggesting that, like her name, Aerin will display both traditionally feminine and masculine traits. McKinley has stated that the name she chose for her heroine was “androgynous to begin with” because “It’s all part of my feeling that the gender wars are so bitter because the areas of rightness and propriety for each side are too absolutely defined; anything that

muddies the line that society has drawn in the dirt and dared us to step over, is to the good, in fiction or in life” (*Something* 137).

Also, it seems relevant that Aerin’s name is not mentioned until chapter one ends. When she is finally called by name, she is identified as “Aerin-sol...Lady Aerin, Dragon-Killer” (*Hero* 10). The titles *lady* and *dragon-killer* are spoken in a derogatory tone by Perlith, her snide aristocratic cousin, with the juxtaposition of these two titles suggesting contempt for both. *Dragon-killer* is not a customary role for the nobility in Aerin’s society; rather it is deemed undignified for them: “There was no glamour in dragon-hunting...heirs to the throne are quickly discouraged from doing anything so dangerous and unadmirable as dragon-hunting” (29, 93). By linking *lady* and *dragon-killer*, Perlith, Aerin’s spiteful cousin and nobleman, affirms that in the patriarchal society of Damar, being a lady is as unadmirable as being a dragon-killer; Aerin herself admits, “No women rode in Arlbeth’s army” (7). Finally, the titles of the Damarian royal family display McKinley’s reversal of gender-appropriate names. The *sola* is the male member of the royal/ruling family while the *sol* is the female member. Typically, in Latin-based languages, the suffix *-a* is added to a word to change it from a masculine to a feminine connotation: as in *señor* and *señora* in Spanish. McKinley inverts this linguistic rule giving the male characters a feminine signifier and the female hero a masculine or neutral signifier.

### **Aerin’s Androgyny**

Similar to the construction of her name, Aerin’s quest in the book displays both masculine and feminine attributes. Aerin-sol, while having the more masculine title, is

the alienated and clumsy adolescent girl searching for a way to prove herself to her father, family, subjects and community. Within this magical medieval society of Damar, many traditional gender stereotypes exist through a gendered division of labor. Aerin exhibits few, if any, of the usual feminine traits that her cousin Galanna and her servant Teka display, such as mending, sewing, and grooming. McKinley utilizes such stereotypically gendered activities in order to debunk contemporary forms of sex segregation and gender role restriction. Instead, Aerin finds peace in solitude with her father's horse Talat and satisfaction in learning new fighting techniques with Tor and on her own: "She took pride, in a grim sort of way, in learning what Tor had taught her" (41). Tor is one of the few people who encourages her and accepts her for who she is. He respects that she doesn't preen and act coy to attract his attention.

However, she still feels the pressure from not being born a boy and she carries the weight of this dilemma with her as she tries to prove herself in masculine terms by learning to fight, rather than in feminine terms by learning "to keep her mouth shut, and to smile on cue" (8). She succeeds in finding her own voice where others have failed, such as Anne from *Anne of Green Gables* and Jo from *Little Women*, who both succumb to the pressure society places on them to silence and restrain themselves. Aerin's insecurity and guilt over being born a girl are not so subtly revealed when she questions her maidservant Teka about the truth of her situation: "That my mother enspelled my father to get an heir that would rule Damar, and that she turned her face to the wall and died when she found she had borne a daughter instead of a son, since they usually find a way to avoid letting daughters inherit" (15). Later, she tries to compensate for her insecurity and feelings of inadequacy by learning the secrets of kenet, an ointment that

protects its wearer from fire burns, and dragon-killing in order to “be doing something better than anyone else was doing it” (73). The society in which she lives views her as an outsider, a witchwoman’s daughter; therefore, the people in her city do not trust her. She spends the first half of the book striving and fighting to earn their trust and to prove herself to the people of her community and especially to her father.

Altmann asserts “*The Hero and the Crown* is recognizably a hero tale, marked by the narrative pattern of the archetypal quest” (“Welding” 146). She also suggests that “McKinley, by giving Aerin a white war-horse to ride, a sword to swing, and a dragon to kill, is not welding brass tits on the armor but reclaiming the metaphor of the heroic quest for women” (154). I would argue, however, that while McKinley does follow the format delineated by Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with the Thousand Faces*, particularly during the first half Aerin’s quest, modeling the traditional hero’s quest is not her end goal. Merely following the template used by male authors would be to continue to subscribe to the dictates of a masculine form; rather, McKinley subverts the male fantasy tradition by expanding the form of the quest to include intellectual, emotional, and subconscious obstacles in addition to physical struggles, while creating a more diverse set of characters instead of relying on the traditional cast of character types.

Throughout *The Hero and the Crown*, Aerin embarks on two major quests. During the first half of the novel, Aerin fulfills her first quest by defeating the great black dragon Maur, thereby demonstrating the typical male journey. In the second half of *Hero*, Aerin diverges from the standard questing form when she pursues a more intimate and psychological quest to heal herself and face her inner power and her potential for evil. Aerin follows Campbell’s hero cycle’s three stages of separation, initiation, and

return more than once during the first part of her story. Her initial quest is a social quest, which Annis Pratt defines in her book *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* as the “search for self in which the protagonist begins in alienation and seeks integration into a human community where he or she can develop more fully” (135). In concert with this assertion, McKinley states, “I’m preoccupied with the notion of woman’s ability, or inability, to move within her society” (*Something* 137). Aerin decides that the path to proving herself and attaining glory lies in slaying dragons, an occupation deemed beneath royalty. Despite this taboo, she faces each new phase of initiation with gusto and bravery. Her ensuing battles with the dragons are escalating tests of her skill, test which she faces with augmented courage, culminating in her barely successful confrontation with Maur, the great black dragon.

It is worth noting that by the time Aerin has defeated the black dragon Maur and has passed the ultimate test of masculine valor and skill, her physical form has lost two of its most feminine features: her facial beauty and her hair. She has become grotesque: “She tried to tell herself that her hurts were honorably won: even that she should be proud of them, that she had successfully done something heroic, but it did no good. Her instinct was to hide” (*Hero* 116). Her physical metamorphosis after the battle to slay Maur is the result of her desire to change her individual identity and find a place in her society. Her father even recognizes her coup, “You’re riding into the City a hero, you know” (122). In striving to relinquish her guilt over not being born a boy by proving her fighting skills, Aerin has sacrificed her femininity, her beauty. She has fought to establish her place in the community and to gain the trust of her people, yet she is perhaps even more alienated after her monumental battle with the beast. The aberration that she has become

confounds and scares her people not only because of her physical wounds, but also because of her masculine behavior. As a woman dragonslayer, Aerin directly transgresses societal tenets that prevent women from dangerous activities. While her father indulged her desire to hunt small dragons, Aerin's triumph over Maur proves not only her spectacular heroics, but also highlights her controversial masculinity. In their eyes she had been a benign oddity, but now she is a potent and threatening force. Aerin's social quest for acceptance yields a meager first harvest. She nearly loses her life to Maur and she must then accept the loss of her femininity, according to Damar's societal values.

### **Facing the "Other"**

The latter half of *The Hero and the Crown* depicts Aerin's second quest, her spiritual quest. After Aerin returns to the city burned and mortally wounded, she slips into a coma, from which Luthe, an immortal and magical man, calls her. She awakens herself and quietly leaves the city alone with only her horse. She ventures forth to the forest and to Luthe so that she may heal herself and finally learn the truth about her mother and, in essence, herself. Pratt defines this type of journey as the "self's journey in relation to cosmic power or powers. Often interior, it may also have communal dimension" (136). Aerin's adolescent search for acceptance through dragon-slaying has left her broken and wounded, and she must once again leave her home. Her journey becomes a journey for rebirth, which will take her beyond the boundaries of her society. Her second quest follows what Pratt identifies as the archetypal patterns in novels of rebirth and transformation. It is Aerin's personal expedition into her unconscious mind

(Pratt 137). Aerin finds success not through physical feats of skill, but through mental battles with herself and her magical and evil uncle Agsded. Altmann asserts that Agsded is Aerin's Jungian shadow, corresponding to Pratt's assessment of the shadow as exhibiting such "'masculine' impulses as logic, aggression, and power struggles" ("Welding" 152). Aerin's feminine quest for selfhood yields an inner strength that is independent of masculine power. When Aerin affronts Agsded, her "shadow," she perceives in him "the self-destructive potential manifest in the personal realm as social rebellion, which, in the unconscious, accretes the power of sexual opposite" (Pratt 141). Aerin confronts and overcomes her fears, reflected in her evil and destructive mirror – her dopplegänger uncle who looks just like her:

And at the far end of the chamber stood a man dressed in white, with a red sword girt at his side, and she knew him at once, for she had seen his face often enough in her mirror.

She opened her mouth, but no words came out. He laughed, her own laugh, but greater, deeper, with terrible, echoes that made tangled harmonies, and those harmonies found the places in her own mind that she had never looked into, that by their existence had long frightened her; that she had hoped to always be able to ignore. (171)

Through Aerin's travail in the mystical battle with her uncle, whom she ultimately defeats, she is reborn with wisdom and peace of mind that come with self-fulfillment and maturity. She exhibits her newfound qualities when she rejects Luthe's suggestion that she keep the dragon's bloodstone, the magically powerful last drop of blood from the dragon Maur, for its gift of invincibility when used with the Hero's Crown. Aerin

sublimates her pride and recognizes the danger of such power immediately. Like Gandalf, who distances himself from Sauron's ring, Aerin resists temptation to deny the evil inherent in absolute power. She admits, "I am letting my own experience color my answer, which is what experience is for" (*Hero* 189). Aerin understands that power of that magnitude would likely infect her with madness and megalomania that corrupted Agsded. Pratt asserts that a woman's journey for rebirth produces an androgynous, powerful human being from a socially devalued being (142). While Aerin returns to her city powerful and reborn, she also brings with her serenity and comfort in her strength as a woman, as well as wisdom from her many battles. She discovers the complexities of life and begins to understand the impact of her journey on her future: "She had misunderstood what her fate truly was a few days ago, as she rode to the City to deliver up the Crown into the king's hands; it was not that she left what she loved to go where she must, but that her destiny, like her love, like her heritage, was double" (218). The purpose of her second quest was not to prove herself, but to *find* herself.

Through her physical and spiritual quests, she transforms herself from a clumsy, insecure girl into a mysterious, self-possessed, and strong woman. It is important to recognize that although Aerin recovers the coveted Hero's Crown, she does not claim it as her own. Instead, she turns it over immediately to Tor, who will be king, and insists that he be the one to wear it. She proudly brings the crown home, yet she sacrifices the glory of wielding it. When Tor protests, demanding that she has earned the right to rule, Aerin replies, "Yes, I know I helped get the Northerners off our doorstep. It doesn't really matter. Come to that, I'd rather you were the king" (217). Political power is not the prize she desires for her quest; rather, Aerin is satisfied with her new inner peace and

love for Tor. She realizes where her journey has brought her: “She had misunderstood what her fate truly was a few days ago, as she rode to the City to deliver up the Crown into the king’s hands; it was not that she left what she loved to go where she must, but that her destiny, like her love, like her heritage, was double” (218). McKinley demonstrates in Aerin’s two contiguous quests that a woman hero can successfully accomplish the tasks of the masculine hero; however, she does not limit Aerin’s battles to those of the typical hero. She elevates her struggle to a higher plane – one that involves the ultimate test of facing one’s inner fears. Aerin finds her place in society and her peace within herself not by imitating a man, but by embracing her own strengths of courage, honor, prudence, love, and the gift to heal others, regardless if her strengths are considered masculine or feminine.

### **First Love: Sex and Power**

McKinley stretches the boundaries of a gender-restricted world. If Aerin breaks the mold of femininity, then Luthe, her mentor, breaches the limits of masculinity. Unlike the hunting and fighting warriors of the masculine realm, Luthe is a healer who cooks for and nurtures Aerin in his mystical realm. Their relationship reverses stereotypical gender roles. Luthe, a non-patriarchal, domestic entity, nurses Aerin back to health. Perhaps because Luthe is immortal and not human, he can exhibit such traditionally feminine qualities. Janice C. Crosby in *Cauldron of Changes* (2000) contends, “women must redefine the concept of power in order to share love and act meaningfully” (71). Consequently, with Luthe, Aerin first experiences physical intimacy and love. Aerin’s loss of virginity directly subverts patriarchal society’s control of

feminine sexuality. According to Roberta Seelinger Trites, “Sexual potency is common metaphor for empowerment in adolescent literature” (*Disturbing* 84). She also adds, “characters who have positive experiences with sexuality are usually strengthened by the experience” (*Disturbing* 96). Through the development of the birth control pill, women began to assume control over their bodies and sexual identity. Feminists of the 1960s encouraged the sexual liberation of women as a way to free themselves from patriarchal repression of their bodies and desires. Virgins have traditionally been seen as commodities, untouched vessels through which men can claim and assert their power. Embracing feminine sexuality, however, is a source of empowerment for women through which they reject being objectified. Aerin experiences this act of love with Luthe after she has become emotionally mature and is confident in herself and her own knowledge and power.

Expressing her sexuality demonstrates her autonomy and sense of self. Altmann argues that this free exchange of love “is possible only in the state of passage that separates one stage of individual and social life from the next, at a moment when the individual is not defined by a set of characteristics or roles but is entirely and only herself” (“Welding” 148). Aerin is aware of her potential for good and evil and exhibits this knowledge through her rejection of Luthe’s proposition for her to keep the dragon’s bloodstone. Her honesty and candor with Luthe evidences her maturity as well as the spiritual bond that has developed between them. As Altmann suggests, it is because of Luthe’s patience and guidance that Aerin is able to realize her love for Tor, another man with whom she has a deep and enduring connection (“Welding” 148). After their time together in the mystical forest, Aerin leaves to face her destiny, while Luthe remains

behind. She once again assumes the masculine role of venturing forth with sword in hand, leaving her lover awaiting her return.

By ruling with Tor rather than being ruled by him, Aerin is the prototype of the new woman. As a warrior princess, she is able to negotiate meaningful relationships. When Aerin tells Tor that she wants him to be king, he asks her to marry him so that she can be queen. After seeing Aerin's startled reaction, he qualifies his proposal: "I mean, I'll marry you as queen, none of this Honored Wife nonsense. Please, I – I need you" (217). Because their marriage is truly based on love and mutual need, neither of them asserts power over the other; they are sharing partners, wife and husband, king and queen. In a realm where symbols of power are traditionally male (153), Aerin brings knowledge that equalizes the sexes to a degree. She teaches her people the secrets of kenet and how to ride without stirrups and reins. She adapts their traditional ways, revising them to function in modern times for both sexes.

### **Embracing the "Other"**

Feminist fantasy's female protagonists play the conventional role of the warrior and exhibit male qualities of courage and aggressive behavior; however, unlike their male prototypes, they are not on a quest for power and domination, rather they journey for self-fulfillment and the protection of the community. Because of this delineation in motivation, Charlotte Spivack in her book *Merlin's Daughters* declares, "female fantasy writers are subversive" (8). These fantasy heroines depict the aim of feminist fantasy to accept and integrate the "Other," which represents the other gender, race, or ideology, rather than to convert or destroy it (Spivack 165).

Aerin embodies the figure of the “Other” in *Hero and the Crown*. While most of the main characters in the novel are endowed with some form of magic, her challenge is to find and control her own hideous strength, which has potential for extraordinary good or terrible evil. Of importance is how Aerin, figurative of the “Other,” is different from the society in which she lives. She is physically different with her red, fiery hair; she initially exhibits weak, if any, special magical powers; she is a female pursuing conventional male activities; she is a solitary and determined character who is not a natural athlete, but one who must work continuously to develop each new skill of fighting and riding. The novel ends with Aerin’s return to her community not wholly changed or converted, but stronger and more mature, ready to reintegrate herself into her community and bringing with her new breeds of animals to comfort her and reform the formerly repressive domestic landscape: “She picked [her goblet] up and looked into it, and saw...the long years in her father’s house of not being particularly welcome; and she thought that perhaps she would enjoy filling the castle with not particularly welcome visitors that were too many and too alarming to be ignored” (219).

Aerin also becomes a teacher, establishing new techniques of warfare and horsemanship. Her differences become her talents, which in turn prove beneficial for her community. Her fiery hair is indicative of her foreign and magically powerful heritage passed down from her northern mother; her powers are weak when she is young because, as Luthe explains, “The stronger the Gift, the later it shows up” (145); by pursuing male activities, she is able to develop new ways of riding and fighting on horseback; her determination to become more athletic is evidence of her strong will and powerful spirit. These aspects of Aerin’s character that were considered different from the typical

feminine nobility prove to be valuable to Damar. Through her courage, determination, and love for her country, she braves a return home: “she was afraid of what she would find; afraid that she came too late; afraid that even the crown was not enough. Afraid that they would not accept the Crown from her hands. Afraid that they would read in her face whom she had wrested the Crown from. Afraid that they would read in her face that she knew, now, that she did not belong to Damar” (197). She still fears rejection, yet she overcomes this fear because she knows that she is bringing the salvation of her community with her, which is also, in essence, herself.

### **McKinley’s Men**

While Aerin represents a changing image of feminine conduct, the men in McKinley’s book also embody a changing appraisal of masculine behavior. Spivack suggests, “just as major women characters are often both masculine and feminine in their abilities, both expert with swords and devoted to peace, so male characters are also complex, with their aggressive natures modified by sensitivity” (8). Aerin undoubtedly proves her skill with swords when battling Maur, yet her overall motivation is to maintain peace and prosperity for her community. Similarly, Tor reveals a tender side to his masculine veneer when he describes the hope he felt when Aerin disappeared after killing Maur. He explains, “When you left I felt hope for the first time. That note you left me – it wasn’t the words, it was just the feeling of the scrap of paper in my hands. I took it out often, just to touch it, and always I felt that hope again” (219). His romantic confession betrays a sensitive side usually depicted in female characters. How often have we read about the abandoned heroine clutching the note of her departed lover? Aerin leaves Tor

feeling similar to the way Luthe feels when she leaves him behind - pining for her and waiting for her return. Both men are strong characters who are modified by a sensitive side, revealed through their attachments to Aerin.

While McKinley endorses sensitivity and vulnerability through her Tor and Luthe, she remains critical of power-lust and male aggression. Spivack suggests, “traditionally male traits of pride, sexual prowess, and desire for domination are often subjected to negative scrutiny” (8). This is very apparent in the characters of Perlith and Agsded. McKinley, for example, describes Perlith with dragon-like qualities: he speaks “venomously” (10) towards Aerin and gazes at her with a glint in his eye when he is being mischievous (63-65), a gaze which is comparable to the red and slitted eyes of Maur (107). He is also very prideful and wants society to envy him. He believes he has “as much right to the king’s daughter as anyone” and lusts after Aerin at her birthday party (62-63). He is consistently depicted as a horrible person throughout the novel and Teka describes him as such: “You know Perlith and Galanna are horrid” (15). Similarly, Agsded is a villainous character for his dangerous hubris and desire for power. Luthe describes Agsded as having “made mistakes in pride” (188). He is a powerful manipulator who is behind the growing evil in the North and when Aerin faces him, he seems “to grow till he towered over her” (173). Both of these villainous characters are depicted as elegant gentlemen with harmonious voices. The juxtaposition of their dangerous desires and potential for evil with their silky manners and graceful tones of voice presents a more seductive and feminine model for evil. They are not the typical plotting brutes, but rather are the tempters of evil who, in Agsded’s case, rely on force when their temptations fail. In this case, McKinley consciously re-examines the typical

gender parameters of the villainous tempters, using men rather than women. By characterizing Perlith and Agsded as despicable and dangerous men, McKinley portrays the perilous possibilities of the traditional masculine traits of pride, sexual prowess, and hunger for domination.<sup>1</sup>

McKinley's book *The Hero and the Crown* exhibits many themes of feminist literature. She explores the manipulation of gender through labels, names, archetypal patterns, characters, including both heroes and villains, and the integration of the "Other." McKinley does not, however, limit her book to an equalizing of the sexes in simple patriarchal terms; rather, she reevaluates and redefines the lines of gender restrictions, exploring the potential for both men and women. We see the best and worst that both men and women can become in the novel. Yes, Aerin is a girl who does things; what she does most of all is exhibit the possibilities of power and security that can be found when people debunk the traditional gender roles of society and follow their own paths to selfhood, be it masculine, feminine, or an amalgam of the two. She is a hero for the men and women of Damar as well as for the men and women of today. While she kills dragons and conquers evil sorcerers, she bravely and determinedly refuses to be repressed by the restrictions of a gender code. She is a subversive hero who embodies the virtues of contemporary feminist women as well as the American ideal of personal achievement. She is the consummate hero for all time, both in her world of Damar and in our own world.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> McKinley even manipulates gender in the wild animals that assist Aerin on her journey. The folstzas are wild cats whose leader is a male, and the yerigs are wild dogs whose leader is a female. Typically, cats are associated with females and dogs are associated with males. The introduction of these wild beasts into the domestic realm of the city “revitalizes[s] the strains diminished by domestication” (Altmann, “Welding” 154). Aerin’s return to the city similarly demonstrates a renewal of her Damarian society, not just in returning the crown, but also in teaching the Damarian men and women to ride together once again as they did in the past (154).

### CHAPTER III

#### FOLKLORE, MATRIARCHY, AND FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY IN *THE BOOKS OF GREAT ALTA* (1988/1989)

*And the prophet says a white babe with black eyes shall be born unto a virgin in the winter of the year. The ox in the field, the hound at the hearth, the bear in the cave, and the cat in the tree, all, all shall bow before her, singing, "Holy, holy, holiest of sisters, who is both black and white, both dark and light, your coming is the beginning and it is the end." Three times shall her mother die and three times shall she be orphaned and she shall be set apart that all shall know her (Yolen, *Alta* 4).*

One of the foremost images of the woman warrior is that of the Amazon. Women soldiers fighting and living together without the presence of men clearly subverts the foundations of patriarchy. Jane Yolen's *Sister Light, Sister Dark* and *White Jenna* introduce an Amazon-like community of women who face annihilation by usurping and pitiless men. Yolen's books are reminiscent of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* and are akin to Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* through their portrayal of spiritual and secular life in matriarchal societies. On her official website, Yolen asserts that her *Alta* books are fundamentally humanist and feminist at heart. Through her exploration of young Jenna's journey to selfhood, Yolen traces the beginnings and end of a matriarchal haven, thereby presenting a template for a new, balanced society where women and men fight and live side by side. As does McKinley, Yolen presents an unassuming, yet gifted young heroine who develops into a powerful woman and performs great and prophetic tasks, thereby saving her society and demonstrating the heroic potential of women. Through her invention of shadow sisters, exploration of feminine spirituality, construction of matriarchal communities, and treatment of gender norms, as

well as her application of song, ballad, history, myth, and legend Yolen espouses the feminist ideal of equality via the reconciliation of peaceful and equitable relations between women and men. As one among many women warriors, Jenna, the hero of the books, does not openly challenge gender stereotypes in her society of the Dales; rather, she utilizes the skills taught in the Hames, enclaves of cloistered women, to unite the worlds of men and women. She is a heroic role model who demonstrates wisdom, self-reliance, and autonomy. While her adventures are quite different from Aerin's, both heroes affirm girls and women's potential for greatness and espouse freedom from gender norms as a means of promoting equality.

*Sister Light, Sister Dark* and *White Jenna* were conceived as one book, but Yolen admittedly felt insecure about writing a 600-page novel; so she wrote two 300-page books, published separately in 1988. They were published together as *The Books of Great Alta* in 1989 for a book club edition and again in 1997 by Orb Books (Yolen, "Telling Tales" 4). The *Alta* books follow the birth and maturation of Jenna, a child fostered in a matriarchal community called a "Hame," who is prophesized to be the avatar of the goddess Alta and who will bring about the end of the age. This plot sequence resembles Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* in which Aragorn, the hero of the trilogy, as heir to the throne of Gondor, leads the humans of middle-earth into a new age of man. Both Jenna and Aragorn are catalysts, establishing a transition from one way of life to another. As part of her training as a warrior, Jenna leaves her home on a mission, once she comes of age, to visit the neighboring Hames in order to learn their ways and share information. On her journey, she kills a man called "The Hound" while defending a boy, who is revealed to be Prince Carum, son of the exiled King of the Dales. In retaliation

for the soldier's death, an army led by the Hound's three brothers attacks the Hames, resulting in the near total annihilation of the feminine havens. Tantamount to genocide, their destruction incites Jenna raise an army against the usurping King Kalas to end the violence and restore Carum to the throne. In a moment of utter need and desperation, Jenna calls up her shadow sister Skada, who appears only in firelight and moonlight and literally represents Jenna's unconscious mind. Through the course of her journey, Jenna encounters Mother Alta in an enchanted grove, during which time five years passes within the span of a few hours and she comes to accept her position as the prophesied Anna. After killing King Kalas, Jenna becomes Queen with Carum as King, but she does not often occupy the throne, choosing to roam the land and visit her surviving Seldan Hame.

Similar to Aerin, Jenna allows her husband to attend to the political and ceremonial duties of the throne, while she pursues more fulfilling and personal tasks. While Aerin becomes a beloved teacher among her people, Jenna maintains her bonds with her Altite sisters and travels the land restlessly in search of more adventures. They do not seek to dominate other people; rather, as do the Grenna, these heroes espouse messages of equality and mutual respect. Even Jenna's adopted daughter Scillia turns down the throne that she has one by right in the third installment of the *Alta* books, *The One-Armed Queen* (1998). Neither Jenna nor Aerin desires political power; rather they seek personal empowerment. While Aerin's personal quest for identity leads her to protect Damar by returning the Hero's Crown and saving her country from a foreign threat, Jenna's quest to understand her position as a figurehead leads her to carry out the prophecy of the Anna by bringing to an end the age of war and turmoil, and delivering

forth a new age of peace between men and women. While both heroes perform great deeds and become formidable women, both Aerin and Jenna began as insecure young girls who felt isolated and different from others within their communities.

### **Growing up a Hero**

Joining *The Hero and the Crown* as a bildungsroman, *The Books of Great Alta* details the moral and psychological development of Jenna, a young girl predestined for noble and extraordinary feats. As was Aerin, Jenna is raised without a true mother and she is without the guidance of a father. The Hame replaces her mother and her father, her brother and her sister. Although she has the companionship of her friend Pynt, who calls herself Jenna's shadow-sister, Jenna is ultimately alone and yearns for the intimate bond between a mother and daughter. Pynt's mother Amalda, whom Jenna secretly calls A-ma (a term of endearment), is kind and motherly towards Jenna, but theirs is not a filial relationship closely binding daughter and mother. Aerin and Jenna endure isolation in their childhoods. The people in her community ostracize Aerin, because she is the daughter of a witch woman. The women of the Hame single out Jenna because she may be the child of the Anna prophecy. The girls' distinctive physical features augment their insecurity and sense of isolation; Aerin's blazing orange hair and Jenna's white hair, black eyes, and large stature are unique among the people of their respective communities. They are marked and, therefore, are set apart from others. Both girls are aware of their differences from others, a perception most young adults contend with some time during their youth; however, Aerin's and Jenna's unique characteristics attribute to

their strength of character and ability to do great things. They achieve their goals despite being different from the norm.

Names are important in both *Hero* and the *Alta* books; they can be empowering, demeaning, enslaving, and loving. Names and titles reflect the identity-forming process by relating the hero's place in society to how this position affects her identity. Selna, Jenna's third mother, welcomes Jenna into the community when formally names her Jo-an-enna: "Jo" for lover or for Selna's shadow sister Marjo, "an" for white, and "enna" for tree. Selna's diminutive for her daughter is Jenna. Jenna, like Ged from Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* Cycle, has a secret name. Given to her by Mother Alta, her secret name is Annuanna, for the tree of everlasting light. In *White Jenna*, Jenna later accepts that the woman in the sacred meadow is truly Alta because she calls Jenna by her secret name. While Perlith, Aerin's snide cousin, initially calls Aerin *dragon-killer* with disdain, her people later call her the same name with affection, after she saves and heals her community from the northern attack. The connotation of the title *dragon-killer* changes as Aerin changes the way her society sees her and the way she sees herself. While Aerin is able to transform the meaning of her moniker, Jenna's prophetic name, which inspires hope for those who call her the Anna, entraps her and seals her fate – she will be the Great Alta's avatar. As Alta's incarnation in human form, Jenna is deprived of her sense of personal identity. She overcomes the uncertainty of depersonalization when she realizes her sense of self. She observes, "But that is only a title, something put upon me. It is not what I am in truth" (260). Not only does Jenna's secret name permit her to recognize Alta, but it is also symbolizes her intimacy with Carum. After she and Carum

become lovers, Jenna whispers her secret name to him; Annuanna becomes an endearment expressing her love.

### **Sex, Death, and Responsibility**

The experience of first love is a common theme in many young adult novels. It is a rite of passage through which characters learn to value others and to esteem trust in relationships. Jenna's first experience with love occurs in *Sister Light, Sister Dark* when Carum kisses her outside of Bertram's Rest. The romantic experience confuses her; after all, she is only thirteen. After she spends more time with Carum and shares an emotional and intellectual bond with him in *White Jenna*, she can explore a more physical relationship. When she realizes that she trusts Carum and truly cares for him, she sleeps with him. Repression by the patriarchy is subverted by the women of the Hame, who do not deem marriage to be the prerequisite for enjoyable sexual relationships with men. As with Aerin, who sleeps with Luthe before returning home to Tor, Altite women freely engage in sexual relationships to fulfill their own desires, without experiencing recriminatory guilt and without fearing social or moral condemnation. Such sexual liberation aligns with feminist theory. Jenna's sexuality is her own, and sharing her body with Carum before marriage exhibits her ownership. Yolen, however, emphasizes that the union is all the more special because they are both virgins learning from each other: "Then mouth on mouth, tongue on tongue, without ever saying the word love, they learned more than she had ever been told or he had ever discovered in his books about it, and they learned it together, far, far into the night" (347).

While experiencing love for the first time is a rite of passage in an adolescent's life, so too is experiencing some form of loss or death. Such losses are necessary for a young person's development, because they validate the importance and ephemeral nature of life. Leaving her home at Seldan Hame, Jenna begins her hero's journey and travels to Nill's Hame to serve her mission year. She soon finds herself in the midst of devastation and tragedy. Returning to Nill's Hame after escorting Carum to Bertram's Rest, a sanctuary for scholars and soldiers, she finds Nill's Hame totally annihilated by the army of men searching for Carum and retaliating for the Hound's death. Yolen's rape imagery evokes thirteen year-old Jenna's horror as she enters the ruined Hame and encounters the scattered bodies of her Altite sisters: "Turning the corner carefully, she gasped, her stomach knotting, a strange metallic taste flooding into her mouth. The carved gates were in splinters, the walls breached. Tumbled about like fruit in a bowl, the heavy stones had their dark, hidden faces up to the sun" (167). The images of the penetrated gates and the destruction of the entranceway evoke shadows of violence and violation. Jenna does not succumb to the chaotic devastation. Reverently gathering the dead and honoring them with an immense funeral pyre, Jenna reveals her spiritual fortitude and her developing sense of responsibility.

Understanding and accepting responsibility is an indication of maturity, and the developing young protagonist in a bildungsroman learns how to discern the binary opposites of good/evil, right/wrong, and light/dark. Francis J. Molson, a critic of young adult fantasy and science fiction literature, in his essay "Ethical Fantasy for Children" defines ethical fantasy as "contemporary fantasy for older children and young adolescents that is explicitly concerned with the existence of good and evil and the morality of human

behavior” (86). Much of Jenna’s, as well as Aerin’s, journey involves choosing between right and wrong and living with the consequences of choices made. Just as Le Guin argues that children must face their own propensity for evil in order to develop into healthy adults, so too does Molson declare that the courage needed to make difficult decisions and to accept responsibility for those judgments is a mark of maturity and also a significant plot element in ethical fantasy (Molson 91-92). As testament to her position as an avatar, Jenna makes many decisions that she believes are for the good of her community and accepts accountability for their repercussions. For example, after returning with orphaned children from the ruined Nill’s Hame, Jenna begins to understand the gravity of her position as the Anna. She resolves to take control of her future, rather than be left at its mercy. In the presence of her sisters and Mother Alta at Seldan Hame, she declares, “Listen to me. *I am the Anna!* I am the Goddess’ good right hand. I go to warn the Hames that the time of the endings, the time of the beginnings, is here. I am the Anna” (203). She is able to accept this responsibility because she understands her culpability and her place in the maelstrom that is about to ensue.

Similarly, Jenna comes full circle by the end of the novel, traveling from baby to mother through her adoption of the murdered M’Dorah Hame warrior’s small one-armed child. Accepting responsibility for the child is another sign of her integrity and maturity: “When I took her from Iluna’s care, my hands were still red from the blood of Iluna’s killer. She is mine, little Scillia. I will love her well” (375). She demonstrates that warriors can be aggressive and tender, destructive and nurturing. Adopting Scillia unites the image of the warrior and the mother, proving that women can be both.

Realizing that her actions can have tragic outcomes challenges Jenna's emotional strength and moral fortitude. When Jenna decides to protect Carum, because he has cried "Merci" and begged for her help, she kills Barnoo, the Hound. While defending the weak seems noble and just, she could not have predicted that her actions would bring about the ruin and desecration of ten of the seventeen Hames. Through her actions she begins to carry out the prophecy of the Anna by initiating the Gender Wars and thereby bringing about the end of the separation of men and women. Similarly, when Carum has captured the Bear and brings him to his brother, Gorum pressures Jenna to kill the Bear in order to fulfill the prophecy. Jenna refuses to kill the unarmed man because she realizes that in doing so she would be no better than he, a ruthless murderer. She chooses to renounce the dark path even though hers will be the more difficult road to travel; however, by letting the Bear live, she is indirectly responsible for Catrona's death, whom the Bear kills during his escape. Such plot elements conform to Molson's classification of ethical fantasy because they demonstrate the "chagrin or surprise experienced by the protagonists when they learn that their actions have consequences quite different from what they intended or imagined" (93). Jenna surely did not expect Catrona's death to be the result of her refusal to kill the Bear. She must accept the consequences of aggressively wielding power and not dodge her enhanced responsibility.

### **The Shadow Sister and Feminine Spirituality**

From such tragedy, Jenna must find comfort within herself; however, she is not always alone. One of Yolen's most intriguing creations in the *Alta* books is her conception of dark sisters, alter egos or "shadow souls" of each of the Altite women.

They appear in moonlight and firelight, doubling the Hames' populations and creating metaphysical balance among the sisters. Skada, Jenna's dark sister, explains, "And though I am many things, I am not what you are not. *I am you*. And what you keep yourself from being" (173). Often Skada will say what Jenna is feeling, in spite of Jenna's conscious or unconscious fear of expressing her sentiments. Skada tells Jenna, "If I quieted, Jenna, you would say the very same things inside your mind" (184). Not only is Skada a true companion, she is the conduit through which Jenna can become a more complete person. Jungian feminist critic Susan Rowland credits Jung for "privileging the voice of the other, the unconscious represented through fantasy and myth" (45). Jung believed the unconscious needed to be superior to the ego and act as the psychic guide. The dark sisters allow their light sisters to rely equally upon their unconscious than their conscious ego. Rowland elucidates that an "Over-reliance upon the conscious persona provokes a dynamically opposite reaction from the unconscious in the form of the shadow. The shadow is literally the image of the thing the person has no wish to be" (31). Aerin faces her shadow, her uncle Agsded, thereby confronting her potential for megalomania and destructive evil. However, the situation is different for Jenna. In her moment of great need, Jenna is able to call up her dark sister to help her cope with the tragedy at Nill's Hame and face her destiny as the Anna. Because Skada speaks from the dark interior of Jenna's mind, Jenna recognizes and manages her own anxieties and fears. As opposed to battling her demons head on, as Aerin does, Jenna collaborates with her dark sister, Skada to resolve her conflicts. The shadow sister demonstrates that, in creating a public face, what a person represses is still a working part of her.

The dark sister is one among many images found within Altite spirituality that centers on the worship of the Goddess Alta and fosters female empowerment. Great Alta was once the “ruling deity of all the Dales before being supplanted by the Garunian pantheon of gods” (Yolen, *Books* 219). According to the history section in the *Alta* books, the Altite religion developed with the overflow of women after the Garunian invasion. Alta embodies two figures: the mythic white-haired, self-progenating goddess and the historical itinerant teacher and savior of unwanted girls who established the first of the Hames. To the women of the Hames, however, Alta the goddess and Alta the teacher are one in the same. On her journey to warn the other Hames about the Garunian’s army’s attacks, Jenna meets Alta and discovers the truth behind both of their identities.

Yolen employs elf-like creatures called Grenna to comment on social equality and to facilitate Jenna’s passage from girlhood into adulthood. Jenna and her comrades find themselves surrounded by these small green elves while traveling through King’s Way, a heavily forested area. Standing in a large circle around Jenna, the Grenna explain that they have no leader and no hierarchy among them: “We have neither king nor captain. We have only the circle” (266). Yolen juxtaposes the Grenna against the hierarchies of the kings of the land, the mother Altas who manage the Hames, and even Jenna, who reluctantly leads an army (Yolen, “Oh God” 10). Their system of leadership is a fantastic ideal of ultimate equality. They take Jenna to a magical cave, which transports her to an enchanted meadow where she finds a tall white-haired woman. The woman explains that she was an unwanted queen who traveled the Dales collecting other unwanted girls until the Grenna found her and brought her into the magic grove. They showed her how to

care for the children, how to call up her twin, how to play the different games that were later instituted in the Hames, and other secrets found in the *Book of Light*. However, once the Grenna returned her to the Dales, a hundred years had passed. Upon her return, Alta established the Hames and brought the wisdom of the Grenna with her. Yolen uses Jenna's experience in the grove not only to demonstrate the subjectivity of truth, but also as a transition phase from adolescent to adult. When she emerges from under the hill, five years have passed and Jenna is eighteen years old and more aware of the impact of her position as the Anna. Using the Grenna and the grove allows Yolen to move Jenna through time quickly and concisely (Yolen, "Oh God" 9).

The image of the Goddess is important to feminist studies. Feminist spirituality began to reemerge during the women's movement in retaliation against the patriarchal-centered dominant religions. Janice C. Crosby in her book *Cauldron Of Changes*, a study in feminist spirituality, explains that 1970s' feminists began to explore new areas of feminine-based religions by: "1) investigating the past through historical and anthropological work; 2) reexamining and tracing the evolution of myth and legend; 3) creating woman-centered ritual; and 4) redeeming the practice, often termed 'womanspirit,' of psychic skills denied or devalued by the western patriarchal scientific establishment" (13). She suggests that fiction writers conceive new visions of male-female relationships and "social ethics" thereby creating new possibilities for women in society (17). Crosby declares, "Womanspirit techniques, like rituals, the Goddess, and historical/mythological revision, serve to empower women by helping women to see themselves as powerful, creative beings who do not have to accept or perpetuate patriarchal reality for themselves" (29).

Susan Rowland also recognizes the importance of the goddess figure in feminism: “For the practice of analysis from a feminist perspective, goddess feminism offers opportunities for feminine fictions of empowerment and agency, for Jungian goddess feminism is a matter of the psyche and the imagination, not a literal replacement of a religion” (68). Eros and Logos are archetypal principles of mental performance. Eros, associated with the feminine, denotes the qualities of feelings, emotions, and relationships, while Logos, associated with the masculine, includes rationality, spirit, and intellect (Rowland 40). Rowland maintains that patriarchal Christianity privileges a “masculine reason structured by its separation from inferior irrationality” (60). Jung proposed incorporating the feminine and the irrational, the unconscious, into both religion and philosophy (Rowland 61). Goddesses are symbolic expressions of the subdued and repressed female psyche. Embracing the anima/animus and utilizing both Eros and Logos are the focus of much of Jung’s archetypal theory. Submitting the ego to the desires of the unconscious and accepting both the feminine and masculine facets of the psyche can lead to a healthy mental balance.

### **Life, Education, and Warrior Training in the Hames**

At the heart of feminist spirituality is a celebration of womanhood. While McKinley focuses primarily on Aerin’s journey to selfhood, Yolen closely explores the bonds between women and how they affect Jenna’s personal development. Hames were established as havens for abandoned or unwanted women and girls, who live together in a matriarchal society worshipping the Goddess Great Alta. Such facilities surfaced after the Garunian invasion, during which time conquerors from another country killed so

many Dalian men that a surplus of women remained. In the Dales, a geographically mountainous area, there are seventeen Hames. Jenna is fostered in Seldan Hame, a small enclave in the southern region. Similar to the Amazon society of legend, only women are allowed to enter and reside within the Hames. Functioning like a commune, the women live together, share the responsibility of raising the children, and establish a structured system of responsibilities and duties that keep the Hame functioning. As adolescent girls, the females in the Hame may choose to enter into a certain field, much like an apprenticeship. They can elect, for example, to work in the gardens, in the kitchens, with the children, or to serve as priestess or warrior. The Hames women are free to choose their own path and to pursue a position in the Hame through which they will not only contribute to the welfare of the Hame, but also find fulfillment and pleasure. Jenna chooses the path of the warrior, much to the disappointment of the head priestess, Mother Alta, who suspects that Jenna may be the prophesied Anna and would rather she follow the way of the priestess. As a warrior, Jenna trains to fight with a sword, move stealthily without being tracked, seek out her opponent's weaknesses, and strike with conviction. Unlike the Garunians who assumed control of the Dales, Altites do not possess a conquering spirit; they are content with their way of life and what they already have.

The women of the Hames carefully and thoroughly educate and train their girls in the ways of the hunter, so that they might always be prepared. They are skillful and intelligent and often are summoned by the townsfolk to assist as midwives, hunters, or in special situations when there are natural disasters, such as an overflowing river. Games also are employed to stimulate reflexes and train the young girls. Among them are the Eye-Mind Game and the Game of Wands. The Eye-Mind Game teaches the students to

quickly study and memorize details, such as map locations and landmarks in the forest. The Game of Wands facilitates swift, yet precise swordsmanship.

In Jenna's world, the elders' emphasis on intensive training and education teaches the girls the valuable lessons of self-reliance, self-esteem, self-defense, autonomy, and camaraderie. Nurturing and instructing their young girls to develop a sense of purpose, self-identity, and community responsibility is of the utmost priority in the Hames. The Altite women couple rigorous training with loving and gentle support, such as singing the young girls to sleep at night. They are not merely hardened warriors; they are also affectionate and caring mothers and sisters. As such, their instruction is pervasive, affecting the girls' physical, mental, and spiritual development. For example, Altite women incorporate different breathing rhythms into their daily lives to enhance their performance. Reminiscent of Lamaze breathing techniques for prepared childbirth, young girls are taught the importance of breathing by their Mother Alta. Focusing so intently on breathing teaches the girls to understand and appreciate the ways in which their bodies work and how they can use their breathing to control their actions, thereby affirming and strengthening the mind /body relationship, focusing the mind to control the body. Mental concentration and physical skill are necessary to fully benefit from the various forms of breathing. Through such lessons as breathing exercises and the Eye-Mind Game, the young girls become self-reliant, independent women who collaboratively work for the common welfare of the Hame. They do not passively await help or guidance from men; rather, they actively assist men and fight beside them. Such examples illustrate the potential for our young women in male-dominated fields as well

as traditional ones, emphasizing the possibility of finding fulfilling employment as the goal of life.

Because their community is isolated from men, the young girls of the Hames do not often interact with men and boys. Furthermore, some of the women of the Hames demonstrate disdain and disrespect for the men in the neighboring towns. For instance, the women of the Hame, to signify when someone is acting dangerously foolish or reckless, replace the misogynist insult “son-of-a-bitch” with “son-of-a-son” (20). Also, as Jenna explains to Carum, “We choose to use men but not to live with them. To serve them for wages as paid guards if need be, but not to stay otherwise in their service” (112). Altite women, therefore, own their sexuality, expressing desire and seeking companionship without fear of social recourse. As inherent feminists, they do not allow themselves to be objectified or seen as commodities on the basis of their sexuality; rather, they involve themselves in relationships that are free from commitment. The women visit the men in the towns for such reasons as sexual gratification or to conceive a child. If the baby is a boy, the woman will leave the child with the father, but if it is a girl, she is fostered in the Hame. The women of the Hame are either biological mothers of their own children or adoptive mothers of abandoned children. In Jenna’s case, her birth mother dies in childbirth; the midwife who takes her to the Hame is killed on her journey by a wild cat; and her adoptive mother Selna is killed with Jenna strapped to her back by a man in the forest. The prophecy of the Anna, the woman who will lead the Dales into a new era of peace and unity, speaks of such a thrice-orphaned child. Mindful of that prophecy, Mother Alta decrees that Jenna shall be fostered by all, but not by anyone

alone. She will be a child to everyone, thereby highlighting the importance of the female bond and uniting the community of women in Seldan Hame.

### **Debunking Gender Norms**

Through many of the women in the Hames and some of the male characters as well, Yolen, like McKinley, subverts patriarchal stereotypes by reconceptualizing typically masculine and feminine traits among her characters. Many of the women possess such masculine-identified characteristics as aggression, agility, domination, and sexual desire, while some of the men demonstrate feminine characteristics such as shyness, vulnerability, and submission. The Altite warriors, particularly, are trained to protect the Hame at all costs and are skilled warriors with swords and bows and arrows. For instance, when Jenna faces the Bear, she aggressively pursues him in order to avenge the M'Dorah Hame warrior Iluna, whom he has just killed. She demands that everyone stand back, while she carefully studies his moves, seeking his weakness (369). She couples aggression with composure to outwit her opponent and attain victory. Similarly, many of the Altites are outspoken and assertive. For example, Catrona, Jenna's teacher and friend, openly displays malcontent with the Mother Alta of Seldan Hame, and Jenna defiantly says no when necessary, such as when she refuses to marry King Gorum and kill the unarmed Bear. Jenna throughout her journey learns how to take control and lead an army. Modeling the heroic woman's ability to shoulder great responsibility and garner power and respect, Jenna, like Aerin, successfully rallies her army for battle against formidable enemies.

In a different tone, Armina, an Altite from Nill's Hame, and young prince Carum also exemplify Yolen's gender inversion theme. Armina exudes a different type of power: the power of sex. She is unabashedly sexually aggressive with young Carum upon his arrival at the Hame. She dehumanizes him with her appraisals of him as a sexual object; she circles him while clicking her tongue and commenting, "There are several in the Hame who like bull calves," meaning he is young but physically able (121). Armina proves herself crude when she teases Carum: "If you think my tongue is wicked, wait until dark. Darmina's [her dark sister] is twice as fast as mine" (129). Reminiscent of Mrs. Robinson's seduction of Benjamin in 1967's movie *The Graduate*, these scenes between Armina and Carum interject humor by turning the sexual tables on young Carum, who is sexually objectified, and by characterizing Armina much like a college boy: she rummages through a pile of clothes and smells them to find if they are clean (129). Yolen juxtaposes this scene with one demonstrating Carum's shyness and propensity towards being a prude. He is embarrassed at the idea of dressing in front of women (129) and is offended by Armina's relentless innuendos.

Carum is Yolen's feminine foil to Jenna's masculinity. For instance, Jenna rescues him twice, once when the Hound is pursuing him as a child and again when King Kalas's army captures him as an adult. Similar to the prince's climb in the fairytale *Rapunzel*, Jenna scales to the top of a perilous and suspiciously phallic tower to free Carum. Similarly, when Nill's Hame is preparing for King Kalas's army to attack, Jenna contributes by hauling up water from the well, while Carum fletches new arrows. Ironically, Jenna performs heavy manual labor, but Carum spends his time sitting doing handicrafts in another demonstration of gender role reversal. Eventually, Jenna is able to

embrace her position as the Anna and lead an army of warriors against a ruthless foe. As a leader and an icon, Jenna embodies women's potential to assume the integrity of great power and accept the respect that it evokes. While Yolen ascribes traditional masculine traits to Jenna, she consciously credits Jenna's closest friend Pynt's father for bestowing upon his daughter his legacy of "being small and fine-boned" (37). Carum, however, is presented as progressive when he listens and follows Jenna. His submission to her is not demeaning towards his masculinity; rather, it is an affirmation of his manhood by demonstrating his wisdom, loyalty, and love.

Yolen also manipulates images associated with women's hair to challenge traditional images of femininity. Typically, a woman's hair is seen a source of beauty, femininity, and sexuality. The Altite women's braids, however, also function as weapons. When Jenna faces King Kalas, both she and Skada, her shadow sister, wrap one of their long braids around him, strangling him to death. Yolen takes a stereotypical feature of femininity and turns it into a dangerous asset. Such feminine stereotypes do not fit with Altite women; the demands of their way of life prevent them from being passive, soft, and submissive ladies.

While Yolen undermines some gender norms, she upholds others. Mother Alta of Nill's Hame criticizes her sisters for their gossiping: "I wish to discover what I can without the added danger of tongues wagging. If we have one fault here in this Hame, it is that we can keep nothing secret" (127). Yolen describes instances in which men try to silence women, such as when Carum touches Jenna's arm to quiet her mid-sentence when they are speaking with Nill's Mother Alta. Similarly, upon traveling with King Gorum's army to New Steading, Jenna is silenced by the townspeople: "Jenna discovered that no

one really expected her to speak” (343). Patriarchal New Steading frustrates Jenna but does not deflect her from the course she sets. The townsfolk exhort Petra (Jenna’s companion and priestess-in-training) to stay behind: “They said women should not be at war. That we are not strong as men” (350). The exiled King Gorum also believes that women warriors would be a distraction to his army of boys and farmers from neighboring towns. In addition, he continually objectifies Jenna as if she is “some sort of exotic animal imported from the Continent” (351-2). When the New Steaders present to Jenna and Petra female-appropriate attire, the practical and self-assured Jenna declines their offer because “She knew the skirts would make riding difficult, guessed the beads would catch in any brush and leave an easy trail to follow” (349). The younger and thus more malleable Petra, on the other hand, accepts the clothes and, as Jenna predicts, slows down their party by entangling her accoutrements on the branches and brushes in the forest. Petra’s immaturity causes her to more easily be swayed; her feminine passivity contrasts with Jenna’s masculine assertiveness and confidence, byproducts of her arduous journey to adulthood.

Yolen, similar to McKinley, debunks traditional gender norms to create new possibilities for men and women. Yolen’s women demonstrate typically masculine qualities, while her men are sometimes effeminate. While some of her characters exhibit stereotypically appropriate gendered behavior, they often act as foils to Jenna and Carum, highlighting the two protagonists’ strengths as gender-bending heroes. By pushing the boundaries of gender to create a hero who will unite the sexes, Yolen shows that restrictive gender norms prevent men and women from achieving equal status. Jenna and

Carum, possessing both masculine and physical attributes, bring together the world of men and women and promote equality.

### **Man-written History vs. Woman-lived Experience**

Through the manipulation of facts, history, and accepted truth, men have been able to maintain their superior status in society. Yolen combines myth, legend, tale, history, song, ballad, parable, and story to present variations of truth from which the reader must discern the ultimate truth. Each section of the books begins with the myth followed by the legend and then the story; however, all but the first section conclude with a myth. History, song, ballad, and parable are all interspersed within the books. By displaying the subjectivity of reality, Yolen challenges the accepted knowledge and promotes the search for individual truth. Within the *Alta* books, the reader must interpret the accuracy of the various narrative forms and decipher his or her own version of what he or she sees as the truth. By creating conflicting stories between the narrative forms, the *Alta* books require the reader to choose what to believe.

According to anthropologist Elliott Oring, myths are considered to be “sacred and true” in the societies in which they are told: “Concerned with ultimate realities, they are often set outside of historical time, before the world came to be as it is today, and frequently concern the actions of divine and semi-divine characters” (124). Indeed, Yolen’s myths dispense Alta’s prophetic declarations within a divine construct with no sense of time, as in Book One of *White Jenna* when Great Alta speaks, “I shall not speak to you that you may hear. I shall not show myself to you that you may see. For a child must be set free to find her own destiny, even if that destiny be the one the mother has

foretold” (227). Yolen beautifully exhibits her poetic gift through her descriptions of Alta’s braids as symbols of power, life, unity, beauty, femininity, and death. In one of her descriptive passages, Yolen describes Alta’s braids as a burial shroud: “Then Great Alta drew up the dead warriors with the ladders of her hair, dark warrior by the golden hair, light warrior by the black. She set them to her breast, saying, ‘You are my own dear babes, you are my own sweet flesh, you are now my own bright companions’” (330).

While the *myth* delivers Alta’s words, the *legend* relays unreliable descriptions of events. Oring defines *legend* as the depiction of a single episode, “which is presented as miraculous, uncanny, bizarre, or sometimes embarrassing,” and is set in historical time in a recognizable world (125). Unlike myths, however, legends are not always considered to be true; rather Oring explains that there is a “negotiation of truth.” As with gossip, the idea of truth is entertained, but not necessarily accepted, as in the legend at the beginning of Book One of *Sister Light, Sister Dark* detailing the miraculous birth of a child who climbs down the umbilical cord, cuts the cord with her teeth, and then proceeds to walk out the door.

The *tale*, however, is a short folk narrative; for example, in *White Jenna* there is a tale of a witty young mouse that outsmarts a kitchen cat in order to leave the house and join his mother. Oring considers a folktale to be a narrative that is received as fiction or fantasy. There is little character development, but the tale proceeds with a logical sequence of events. The folktale emphasizes binary opposites of characters’ attributes: wise versus foolish and love versus hate (Oring 126-8).

The *history* of the Dales, the regional setting of the *Alta* books, attempts to reconstruct through anthropological, archeological, and other scholarly research the

heroes and ways of life during the Gender Wars. The pompous historian Cowan is often more well regarded by his peers than the “indefatigable mytho-culturist Magon,” whose “shaky” theses are frequently more consistent with the true story than other researchers. Yolen’s depicts the subjective nature of history as unreliable and biased.

The *song* is often a lullaby from the Dalian culture; the *ballad* is a “celebration of Anna’s heroics;” and the *parable* makes a moral point (MacRae 247). At the end of each book, Yolen incorporates music with the songs featured in her novels. Yolen explains, “Music, too, has remained an important part of my life” (Yolen, *Something* 207), and she utilizes her music to complement beautiful poetry (Yolen began her writing career as a poet) (Yolen, *Telling* 5). The story provides a clear narrative that seems to be the truth; however, Yolen explains, “...the books are really about that point where folklore, history, storytelling, balladry, all come together. I’m never sure, but I believe that not any single one of these tells the entire truth – not even what seems to be the actual narrative, which I call the story. The word ‘story’ is supposed to be a kind of hint to you that this is also part of unreliable narrative” (“Telling Tales” 4). Rather than telling a complete truth, the focus of the story is Jenna’s journey and the circumstances in which she finds herself. The story portrays the life of the hero on which the legend is based, as does *The Hero and the Crown*. In *The Blue Sword*, Aerin is a legend who manifests herself in fire to guide and assist Harry, the hero of the novel. McKinley wrote *Hero* to portray the making of a hero and a legend. Yolen juxtaposes the story with powerful myth and legend and dismissive history to produce shadows of the truth. After all, Jenna’s story is only one interpretation of events that occurred in the fictional Dales. The truth here is subjective.

Through her literary manipulation of history, story, and other folk narratives, Yolen demonstrates that history is interpreted retrospectively through the eyes of researchers with various biases and personal agendas. Indicative of post-modern ideology, Yolen demonstrates the concept that history reflects the point of view from which it is told. Therefore it is dangerous to blindly accept any account of history as definitively true. As in the case of Dalian history, Jenna's heroics are either discredited or attributed to a male hero such as Carum. Such events are changed to adhere to patriarchal standards rather than objective truth. For example, the ballad that celebrates the episode in which baby Jenna seemingly kills her foster mother's attacker uses the masculine pronoun "he" to identify the baby. The sex of the child is changed to conform to patriarchal tenets, which assume that a hunter or killer must be male. Similarly, in *The Hero and the Crown*, when Aerin rushes in to battle at the end of the novel in a wave of burning light, her countrymen assume she is a man: "But the blue surface rippled more like furry backs than like water, and the rearing white crest was a war-horse, and a sword blazed blue in his rider's hand; he carried no shield and wore no armor, but he seemed no to need it, for the Northerners fled before him, and only his sword's quickness stayed their flight, and slew them as they sought to escape" (201). In patriarchal society, if there is a hero, he must be a man.

Yolen, a folklorist herself, also exhibits the cultural value of myths and other folk narratives, primarily when the folklorist Magon proves to be more reliable than the historian Cowan and is honored by the Dalian Historical Society (418). Such details suggest that Yolen appreciates folklore as not only a culturally rich art form, but in some cases as being closer to the truth than actual recorded history. Interpretation is key within

the *Alta* books, as Nill's Hame's Mother Alta explains one must "See the world on a slant" (138). The subjective truth must be deduced from the combination of myth, prophecy, legend, and other cultural and folk narratives. Through such literary techniques, the young reader learns to challenge the authenticity of history, acknowledging the possibility that male writers might discount, underestimate, and even exclude the contributions of women and minorities.

### **Weaving a New Society**

Yolen's *Alta* books do not endorse a matriarchal society or a goddess-based religion: rather, she endorses, like Jung, a balance between the feminine and masculine. When Jenna challenges her position as the Anna in the grove with Alta, Alta explains that loving both men and women has prepared her for what is to come. She is to bring about the end of the age when men and women live separate lives. Jenna, as the Anna, will weave together, like Alta's nurturing and dangerous braids, the two sexes into an equitable society of woman and man, light and dark. Yolen leaves the conclusion to her *Alta* books ambiguous and open-ended. The Grenna allow Jenna to bring only one person back to the grove with her to live with Alta in a timeless state. Jenna and Skada carry an aged and dying Carum to the mouth of the cave together; however, Yolen does not make it clear whom Jenna decides to take into the grove with her, thereby not privileging either relationship over the other.

Yolen espouses the need for the sexes to unite rather than segregate. Jenna as a role model for young adults, while enduring typical adolescent rites of passage, displays the ownership of her sexuality, and the ability to be aggressive and still tender. She

embodies the potential for women to assume the glories of great power, to embrace both the unconscious and vocalizing desires and feelings, and to refuse to be defined by obsolete stereotypes and gender norms. Yolen and McKinley manipulate gender and social constructs to portray the importance of flexible gender roles and equality among men and women. Skada once asks Jenna, “What does a hero look like?...Polished helm, fresh tunic, clean hair, and a mouth full of white teeth?” Jenna replies, “Not...not like this anyway.” Skada encourages her: “You are wrong, sister. We are all heroes here” (321). Jenna finally understands her purpose and becomes the hero that prophecy foretold she would become. Her cause is one that anybody can embrace: the unification of all people.

## CHAPTER IV

### GIRLS, FEMINISTS, WARRIORS: INFLUENCES OF YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE ON THE ADOLESCENT FEMALE READER

McKinley writes books such as *The Blue Sword* and *The Hero and the Crown* to create adventure stories that feature girl heroes, whom Tamora Pierce calls “Sheroes.” In her 1985 Newbery Medal acceptance speech for *The Hero and the Crown*, McKinley recalled how strongly the image of the warrior maiden Eowyn, facing the terrifying Lord of the Nazguls in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, affected her (*Horn Book* 402-403). In the typical patriarchal hero’s quest, women are generally peripheral characters who either assist or hinder the hero on his journey. Within a mammoth text of male heroes and extensive male relationships, Tolkien offers in Eowyn’s character one shining glimpse of an active woman warrior defending her king. Cathi Dunn MacRae considers McKinley’s novels “designed to put right those failings of her beloved Tolkien, to portray in depth the women with the sword as hero both ordinary and utterly human” (120). Similarly, Yolen diverges from Tolkien’s patriarchy and creates a world that emphasizes the importance of female relationships and greatly expands upon his fleeting image of the female warrior. McKinley and Yolen demonstrate in their novels a new model of quest, which deviates from mythologist Joseph Campbell’s model of a traditional heroic quest. Their heroes do not merely seek treasures and glory and face physical battles; these female heroes venture within their own psyche to reconcile their inner desires, demons, and self. Exploring the

unique ways women are motivated to develop their own particular heroes and quests, Dana A. Heller in her book *The Feminization of the Quest-Romance* contends, “it is time to map the ‘dark continent,’ the frontier of an individual female psyche, while understanding how her specific ties to community, family, and loved ones empower – rather than restrict – her capacities... Women’s quests must be able to embody the opposite impulses of separation and connection” (13).

### **Female Adolescence and the Loss of Inner Voice**

Such distinctions between separation and connection are particularly pertinent to the adolescent female reader who, as Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan explain, is at the “crossroads” between childhood and womanhood. While they value their relationships with their parents, especially their mothers, they are at a difficult stage in their development, suffering from separation anxiety. In their psychological study of female adolescent development entitled “Meeting at the Crossroads,” Brown and Gilligan explain that “female psychological development within patriarchal society and male-voiced cultures is inherently traumatic,” (216) primarily because girls are likely to lose their voice, self-esteem, and meaningful and authentic relationships that encourage fearless and free expressions of ideas. Women see themselves in relational terms – wife, mother, daughter, girlfriend, and friend – and yet at some point in their early lives they sacrifice a fundamental part of themselves to become “good women” and maintain relationships (Brown and Gilligan 2). There is a disconnection between voice and desire, psyche and body, and self and relationship at a certain stage in female development (Brown and Gilligan 7).

While young boys are allowed to act out their emotions and express their thoughts and desires, young girls are “civilized” into becoming proper young ladies and nice girls; such indoctrinations are used to control girls’ behavior and thoughts. For example, women often avoid expressing their feelings to circumvent confrontations, because they are afraid of the consequences, which might include the break-up of a relationship or physical violence (Brown and Gilligan 3). Caroline S. McKinney in her article “Finding the Words That Fit: The Second Story for Females in Young Adult Literature,” warns, “Girls who see that truth and knowledge exist outside of themselves, residing elsewhere, as the property of some outside authority figure, are unlikely to develop an inner voice” (2). By modulating and silencing young girls’ inner voices, society is crippling their development, hindering them from being autonomous and authoritative members of society. From the Bible to fairytales to much classic and modern literature, women and girls are saturated and inculcated with images of passive and sacrificing women. Putting the family first and being attentive and loving mothers and wives are the patriarchal characteristics of a “good woman.”

Brown and Gilligan, however, distinguish between what they term “authentic” and “idealized” relationships. Authentic relationships encourage honest communication of desires, feelings and emotions between the people involved; however, idealized relationships censor expression to conform to societal expectations and values (29). In an authentic relationship the parties involved express their feelings without fear of social rejection, whereas idealized relationships require those involved to perform their socially dictated roles, such as young lady or raucous young man. Adolescence is the turning point between the carefree voice of childhood and the silenced voice of womanhood.

Young adult fantasy novels like *The Hero and the Crown*, *The Books of Great Alta*, and *The Song of the Lioness Quartet*, by Tamora Pierce, encourage young girls to pursue their dreams and listen to their inner voice. Peter Hollindale names such books “adolescent novels of ideas,” because they require more intelligence in their readers in addition to “grow[ing] the mind a size larger” (86, 88). While the writers of these books weave political, philosophical, and social concerns into their texts, they also challenge their readers to consider the themes, the characters, and the social situations and how they relate to their own lives. And, as Yolen demonstrates the subjectivity of truth, such novels challenge their readers to search for their authentic self, a search that continues throughout life.

### **Affecting Change: Literature’s Influence on the Adolescent Reader**

The question remains: How does literature influence young adult readers? Holly Virginia Blackford in her book *Out of the World: Why Literature Matter to Girls* explains, “the reading and identity-formation processes of children display the negotiations by which a culture reproduces” (2). Through books, television, and other media, society presents cultural values and political and philosophical concerns. For example, since the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s, a proliferation of writers has begun to challenge gender stereotypes and patriarchal repression, including but not limited to Marion Zimmer Bradley, Toni Morrison, Sandra Cisneros, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Margaret Atwood. Their writing reflects the changing cultural climate and encourages further social change and awareness of feminist, racial, and economic issues.

To the young and impressionable reader, Blackford asserts that characters function like real life role models (5). While some may think, “How can a warrior in a fantasy novel serve as a role model for a girl living in the twenty-first century?” Blackford explains that the fantasy realm is liberating for girls, because it frees them from the social constraints they face in their own day-to-day life (61). They are able to imagine new worlds different from their own, while understanding the fundamental logic within the story, focusing on the possibilities presented in the text (62). Blackford credits girls with understanding the fundamental relationship between good and evil and how they are symbolically represented through the characters in the text. From a Jungian perspective, she argues that girls recognize the archetypal imagery and comprehend that the villain is the hero’s mirror or “other,” who must be confronted and conquered (49). Therefore, the fantasy genre facilitates the developing mind by taking it out of the confines of its conscious world into another construct where new ideas and possibilities are revealed.

Girls, however, do not just read one type of genre. In school and in their free time they often enjoy a variety of literature, including romances, adventure stories, mysteries, fantasies, and non-fiction texts. Gina DeBlase, in “Acknowledging Agency While Accommodating Romance: Girls Negotiating Meaning in Literacy Transactions,” explains that girls are in a “tug-of-war between the more traditional representations of femininity found in such texts [as patriarchal romances] and those images of femininity that represent a more self-determined and assertive female role model” (9). Girls must choose between competing voices in their worlds, telling them who to be, how to act, and what to feel. McKinney considers the best young adult novels to be those in which girls

can relate to the female protagonists as “reflections of themselves” (2). The female character who “uses situational shifts [new circumstances that force her to undertake a quest or journey] in order to help her grow, gain a sense of self or transform relationships,” demonstrates “not only a successful rite of passage but also her own emerging strength” (McKinney 4). Such strength of character is required to realize an individual’s inner voice and identity, in addition to maintaining authentic relationships.

### **Young Adult Novels: The Literature of Power**

Part of growing up is being indoctrinated into society; however, Roberta Seelinger Trites in *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* considers power to be more of an issue in adolescent literature than growth, stating, “power is everywhere” (x). In addition to power, or strength, Trites asserts, “adolescents must learn their place in the power structure” (*Disturbing*, x). While developmental growth seems to be at the heart of the adolescent novel, she suggests that without feeling and comprehending the differences between power and powerlessness, the youth cannot grow. The issue of power in youth is congruent with the issue of power in feminism, primarily because, as Lissa Paul points out, both women and children are linguistically, physically, and economically repressed and controlled in patriarchal society (Paul 188). Paul acknowledges that women’s literature and children’s literature are both considered “marginal or peripheral by the literary and educational communities” (187). Even though both women and children are marginalized in society, children, unlike women, are not yet restrained by the rules that dictate adulthood (Paul 188). Trites sees this liberty in childhood to be a perfect time in which to inculcate children with respect for self and the

choices of others. She defines the feminist children's novel as one in which the protagonist travels on an inward journey to seek identity and self "because some form of environmental pressure has made them aware that they are not upholding socially sanctioned gender roles" (Trites, *Waking* 2).

### **Pushing the Boundaries of Gender Restriction**

Transgressing and renouncing gender roles are major goals of feminist children's novels. While *Hero* and the *Alta* books are not necessarily defined as children's books, rather as young adult, and sometime adult, books, the feminist arguments regarding gender roles seem to apply. Aerin and Jenna each struggle to uncover and accept their identity as they grow from child to adult. These novels demonstrate what Trites identifies as the most powerful way feminist children's novels subvert gender roles: "the protagonist is more aware of her own agency, more aware of her ability to assert her own personality and to enact her own decisions, at the end of the novel than she has been at the beginning" (*Waking* 6). By the end of McKinley's and Yolen's books, both Aerin and Jenna are more confident in their decisions, more decisive in their actions, and more eloquent and authoritative speakers. Such transformations should be celebrated because "Any time a character in children's literature triumphs over the social institutions that have tried to hold her down, she helps to destroy the traditions that have so long forced females to occupy the position of the Other" (Trites, *Waking* 7). This is particularly true in Jenna's case, because she not only refuses to be destroyed by the misogynistic patriarchy of the Garunians, she also conquers their regime, thereby ushering in a new system of gender equality. Such equality demonstrates a fluidity of gender roles,

primarily because both Aerin and Jenna, as well as other female and male characters in their respective books, display both traditionally feminine and masculine behaviors. In relation to these heroes' subversion of gender restrictions, Trites contends, "Successful feminist characters are those who adopt the best traits of both genders to strengthen themselves personally and within their communities" (*Waking* 25).

### **Real World Women Warriors**

Are the transformations found in literature possible in everyday life? Throughout the past few decades, women have begun more actively to pursue athletic sports such as boxing, basketball, and soccer and to participate legally in typically male-only occupations such as being police officers, firefighters, and soldiers. Such positions require bodily strength and agility, which is indicative of the woman warrior. She is not only mentally resilient and autonomous; she also is athletic and courageous, evident in her more muscular physique. An example of one such arena in which women subvert stereotypical gender norms by pursuing a physically challenging and dangerous career is in the military. Modern day women warriors defy society's tenets of femininity in search of purpose, identity, and adventure. Among the reasons women give for joining the military, the two most common are funding a college education and finding a sense of purpose and direction. Some women join for an adventure or challenge, a sense of duty to country, to push gender boundaries, or because it is a family legacy. According to the *Women in Military Service for America Memorial* website, women have served in the military in some capacity, such as volunteers and nurses, throughout American history. But following the incendiary women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, there was a

dramatic increase in the number of female military personnel in the 1980s. By the end of the decade, women encompassed 12% of the armed forces as women began infiltrating traditionally male-only military positions and began being deployed to combat zones; however, women were still excluded from major combat action. During Desert Storm, though, over 42,000 female soldiers were deployed, working side-by-side with their male comrades (*Women in Military Service for America Memorial*).

As with Aerin, who courageously rode into battle against the great black dragon Maur and later fought against the northern horde, modern military women face dangers and conflict. Currently, in Iraq, women soldiers are bombarded with enemy fire and explosions. Their dragons are elusive terrorists with hidden bombs and their northern horde is rebel troops who fire on sight. Also, just as Jenna leads her army of men and women into battle, modern day women have begun filling more command roles in today's military. The *Women in Military Service for America Memorial* website states that in 1999, the first women graduated from the Virginia Military Institute and The Citadel. As of May 31, 2004, there were well over 600,000 women on active duty throughout all branches of the American military and over 450,000 in the Reserves and National Guard. More than 90% of all career fields are now open to women in the military.

There is a correlation between this female migration into the military and the increase in active female literary protagonists; i.e., they both resulted from the aftermath of the feminist movement. Betty Freidan's 1963 landmark book *The Feminist Mystique* voiced the frustrations of white, middle-class women who resented being confined to their homes and stifled by *Better Homes and Garden's* images of the perfect housewife.

Incarcerated by society's feminine ideal, American women had limited career options: teacher, nurse, and secretary. The feminist movement mustered up massive support to liberate women from patriarchal repression and find new avenues for female expression and possibilities. The 1980s witnessed the fruition of many feminist goals. Record numbers of women began entering the workforce and universities. In response to dissatisfaction with stereotypical images of women in literature and other media, authors like McKinley, Yolen, Le Guin, and Pierce created new, powerful, feminist role models for a new generation of girls. By the mid and late 1990s, this new generation had accepted the torch of liberation, possibility, and change offered to them by the women of the feminist movement. Women today are continuing to enact the freedom of choice for which the women of the 60s and 70s fought. Women soldiers' decisions to demonstrate their public and civic duty through joining the military, however, are not easily and lightheartedly approached. They must understand and assume the responsibility for dealing death in warfare as well as exhibit leadership qualities within a public forum. While these women warriors proudly fight for the common good, they have to be aware that armed might can bring terrible suffering. As defenders of the realm, women soldiers must be physically and mentally prepared for the responsibility of using deadly force to defend the American way of life and ideologies of right and wrong.

Clearly not all women who read McKinley and Yolen's books will pick up the torch of the literal woman warrior and join the military; however, women are still inspired to be warriors in other avenues of life. Women warriors are not only found on the battlefield, they are seen in politics, in medicine, in academia, in law, in the home, and in a myriad of other echelons of life. These warriors may not be physically

aggressive and agile, but they likely have courage and determination. They are waymakers and leaders, fighting their own respective of battles. While Aerin and Jenna's heroic feats are thrilling, their personal journeys relate more closely to my own life. I don't fight dragons, face magicians, converse with elves, or rescue princes; however, I am trying to find my place and purpose in society. I may never become a great hero or a great leader, but I can still have a great life and I can always make a difference, because my gender does not define me. McKinley and Yolen celebrate the possibilities for both men and women through their heroes' refusals to be hindered by socially prescribed norms of gender-appropriate behavior. This celebration of possibilities inspires and strengthens my own resolve to challenge gender restrictions and continue the search for my authentic self.

## **Conclusion**

It is in part because of the influence of the media's images of autonomous and athletic women and such fantasy novels as *The Hero and the Crown* and *The Books of Great Alta* that young girls carry visions of change and possibility with them into adulthood. Following in the footsteps of role models like Aerin and Jenna, a new generation of heroes has emerged, liberated from many restrictive gender norms while repressed by others. Women warriors in every facet of life are exercising their right to be whom they choose and say what they please. Aerin and Jenna provide a symbolic template for girls struggling to keep their inner voice and find a sense of self. They exemplify the female's ownership of her body, the potential for women in leadership roles, the amalgamation of determination, physical strength, aggression and tenderness,

and the refusal to be confined by patriarchal gender restriction. However, according to Brown and Gilligan, adolescent and young adult girls are still at risk of losing their inner voice and their ability to vocalize their desires, which suggests that patriarchal forms of repression still restrict the development of girls into active and autonomous women (3-4). Encouraging girls to develop mental and emotional strength as opposed to focusing on their appearances to get attention and censoring their desires to fit a cultural norm, reinforces the importance of authentic relationships and the free and honest exchange of feelings. Apparently the world could use more consummate, cause-driven female heroes like Aerin and Jenna to inspire the warrior spirit that is needed to subvert patriarchal oppression and to promote the feminist concepts of self-fulfillment, agency, and autonomy.

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